

Sikh and Jewish Holidays

To define the scope of this paper I have to mention that regarding Sikhism I will focus on the Khalsa. There are some conversations today whether it is possible to be a Sikh if one is not Khalsa. "In the context of Guru Gobind Singh's [the initiator of Khalsa] own time we shall soon discover that some of his own disciples did not receive the Khalsa initiation. From this it presumably follows that one may indeed be a loyal Sikh without being a Sikh of the Khalsa." (McLeod, 7) However the vast majority of Sikhs today are Khalsa thus I will follow their holidays for comparison.

There are 4-6 major Jewish denominations and dozens of minor ones but my purpose here does not include covering all of them. Instead I will review what they share or what I believe was the original form of the holidays before they split.

The rituals for both religions can be divided into 3 categories

1. The ones accompanying or part of the daily prayer cycle
2. The one that revolve around holidays, most of them happening once a year
3. The life cycle events, such as birth, rites of passage (baptism/bar(t)-mitzvah), marriage, death

DAILY PRAYERS

Both religions place importance on daily communal practice. Jews supposed to say prayers 3 times a day, from sunrise through midday and sunset. Some of the prayers cannot be said unless 10 Jews (traditionally males only) are not present. The requirement of this quorum - called 'minyan' - is one of the two main reasons for the Jews to gather for praying in the Synagogue (temple). The other is that the synagogue usually holds one or more Torah scrolls that may be used for some of the prayers, although it is mostly done only on Mondays and Thursdays. (In the middle ages these were the two days when Jews living in the rural area might have traveled to the feudal cities for the market days. So the rabbis used these days to teach those who didn't have a chance to join the community every day.)

The Sikh religion is quite similar to the Jewish one in most of these aspects. They prefer to pray in community as opposed to alone because "one is more easily and deeply affected by Gurbani (the holy Bani bequeathed by the Gurus) participating in congregational gatherings." (sgpc.net) The Sikh's house of worship and the congregation itself is called Gurdwara. I didn't find any reference how many times a day a Sikh should visit the Gurdwara but their sacred book - the Guru Granth Sahib - should be opened every day as part of the ceremony.

Both religions treat the object of their sacred writing with awe. There are numerous rules how a Torah scroll should be prepared, who and how can touch it. I found similar logic behind the rules that a Torah scroll should never be put on the ground and that the Guru Granth Sahib should never be left open for the night. The aim for both customs is ensure respect toward it. It is considered a great honor to read from the Torah scroll. The readers are called to go 'up' - known as 'aliyah' in Hebrew - to the scroll and say blessings before and after they read from it. The most important practice and duty in a Sikh's life is the daily reading from the Guru Granth Sahib. Every Sikh should, as far as possible, maintain a separate and exclusive place for the installation of Guru Granth Sahib, in his home. Reading

the whole of the book is customary for any joyous occasion. Another similarity is the further emphasis on the compulsory covering of the head in the presence of the sacred writings.

ANNUAL HOLIDAYS

Most of the Sikh holidays are based on a birth or death of one of the ten Gurus or other events in their lives. In contrast most of the Jewish holidays are either based on either the seasons or some historic event in the past. Thus there is little correspondence between the Sikh and Jewish holidays. The one exception maybe the Sikh New Year, the Baisakhi. It is almost always celebrated on April 13, which is roughly when the Jewish Pesach (Passover) falls in most years. The Baisakhi is a celebration of the birth of the Khalsa. In 1699 this day, the tenth Guru - Guru Gobind Singh – asked his people to sacrifice themselves, 5 volunteered and although they were not sacrificed, but they showed courage and faith thus they became the first who got initiated into the new order. The Jewish Pesach commemorates the Hebrew tribes' victorious escape to freedom from Egypt where they were slaves. Both religions got reaffirmed and strengthened on their respective holidays.

All the Sikh festivals are called Gurpurbs, meaning Guru's day. The celebration is generally similar for all Gurpurbs. Here is a quick overview of them:

- ? The birthday of Guru Nanak, founder of the Sikh religion, is usually celebrated in the month of November, with the date varying according to the Indian Lunar calendar, called Bikrami Sammat.
- ? Guru Gobind Singh's birthday is generally celebrated in December or January.
- ? The martyrdom anniversary of Guru Arjan, the fifth Nanak, falls in May or June, the hottest months in India. He was tortured to death on 25 May 1606.
- ? Guru Tegh Bahadur, the ninth Nanak, was arrested and asked to either convert to Islam or be executed. As he refused to convert to Islam, he was beheaded on 11 November 1675 in Delhi.
- ? Three days before his passing away, on 3 October, 1708, Guru Gobind Singh declared that after him Guru Granth Sahib would be the Guru. Therefore there are no other Gurus after him.

Jewish holidays could be divided into 3 categories: a, Biblical, b, traditional (but not based on the Bible, and c, 'new' ones related to the birth of Israel. It would take too long to list all of them thus I limit myself to the first category as they are the most important and universal ones within Judaism:

- ? Rosh Hashanah marks the beginning of a new year.
- ? Yom Kippur is the holiest day of the year. On this day, God seals the Jews' fate for the coming year, and therefore, the entire day is spent in prayer to God for forgiveness and a good year.
- ? Sukkoth is a holiday of happiness, due to the celebration surrounding the harvest.
- ? Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah demonstrate God's love of the Jewish people, and the celebration by the Jewish people of the completion of the Torah.
- ? Pesach, mentioned earlier
- ? Shavuot celebrates the fact that the nation of Israel received the Torah, as well as the bringing of the first fruits at the time of the Temple.

LIFE CYCLE EVENTS

Below is the description of the Sikh birth related ceremony:

“As soon as the mother and child are able to travel, the family visits the Gurdwara [temple]. There they recite joyful hymns from the Guru Granth Sahib [the sacred writings of the Gurus] to celebrate the birth of the new child. This is the time when

the child receives its name in a rather unique manner. Karah Prashad (sacred pudding) is prepared by the family. Amrit (sweet water) is also prepared and given to the infant as well as the mother. The name is chosen by taking the Hukam, the granthi randomly opens Sri Guru Granth Sahib to any page and reads the hymn on that page. The first letter of the first word of the hymn is chosen. The child's name is then chosen beginning with that letter and is announced to the congregation." (Sikhs.org)

I just would like to add one more detail: boys' name must have the suffix "Singh" and girls', the suffix "Kaur".

Jewish males are circumcised when they are 8 days old. (The ceremony is called 'brit milah'.) Ritual circumcision is a sign attesting to the everlasting covenant that God established with the Jewish people (Genesis 17). It was then reiterated through Moses 500 years later: "And on the 8th day he shall have his foreskin circumcised" (Leviticus 12:3).

I found no equivalent of the Jewish bar(t)-mitzvah ceremony in the Sikh religion. This ceremony marks the initiation of a child into the Jewish religious community and into observance of the precepts of the Torah. A boy customarily becomes a Bar Mitzvah at age 13 and a day, whereas a girl may become a Bat Mitzvah on her 12th birthday. The term means son/daughter of the commandment and this is the occasion the young Jewish adult receives her/his Jewish name. So in a way it is similar to the baptism of the Sikhs that happens soon after the birth.

The Sikh matrimonial ceremony is called 'Anand Sanskar'. Some of the rules pertaining to it are direct responses to the Hindu religion. E.g. One's social caste should be disregarded when selecting spouse and child marriage is taboo. The first of these two is not an issue for Jews – although there is a tendency and social pressure to marry within one's class, but it is not fixed by religion itself – and they agree on the second one. Both religions ban any form of trying to look into the future, including explicit prohibition of consulting horoscopes for determining which day would be beneficial for the marriage ceremony to take place. Endogamy is strongly encouraged. A Sikh's daughter must be married to a Sikh. A Jew should marry only a Jew to maintain the Jewish line of descendency. Unfortunately there is no space here to go into the finer points of the ceremonies of the two traditions but both are rich in symbolisms, details and liturgy.

Jews prefer to bury their dead as soon as possible after the death occurs, preferably within 24 hours. For Sikhs the proper time for the burial is the day after the person dies. The name of the ceremony is 'Antam Sanskar'. For them cremation is the traditional method of disposal of the body, although other methods may be acceptable. Jews don't allow cremation because it contradicts with the notion of bodily resurrection in the future Messianic time. While rejecting the theory of re-birth, Sikhs believe in an afterlife, when the soul meets with the supreme soul, God. Worship of the dead with gravestones, etc. is discouraged, because the body is considered to be only the shell, the person's soul is their real essence.

The mourning period has 3 major phases in the Jewish tradition. In the first week the immediate kin holds the 'shiva' (the words mean 7). In the evening of the burial, the first shiva takes place. This is the time when the mourners stay at home and will be visited by friends and acquaintances. A year of official mourning follows and certain communities will have specific customs associated with the year. In the Sikh tradition after the cremation, guests usually return to the family home where there will be readings and hymns. The mourning period usually lasts between two and five weeks during which time other ceremonies may also be held.

The similarities we discovered among the two religions may be derived from the fact that the Sikh religion was directly influenced by Islam, which in turn is closely related to Judaism. The differences could have been caused by the different circumstances the religions

born and developed. This may include the difference between the Hindus surrounding the Sikhs and the various tribes and countries around the ancient Hebrews.

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