

Jewish Holidays and Customs

THEN AND NOW The Jews of Mariampole lived in a well-structured, organized community governed by religious principles. The observance of traditional religious rituals and customs was the foundation of life.

In the twenty-first century, Orthodox and Conservative Jews observe most Jewish holidays and customs mentioned here although the religious practices of our ancestors in Mariampole are no longer observed precisely the same way. The holidays and Sabbath are described here in the past tense even though they are still celebrated. The past tense is used in keeping with the aim to describe what was done during the period when our grandparents and their children lived.

ROSH HASHANA AND YOM KIPPUR

Rosh Hashana, the Jewish New Year, fell in September or early October and was followed by ten days of atonement. As the father left the house, he would say, "*Lomier ausbeten a guten Yohr*," Let's pray for a good year.

A procession in Mariampole headed for the shores of the Seshupe River for *Selichos*, a special prayer, traditionally said at midnight on Saturday. On the first day of Rosh Hashana, *tashlich*, began the ritual of casting away one's mistakes of the past year. After the prayers, men shook out their pockets to throw off imaginary sins they had accumulated during the year and women shook their handkerchiefs and skirts into the river. The ceremony was based on the prophecy of Micha, "Thou wilt cast all their sins into the depths of the sea."ⁱ

It was a day of remembrance, symbolized by the blowing of the *shofar*, an ancient Hebrew musical instrument made from a curved ram's horn. As part of the religious service, the sounds of the *shofar* resembled sobbing, wailing notes followed by long piercing sounds.

The days between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, the solemn day of atonement, were a time for self-evaluation. *Leshana tova tikotevu*, "May you be inscribed for a good and sweet year," was a familiar greeting exchanged by family and friends as they celebrated the high Holy days that signaled the New Year. It was a time of renewed joy and hope. People resolved to do better and offer forgiveness to others. The *rebbe* led the *Shachris*, morning prayer, on the high holidays of Rosh Hashana

and Yom Kippur. At the *Kol Nidre* service on the eve of Yom Kippur the *rebbe* stood in stocking feet (as it is forbidden to wear leather footwear an ancient indication of luxury), his *tallis*, prayer shawl, draped over his head as he swayed and prayed in a tearful voice, his lips *davening* each word.

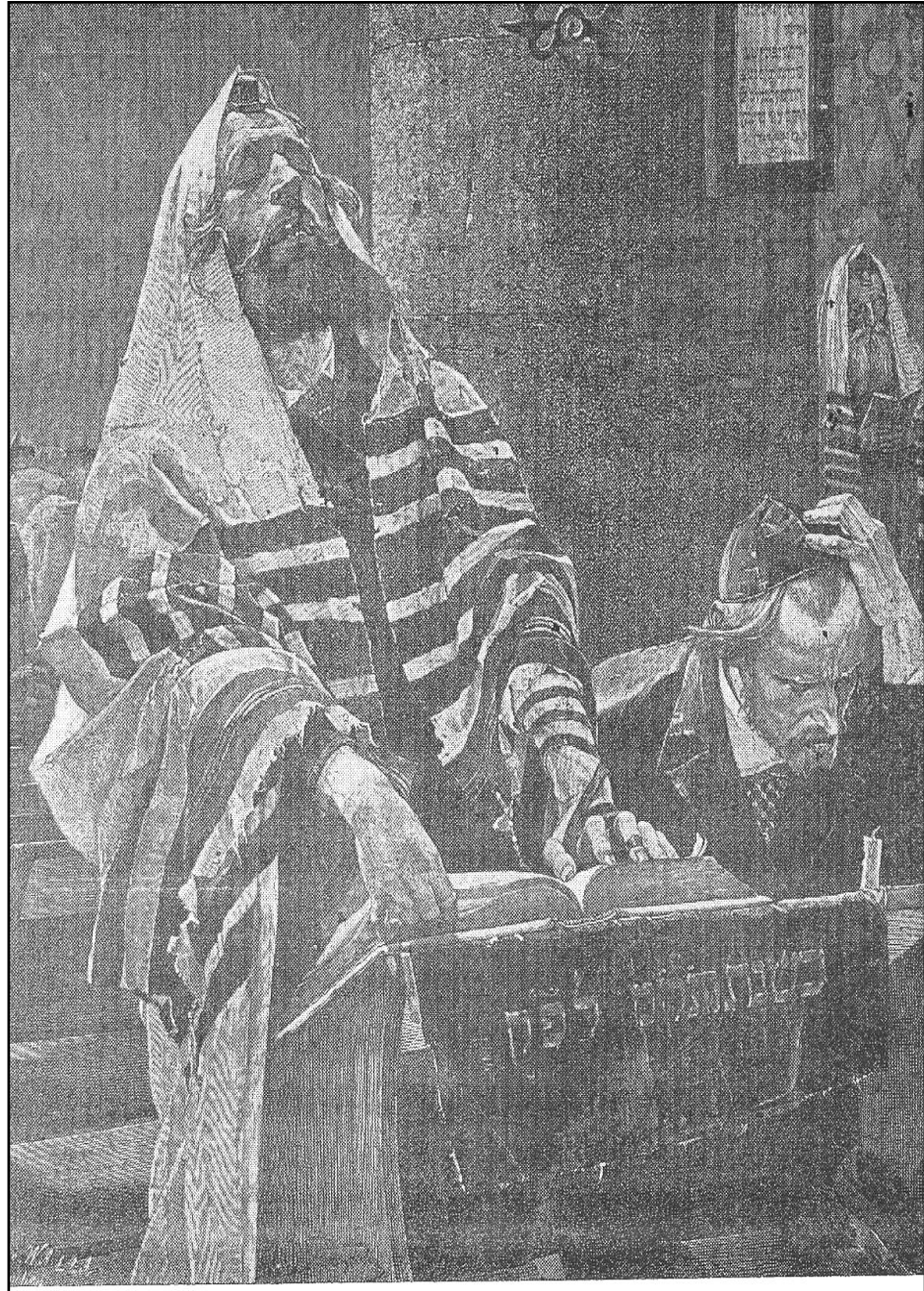
Yom Kippur, ten days after Rosh Hashana, was devoted to fasting, prayer, and atonement. People fasted from sundown until sundown on the next day when the *shofar* sounded one long-uninterrupted blast. Candles were lit to remember deceased relatives. Yom Kippur, a solemn day, signified God's final judgment on people. The fast was broken at the end of the day heralding in time to start building the *sukkah*, booth or hut, for the next holiday.

At *Sukkoth*, bowls of honey embodied the wish for a sweet year. A golden, coiled, round *challah* bread, often containing raisins, was a symbol of the year's round, complete, and uninterrupted cycle. It was torn into chunks and dipped into the sweet honey.

SUKKOTH

This Feast of Tabernacles or booths was a harvest festival. The weeklong holiday began early in October, on the fifteenth day of the Jewish month of Tishre, the fifth day after Yom Kippur. It was the longest holiday in the Jewish calendar, nine days long, a time of rejoicing for the bounties of the earth. The *sukkah*, built with plants and branches, represented the temporary huts Jews occupied when they lived in the wilderness. During their forty years of wandering in the Sinai Desert on their way to Israel, these makeshift huts which the Jews called home embodied God's protection. The holiday commemorated the time when the Jews waited in their *sukkoth* at the foot of Mount Sinai for Moses to descend.

The father or a pious Jew drove a wooden peg on the spot where the *sukkah* was to be built. Fathers, sons, and neighbors determined how it should be constructed. For the next few days men transformed into carpenters, sawing, pounding, and nailing boards, old doors, carpets and mats, or whatever material to create a replica of an ancient shelter. Branches of *s'chach*, evergreen pine trees, were distributed for the roof. When it was complete, candles were lit and blessed and meals were eaten inside the *sukkah* under the moonlit sky.



Chazzan in a Mariampole Synagogue from an Old Print by St. Grocholski

SIMCHAT TORAH Simchat Torah, a day of rejoicing the Jewish law, was usually in October and took place the day after *Sukkoth*. Men carried the Torah around the synagogue seven

times; children joined the parade with paper flags, adorned with carrots, apples, or red beets. This holiday celebrated Moses's descending Mount Sinai with the Torah, the Jewish law. The congregation sang and danced with joy following the *rebbe* as he circled the *bemah*, the pulpit, with the Torah in his hands.

CHANUKAH The first night of Chanukah, the festival of lights, was one of the most festive holidays. The twinkling candles in the menorah shed a lovely light on the elegantly set table. Children anticipated small nightly gifts. Family and friends gathered around the table to commemorate the rededication of the Temple of Jerusalem. At home, the aroma of roast goose rose from *latkes*, potato pancakes, made from grated raw potatoes and cooked in goose fat, a substitute for olive oil symbolizing the oil used long ago to light the temple.

Chanukah celebrated the victory of Judah Maccabeus in the second century B.C.E. With his small band of Jews, he led the battle against Syrian Hellenists and their oppressive King Antiochus IV, known as Epiphanyes. Maccabeus and his followers rededicated the temple with a flask of pure olive oil, sufficient for one day. Legend has it that the oil lasted for eight days; it was a miracle, hence the festival of lights was celebrated for eight days.

This miracle of oil began by lighting candles at sundown, starting with one light and adding one more each night until the eighth day, when all eight candles were lit. The ninth candle, the *shammas*, in the middle was used to light the others.

Chanukah usually occurred in December, and on the first two days teachers let children go home from *heder*, religious school, after half a day. At night, children played in the snowy white streets, lanterns in hand, sometimes in below-zero weather.

The stores were open because work was permitted on this holiday. Family members and guests sat around a party table and played spin-the-dreidl with a wooden top with Hebrew letters on all four sides and with *nees*, hazelnuts and walnuts. Children waited for the Chanukah gelt, gift money. The father dipped his hand into his long leather pocketbook and gave each child a *gilden*, 15 *kopecks*, currency of Tsarist Russia. The male guests also passed out shining silver coins. The children tucked their treasures under their pillows.

TU BISHEVAT Tu Bishevat, the festival of trees in January or February, celebrates nature's rebirth after winter. Children received gifts of dried fruit recalling tithes of fruit in ancient Israel.

PURIM Purim, usually in March, celebrated the defeat of a plot by Haman to destroy the Jews of Persia. The story was that the Jews were saved from massacre by Queen Esther, a Jewish woman, one of the King of Persia's wives. In the synagogue, the reader chanted the *Megillah* (the Book of Esther) the story of Mordechai, Esther, King Achasheveres, Queen Vashti, Haman and his wicked ten sons. The story told how, by the will of God, Haman was hanged on a high scaffold he had prepared for the Jews. Children received *kappers* and *driers*, noisemakers, to rattle whenever the name of the hated Haman was mentioned. The house was filled with the scent of freshly baked *hammentashen*, triangular-shaped pastry in the shape of Haman's hat and filled with ground poppy seeds and honey or fruit.

Children dressed in costumes paraded as characters in the Purim story.

It was customary to present a Purim gift called *shalach mones*, a package of three things, containing a fruit, *boore abes*, boiled beans, and another delicacy. These were spread on a plate, covered with a cloth and given to children to take to designated friends. Rich persons employed the *shammas*, the caretaker of the synagogue, to distribute their gift packages. The same plate traveled from family to family with minor changes in goodies. It was considered a *mitzvah*, a good deed, to make certain that no one went hungry on Purim.

PASSOVER/PESACH The passing of Purim was a signal to prepare for *Pesach*, Passover. *Pesach*, usually in April, celebrated the deliverance of the Jewish people from Egypt. This holiday, the feast of unleavened bread, was an eight-day festival that celebrated God's intervention and the deliverance of Jews from Egypt to freedom. This event led to the birth of the Jewish nation. As *Pesach* approached, the snow and ice melted, and water flowed in the Yevonke Creek and Sheshupe River. *Matzoh* bakeries finished their production of *matzoh*, unleavened bread. The women of the house began their elaborate preparation for this gathering to be held in their homes. They boiled water for housecleaning, premade *shtelen russets*, soured beets, and other *Pesach* foods. In preparation for the holiday, furniture was taken outside and scrubbed with boiling water, and the inside of the stove was burned to remove all remaining bread crumbs. Walls and ceilings of the house were *auskalchened*, whitewashed. Dishes and silver cleansed in vats of boiling water containing heated stones were made kosher. The stones maintained the water's heat. Because household items were porous, dipping utensils in hot water was considered insufficient to get rid of the leavened matter, bread, flour, and such. Pots and pans were tinned for *Pesach* use. Similarly, coarse

salt was added to the boiling water at the public bath for cleansing.

At the Passover table, each man was king and his hardworking wife the queen. The *seder*, the ritual service, was long and oftentimes the wife sat at the table exhausted, worn out from all the necessary preparations for the feast. For the first two nights of Passover, it was customary for everyone in the household to recite a portion of the *Haggadah*, the story of the Jews' liberation and miraculous escape from slavery—the story began with these words: “This is the bread of affliction our forefathers ate.” The affliction referred to the memory of the Jews' slavery in Egypt, and the bread referred to a crisp unleavened crackerlike flatbread called *matzoh*, which the Jews baked in haste when fleeing from their oppressors.

Leavened bread or any grains that may conceivably ferment was forbidden during this holiday, as were other foods made with yeast. The night before *Pesach*, children searched for *hametz*, leavened food or other material which was hidden by someone, usually the father. During the ceremony the family read the *Haggadah*, the service for the first two nights of Passover. A popular saying on *Pesach* decreed that one may eat where he wants but not what he wants. *Matzoh* was substituted for bread on the table at each meal and was used to create many dishes, even dessert.

To begin the ceremony, the father broke the middle *matzoh* into three pieces, rolled them in a cloth, and hid half of the middle piece as the *afikommen*, dessert *matzoh*. Children were ceremoniously encouraged to find it and demand a present for returning it to the leader of the *seder*.

The service on the first two evenings recounted the story of the Jewish exodus from Egypt. *Matzoh* and chicken soup with *matzoh* balls were holiday fare.

LAG B'OMER *Lag B'Omer*, usually in May, was a holiday of partial mourning. During this Lag B'Omer, in memory of ancient plagues, weddings, parties, and dancing were forbidden.

SHAVUOT *Shavuot*, the feast of weeks, usually in late May or June, celebrated the harvest season in Israel and commemorated the anniversary of Moses and the Israelites receiving the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai. This holiday was held seven weeks after *Pesach*, when the gardens were in full bloom.

Jews relished this holiday because they could eat whatever they wanted, wherever they wanted. Usually kosher laws forbade them to eat dairy foods for six hours after eating meat. On this holiday they were permitted to eat dairy foods three hours after a

meat meal. Popular treats were *shaltenoses kreplach* and *breite lokshen*, broad noodles, served in butter, cheese, and cream. Stores and businesses were closed, as on other holidays and the Sabbath, and folk songs were sung in Yiddish and Russian.

TISHA B'AV *Tisha B'Av*, usually in July, was a mourning and fasting holiday that marked the destruction of the First and Second Temples in 586 B.C.E. and in 70 C.E. when the Babylonians and later the Romans pierced the defenses of Jerusalem. Nothing was eaten on that day, no bathing was allowed. The prohibition of weddings begins during the three weeks earlier during of the month of Av.

ⁱ In the Bible: *Micha* 7: 29.