

# Jewish Museum Berlin



## Background Information

**Wall texts “A Time for Everything. Rituals Against Forgetting”  
Exhibition dates: 18 October 2013 – 9 February 2014**

### **Remembering the Temple**

The Temple in Jerusalem holds a singular place in Jewish history. With its destruction by the Romans in the first century CE, the sacrificial religious service was transformed into one based on the Scriptures. To compensate for the loss of the central holy site, the synagogues that were then built received a sacred character. This can be recognized through their orientation pointing toward Jerusalem, the destroyed center of the Jewish ritual cult. In the Byzantine basilica-like structure of Beit Alfa synagogue in Israel, the apse for the Torah shrine also faces Jerusalem. The iconographic language of this Late Antique synagogue, with its depiction of the Binding of Isaac, the festival calendar, and an imaginary view of the Temple interior, treats key scenes in Jewish memory. It distinctly shows how the synagogue would from then on represent the Temple as a “small holy site.”

Specific symbols on Jewish ritual objects, such as tablets with the Ten Commandments, the seven-branched menorah, the Eternal Flame, and the pillars of the Temple, keep alive memories of the Temple.

### **Remembering the Word**

Hebrew is the language of the Jewish bible. According to tradition, the holiest part of the Hebrew bible, the Torah—the Five Books of Moses—was dictated to Moses by God on Mount Sinai in the language with which He had already created the world, Hebrew. For this reason, Hebrew is known as the “holy language”; its use is a reminder of the divine work of Creation. Together with Aramaic, Hebrew is the language used in the Talmud and the rabbinic commentaries and literature. From approximately 200 CE onward, Hebrew was no longer an everyday language but the language of the liturgy.



It was not until the early Middle Ages that Hebrew started to be used more and more in daily life.

In order for the faithful to read the Bible and further religious texts and follow the religious service, the teaching of Hebrew—and Aramaic for the learned—was introduced in Jewish communities. A sound knowledge of Hebrew is indispensable not only for religious offices but also to carry out certain functions and duties within the Jewish community. As a consequence, illustrations of teacher–pupil situations and teaching aids such as spelling charts could be found very early on.

### **Remembering Love**

“Be ye fruitful, and multiply” is a biblical commandment, and according to Jewish tradition, marriage serves procreation in particular. In the Talmudic period a two-step wedding ceremony developed: First the engagement and a year later the marriage itself. The two parties concluded a standardized contract in which the groom committed himself to care for the bride and a sum was determined that the woman would receive in case of divorce or upon the husband’s death.

It has been customary since the Middle Ages for the bride and groom to exchange presents. In Germany, spouses-to-be gave each other a belt on the eve of the wedding; these were worn during the ceremony and linked together as a sign of the couple’s bond. Still a popular wedding present today is the kiddush cup, used in reciting the blessing over a cup of wine to welcome every Jewish festival. During the wedding ritual, which takes place under a chuppah, a canopy, the cup is used in reciting the blessings. After the marriage ceremony, bridegrooms in southern Germany used to smash a glass on a marriage or chuppah stone located specifically for that purpose on the outer wall of the synagogue. Nowadays, the bridegroom stamps on the glass. The custom during the joyous celebration not only recalls the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, but also acts as a reminder of the fragility of happiness.



### **Remembering Life**

The first passage that everyone experiences is birth. In Judaism as in Christianity, a woman who had recently given birth and the newborn child were protected not only by midwives, but also by magical objects such as amulets. In Jewish congregations in southern Germany a newborn girl was given a typical secular or Yiddish name in a special ritual on the fourth Shabbat after her birth.

A different ritual for healthy male babies is held on the eighth day after birth. According to Jewish tradition, through Brit Milah (circumcision) male descendants of Abraham enter into the covenant with God. If this takes place in a synagogue, the godfather, who holds the infant during the ceremony, sits on a circumcision chair or bench. Another seat is reserved for the prophet Elijah.

In German-speaking areas, the custom developed of sewing the swaddling cloth used during circumcision into a strip, and painting or embroidering it with the names of the child and his father, as well as the date of birth and a blessing. The father brings this wimpel, or sash binding, when he first carries the child into the synagogue.

### **Remembering the Victory**

During Hanukkah, the eight-day Festival of Lights celebrated at the time of the winter solstice, one more candle is lit every evening. Hanukkah means dedication, and commemorates the rededication of the Temple in the second century BCE after the successful revolt of the Maccabees against the Hellenistic rulers of Syria.

After the victorious Maccabees recaptured the desecrated Temple, it was cleansed of all impurities. According to legend, when the rebels retook the Temple, they could find only a small jug of ritually pure oil, bearing the seal of the High Priest, that could be used for the Temple lamp. This little bit of oil was said to have sufficed for the lights of the menorah in the Temple, miraculously continuing to burn for eight days and nights. In commemoration of this event, the Hanukkah festival lasts eight days. The celebration focuses on the eight-armed Hanukkah lamp, which has a ninth flame used solely to light the others. The menorah is placed in a doorway or



window in clear view so that everyone can share the experience of the miracle.

### **Remembering Finiteness**

In the seventeenth century collections of texts emerged dealing with the sick and dying, the newly deceased, and the bereaved, in which the specific rituals for mourning and funerals were laid down in writing. Arranging a funeral for the deceased in accordance with tradition is considered a charitable act in Judaism. The burial society chevra kadisha (“holy society”) has been part of most Jewish communities since early modern times. Its members take care of the sick, the deceased, and those in mourning; they wash the dead, clean their nails, and comb their hair. This ritual, cleansing the deceased of all impurities, reminds those doing it of their own mortality. Mourning rituals include the seven days of sitting shivah, during which only low seats are used, and the regular recitation of the kaddish mourners’ prayer, followed by a thirty-day period leading back into everyday life, and a further, eleven-month period of mourning.

The societies, which are among the most important institutions in a Jewish community, traditionally organize annual celebratory feasts. Special chevra kadisha cups, engraved with the members’ names, were made in connection with these feasts.

### **Remembering the Revelation**

Pesach (Passover), Shavuot (The Festival of Weeks), and Sukkot were originally harvest festivals. On these pilgrim festivals, people walked to Jerusalem to make an offering in the Temple. During the 49 days between Pesach and Shavuot, the ritual Counting of the Omer (counting of the sheaves of freshly harvested barley) takes place. When Shavuot became associated with the Giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai, its original meaning as a harvest festival lost significance. However, the receipt of the Ten Commandments did not take place without a misdeed having been committed: While God was speaking to Moses on Mount Sinai, the Israelites demanded an idol and the Golden Calf was made. When Moses saw the idol, he became enraged and smashed the tablets with the Ten Commandments.



Rabbinic interpretive literature juxtaposes the Israelites' misdeed with God's mercy, as Moses was given the Commandments a second time. The Omer days, except for one day, have become days of mourning in commemoration of historic catastrophes. Omer calendars are supposed to ensure that no mistakes are made when counting.

### **Remembering Creation**

The commandment to observe the Sabbath is one of the Ten Commandments. Friday evening services start by welcoming the Sabbath with the Kabbalat Shabbat ceremony, including psalms and the traditional Sabbath song "Lekhah Dodi." Kiddush, the blessing sanctifying the holiday, is said after evening services. Within the family, the blessing is recited before the evening meal over wine and bread.

Instructions for the holiday ritual can be found on many different objects. Kiddush cups were created especially for the blessing over the wine, and challah platters are used only for the traditional braided loaves eaten on the festival day. The holiday finishes with the havdalah, the ritual marking the transition between the sacred and the profane.

With the Sabbath commandment, the divine day of rest from the history of Creation has become a holiday for the people, which is repeated every week to commemorate God's resting on the seventh day. However, the Exodus, the liberation from slavery in Egypt, is also remembered on the Sabbath. As such, the weekly holiday takes on special significance for the community.

### **Remembering the Liberation**

The Pesach festival is linked to the Exodus, the departure of the Israelites from Egypt. God's direct intervention enabled the people to be delivered from slavery and this shaped Israel's relationship to its God. Pesach, or Passover, was originally a pilgrim festival and lasts eight days. The celebration in private homes takes place on the seder evenings. Seder (Hebrew "order") refers to the fixed order in which the ritualized commemoration is carried out.

The Passover Haggadah contains instructions for carrying out the ceremony as well as biblical stories of the Exodus, rabbinical commentaries, and songs.



Due to the nature of the narrative about oppression and liberation, it is particularly suited to contemporary adaptation.

Special plates and bowls are used for the mazzah, the unleavened bread, and other symbolic foods eaten at Pesach. As a harbinger and announcer of the Messiah, the Prophet Elijah is awaited at the Pesach seder and honored with a special cup of wine. Just as God freed the Israelites from bondage in Egypt and had them build the holy site, so too will the Messiah bring together the people to build a new Jerusalem and a new Temple.

### **Remembering the Wandering**

The seven-day Feast of Booths (Sukkot) is the third pilgrim festival. It commemorates the forty years of wandering in the desert after the Exodus from Egypt. Booths are built as a reminder of the provisional dwellings in the desert. They are decorated with fruit and flowers, and charts indicate the direction to face during prayer. During the week of Sukkot, meals are eaten in the booths and many people sleep in them as well.

Bunches of greenery, including an etrog (citrus fruit), a lulav (palm frond), and myrtle and willow branches, are a reminder of the festival's original agricultural ties. During the "lulav shaking," while the Hallel prayer is recited, they are pointed in six directions—to the east, south, west, and north, and upward and downward.

The congregation's Torah scrolls are carried around the recital lectern in a procession, followed by the faithful with their bunches of greenery. On the last day of the festival, prayers are said for rain, and the lectern is circled with the Torah scrolls seven times. The scrolls in rural congregations are decorated with simple Torah crowns made of materials such as cardboard, cloth, and paper. The ceremony recalls the Sukkot processions around the altar in the Temple in Jerusalem.

### **Remembering Evil**

The Book of Esther is read during the annual Purim festival. The story takes place during the Persian exile, in the reign of King Ahasuerus (probably Xerxes I). In the story, the vizier Haman planned to kill all the Jews in Persia, because Mordecai, a Jew, refused to kneel down before him for



religious reasons. The date of the pogrom was to be chosen by lots (Hebrew: *purim*).

Mordecai asked his cousin Esther, the king's wife, for help. She revealed her Jewish identity, which she had concealed until then. Together they managed to prevent the disaster and have Haman punished. The feast that the Persian Jews then celebrated was the first Purim festival.

Reading the Book of Esther together is a religious and social event; celebrating the holiday has strengthened Jewish cultural identity especially since the Diaspora. This narrative has continually been adapted to contemporary conditions. Non-Jewish commemorative objects with a religious connotation—primarily from the Nazi era—have also found a place in the Jewish memorial culture.

### **Remembering the Fatherland**

Apart from reminders of religious events and rites of passage, rituals can also express loyalty to a larger community. Just as the loyalty of European Jews to their respective sovereigns left its mark both ideally and materially on ritual objects in the eighteenth century, the Jewish prayer room in European cities evolved into an arena for patriotic statements during the nineteenth century.

German Jews showed their loyalty to the regents with regular services to mark the various celebrations and days of remembrance of the ruling houses. In private homes, too, signs of a person's loyalty to the respective ruler could be found very early on. Many Jews took part in the Napoleonic wars, the last war of German Unification in 1870–71, and in particular World War I. Many Jewish women did charity work during wartime. This loyalty to the state was not always acknowledged. Many towns and villages refused to include the names of fallen Jewish soldiers on war memorials, thus denying Jews a place in the collective patriotic memory.

### **Remembering Childhood**

Childhood comes to an end for girls at the age of twelve, and for boys on their thirteenth birthday, when they reach religious maturity. From this time on they are bound to observe the religious commandments. Thus a female



teenager is called Bat Mitzvah, “daughter of the commandment,” and a male Bar Mitzvah, “son of the commandment.”

The Bar Mitzvah celebration had already developed into a ritual by the late Middle Ages. This ceremony can be seen in connection with puberty as a classic rite of passage. During the celebration in the synagogue, the teenagers are called up to read from the Torah and from the books of the Prophets for the first time.

The Bat Mitzvah ceremony was first introduced in the early twentieth century. As a reminder of God’s commandments, Jewish men are to attach ritual fringes of knotted cotton to the corners of their garments. This is the origin of the tallith, a prayer shawl with ritual fringes, which youths receive as a reminder of having reached religious majority.

It is worn during morning prayers and on various other occasions in the synagogue.

To comply with the commandment at all times, Orthodox Jewish men wear a small prayer shawl—the tallit katan—under their outer garments.

### **Remembering the Law**

Like Shavuot (the Festival of Weeks), Simchat Torah (Rejoicing with the Torah) and every religious service are also reminders of the revelation of God’s commandments. However, different Jewish denominations interpret the revelation differently.

According to the Orthodox tradition, the revelation does not just refer to the absolute and true written law (Torah) given on Mount Sinai. It also refers to the oral law (Mishnah).

Only official rabbinic authorities are able to interpret both of these correctly, and they determine how the commandments are to be followed.

On the other hand, Conservative Jews do not consider the written or oral law to be a literal revelation from God, but as having been compiled by editors. Nevertheless the Halakha, the religious law, is also binding in Conservative Judaism.

The Reform movement, in contrast, does not regard the Torah as a divine revelation but merely as divinely inspired. As a consequence, Jewish religious



law is seen not as a constant but variable, and the interpretation of the Torah is the responsibility of the congregation.

### **Remembering Infiniteness**

There is no uniform notion of the “world to come” in Judaism. Apocalyptic books in the Bible—such as Ezekiel, Isaiah, and Daniel—as well as literature not included in the biblical canon try to depict and explain the “end of days.” The Jewish hope of salvation focuses on the coming of the Messiah, the ingathering of the exiled in Zion, and the rebuilding of the Temple in a future world. Rabbinical Judaism, however, generally refrains from making concrete statements about the hereafter, as it is written in Isaiah 64,4: “Men have not heard ... neither hath the eye seen ... what He hath prepared for him that waiteth for Him.”

Nevertheless, the concept of resurrection is an integral part of the Jewish faith. In the daily morning prayers it says: “You, O Lord, are mighty for ever, you revive the dead, You are mighty to save. You cause the wind to blow and the rain to fall. You sustain the living with loving kindness, revive the dead with great mercy, support the falling, heal the sick, free the bound, and keep Your faith to them that sleep in the dust.”