

# New Jewish Rituals

## The Evolution of New Holidays

RECENTLY, INTERNET GIANT Google announced plans to enter the cellphone business using Open Source (that is, free and shared) software. Some tech experts think that Google's new venture will revolutionize telecommunications. At least one consultant expressed a more skeptical view, however. While a "pretty impressive list" of people were working on the project, Chetan Sharma told the *New York Times*, "it takes a long time to get things into the ecosystem."

A similar discussion might focus on how new holidays and observances emerge and develop. How do they spring up? Why do some catch on and others don't? How long does it take for them to become part of the Jewish ecosystem and, in particular, the secular Jewish ecosystem? Why do some fade and then get reinvigorated?

*The original "Open Source"* for our Jewish holidays was the Bible, which outlined *shabbat*, *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur* (*shabes*, *rosh hashone* and *yom kiper* in Yiddish), as well as Passover, *Shavuot* and *Sukkot* (*peysakh*, *shevues*, and *sukes*), three harvest festivals that only later were reinterpreted to mark stages in the Exodus story. The Biblical descriptions of these holidays — Version 1.0, if you will — were terse, which gave free reign to their development. Subsequent "releases" over the centuries added layer upon layer of details of observance. Starting with the discarding of temple sacrifices, the holidays have been altered so dramatically that our ancient ancestors would not recognize them.

Other observances that have entered the Jewish calendar would also be totally foreign to them. Perhaps the most

prominent of these is Chanukah (*khanike*). Initially a so-called 'minor holiday' with a quaintly appealing religious story of the oil burning for eight days, its military theme brought Chanukah more popularity with the rise of political nationalism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Early Zionists, pioneers reclaiming the land in Palestine, and soldiers of the early Haganah were naturally regarded as Maccabean descendants. Then, faced with the tempting tinsel and bright lights of Christmas, American Jews asserted themselves with Maccabean vigor and elevated Chanukah to a celebration of major import.

Other Jewish holidays with newer observances include *Tisha b'Av*, the commemoration of the destruction of the Temple, and, more recently, *Yom HaShoah*, the memorial to the Holocaust — which offers a good case study for the emergence of a new, contemporary observance.

*Yom HaShoah* was established in Israel in 1959. It was originally proposed to be on the 15<sup>th</sup> of *Nisan*, the anniversary of the Warsaw Uprising, but there was religious objection to this because it was also the first day of Passover. Instead, the 27<sup>th</sup> of *Nisan* was chosen and the observance now comes one week before *Yom HaAtzmaut*, Israel Independence Day. Notably, while *Tisha b'Av* had much

earlier been declared a fast day, *Yom HaShoah* was not, though, arguably, the devastation of the Holocaust was as grievous a loss, if not worse, than the destruction of the temple.

At 10 a.m. on *Yom HaShoah*, air-raid sirens sound for two minutes throughout Israel. All transportation comes to a standstill, and people stop their activities to stand silently. In pluralistic America, of course, this kind of countrywide public observance cannot be achieved, even for Jews; instead, we gather for memorial services, speeches, and candle-lighting ceremonies. In our immediate

future, however, these commemorations will likely take new shape when there are no longer any living survivors. It will be left for their children and grandchildren, as well as concerned and conscious Jews, to preserve Holocaust commemorations, undoubtedly in new forms.

*Besides our Jewish holidays and memorials, a number of new observances are taking shape that call our attention as secular humanists. Two of these are what I would call*



Poster by Lisa Lyons, from *Images of American Radicalism*, edited by Paul Buhle and Edmund B. Sullivan

alternative celebrations.

There is the National Day of Reason (NDR), instituted in 2003 by a consortium of atheist, secular, humanist and rationalist organizations as an alternative to the National Day of Prayer (NDP), which was authorized by federal statute in 1952 and is held on the first Thursday in May. NDP was meant not only to promote belief over non-belief, but to set a standard for how religious people should behave. Alternatively, NDR is designed to raise public awareness about the persistent threat to religious liberty posed by government intrusion into the private sphere of worship and religious practice. Participants have been encouraged to give blood (instead of prayer), sign up as organ donors, or make donations to their favorite secular non-profits. Some groups organize members to lobby government officials to remind them of the separation of state and church ([www.religioustolerance.org/day\\_reas.htm](http://www.religioustolerance.org/day_reas.htm)).

A second alternative celebration is Interdependence Day, promoted by Rabbi Michael Lerner and Nichola Torbett in *Tikkun* magazine and embraced by the Network of Spiritual Progressives as a corrective to Independence Day, July 4<sup>th</sup>. The goal, according to the Network ([www.spiritualprogressives.org](http://www.spiritualprogressives.org)), is to take an “ultranationalist holiday with its militaristic theme” and reshape it to accomplish two purposes: to celebrate all ordinary Americans and their struggles for civil liberties, and to “transcend chauvinist nationalism” and recognize our interdependence with all other people on the planet — and with the planet itself. Interdependence Day was launched in 2007 with a picnic in Berkeley, California’s Tilden Park.

***An entirely new celebration, Darwin Day, has been observed since 1995 on February 12<sup>th</sup>, which marks Darwin’s birthday in 1809. Darwin Day ([www.darwinday.org](http://www.darwinday.org)) began with a solitary event at Stanford University; today, there are more than eight hundred and fifty Darwin Day events worldwide, including debates, lectures, film festivals, museum exhibits, and art shows. Most notably, hundreds of church organizations have joined the celebration by affirming the compatibility of science and religion. A particularly big celebration is anticipated for 2009, which marks the 200<sup>th</sup> birthday of Darwin and the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1859 publication of *On the Origin of Species*, which presented the scientific theory of natural selection and revolutionized human thinking.***

A variety of other new ‘days’ have been marked on the calendar by the United Nations, including World Day for the Prevention of Child Abuse (November 19<sup>th</sup>), inaugurated by the Women’s World Summit Foundation in 2000; World Day Against Child Labor (June 12<sup>th</sup>), launched by the International Labor Organization; World Day for Cultural

Diversity for Dialogue and Development (May 21<sup>st</sup>), which the UN General Assembly established in 2001; and World Day for Water (March 22<sup>nd</sup>), established by the General Assembly in 1992.

Playwright Eve Ensler has built upon the worldwide success of her *The Vagina Monologues* as a feminist organizing tool to create V-Day (<http://v10.vday.org/>), launched in 1998 to protest rape and other forms of violence against women. Over the past decade, thousands of V-Day events have taken place around the world, in Africa, Asia, Australia, the Caribbean, Europe, the Middle East, and all fifty of the United States — and this year, for the tenth anniversary of V-Day, thousands of women came to New Orleans for a two-day activist festival, April 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup>. Originally linked on the calendar to Valentine’s Day (February 14<sup>th</sup>), but it moves from year to year throughout the late winter and early spring, as it is less a holiday than a series of consciousness-raising events that often involve celebrities and artists. For some Western women, V-Day has by now eclipsed International Women’s Day (March 8<sup>th</sup>) as a feminist observance — although International Women’s Day, founded by the Socialist Party of America in 1908, is still an official holiday in many countries.

Earth Day, of course (April 22<sup>nd</sup>), has been around since 1970, when an estimated twenty millions Americans, inspired by Senator Gaylord Nelson (D-WI) and the organizer he hired, Denis Hayes, turned out in the country’s streets, parks and meeting halls to launch the modern environmental movement. The winter solstice (December 21<sup>st</sup> in the Northern Hemisphere) has also been receiving attention in both neo-pagan and non-sectarian circles as an observance that heightens environmental awareness and creates a bridge linking the Jewish and Christian winter holidays.

***Which of these observances will make it over the long haul? Will they need to become formalized and ritualized in order to survive, or can they exist in a loosely structured style that seems currently to be favored? Will any of these new holidays get absorbed into our Jewish canon, modified as they go?***

Some Jews already infuse Judaism’s harvest holidays with concerns for the environment, while others use Passover, with its theme of liberation, as a time to reflect upon the oppression of all peoples, not just Jews, and the interdependence of humanity. Some secular Jews, when they gather for Rosh Hashanah — traditionally understood as the “birthday of the world” and the beginning of creation — give a nod, instead to Darwin and the world’s ever-evolving amazing diversity. These are examples of interpretive hybridization that may enrich Judaism for decades to come. ■