

Jewish Religious Festivals and Their Impact on Jewish Life

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Awais ud Din Khan¹ & Wan Ahmad Fauzi Wan Husain^{1&2}

1 International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilisation (ISTAC), International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), 24, Persiaran Tuanku Syed Sirajuddin, Bukit Tunku, 50480 Kuala Lumpur, Wilayah Persekutuan Kuala Lumpur, MALAYSIA. Email: khanawaisuddin@gmail.com; wanfauzi@iium.edu.my

2 Faculty of Industrial Management, Universiti Malaysia Pahang, Al-Sultan Abdullah, Lebuhr Persiaran Tun Khalil Yaakob 26300, Kuantan, Pahang, MALAYSIA

*Corresponding Author: wanfauzi@iium.edu.my

Abstract

Jewish religious festivals are dynamic institutions that embody historical memory, covenantal relationship, and collective identity. Rooted in the Torah and elaborated through rabbinic tradition, they sanctify time and transform ordinary life into sacred experience. These festivals commemorate pivotal events such as liberation from slavery, divine revelation, repentance, and renewal, thereby integrating spiritual devotion with social organisation. The objective of this study is to examine the scriptural foundations, rituals, and social functions of nine major Jewish festivals and to assess their role in preserving religious identity, cultural continuity, and communal cohesion across generations and diaspora contexts. Guided by a conceptual framework that integrates Divine Covenant and National Identity with Worship, Repentance, and Moral Responsibility, the research highlights how festivals serve as recurring acts of covenantal remembrance and ethical renewal. Methodologically, the study adopts qualitative, descriptive, and analytical design, drawing on documentary and textual analyses. Primary sources include the Hebrew Bible, Mishnah, Talmud, and Zohar, complemented by authoritative secondary works in Jewish studies and history. The analysis proceeds in three stages: identifying scriptural foundations, describing rituals and symbolic practices, and evaluating social functions such as strengthening family bonds, transmitting collective memory, and fostering moral responsibility. The findings demonstrate that Jewish festivals function as complete social systems, connecting families, stabilizing relationships, promoting charity, and preserving national identity through shared memory. In an era of globalisation and cultural homogenisation, these festivals remain vital instruments of resilience. The study contributes to interfaith dialogue and civilisational scholarship by illustrating how sacred occasions sustain identity, values, and cohesion across diverse historical and geographical contexts.

Keywords: Jewish festivals, covenantal identity, collective memory, moral responsibility, cultural resilience, diaspora cohesion



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INTRODUCTION

Jewish religious festivals are not merely ritual observances but dynamic institutions that embody the historical memory, covenantal relationship, and collective identity of the Jewish people. Rooted in the Torah and elaborated through rabbinic tradition, these festivals sanctify

time and transform ordinary life into sacred experience. They commemorate pivotal events such as slavery and deliverance, repentance and renewal, and the enduring closeness between God and the Children of Israel. In doing so, they integrate spiritual devotion with social organisation, ensuring that religious and communal life remain inseparably connected (Cohen & Eisen, 2000; Hartman & Sheskin, 2012).

The foundations of these festivals are set out in the Hebrew Bible, where they are described as “sacred assemblies” commanded by God. Passover, for instance, is instituted in Exodus as a perpetual reminder of liberation from Egypt (Exodus 12:14), while Leviticus prescribes detailed laws for the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 23:27). Such observances elevate time itself into a medium of worship, reinforcing the covenant and shaping Jewish consciousness across generations.

This study examines the scriptural foundations, rituals, and social functions of nine major Jewish religious festivals, assessing their role in preserving religious identity, cultural continuity, and communal cohesion across both homeland and diaspora contexts. By analysing how festivals strengthen family bonds, transmit collective memory, and foster moral responsibility, the research highlights their enduring impact on Jewish life. In an era of globalisation and cultural homogenisation, these festivals serve as vital instruments of resilience, enabling Jewish communities to maintain distinctiveness while engaging with broader societies (Bilewicz & Wojcik, 2010; Rebhun, 2014; DellaPergola, 2020).

The significance of this inquiry extends beyond Judaism. It contributes to interfaith dialogue and civilisational studies by illuminating how sacred occasions sustain identity, values, and social cohesion. For Islamic civilisational scholarship, understanding the shared Abrahamic roots and the distinctive developments of Jewish festivals enriches perspectives on coexistence and the role of religion in shaping human civilization (Wan Ahmad Fauzi, 2025).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Jewish religious festivals are inseparable from the Divine Covenant between God and the Children of Israel. This covenant is not confined to belief alone but extends to shaping collective life, memory, and identity. Festivals serve as recurring acts of covenantal remembrance and renewal, reinforcing the idea that Israel is God’s chosen people. Passover, for example, commemorates deliverance from Egyptian slavery and symbolises divine election and protection. Such historical consciousness transforms ritual observance into a foundation of Jewish national identity, ensuring continuity of faith and peoplehood across generations (Leviticus 16:30; Haji et al., 2011; Friedlander et al., 2010).

The second pillar of the framework is the integration of worship with repentance and ethical reform. Jewish festivals are not confined to ceremonial acts; they call for moral accountability and spiritual renewal. Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, epitomises this dimension through fasting, prayer, and collective confession of sins. Its purpose is to restore the relationship between humanity and God and to purify moral life. This illustrates the principle that Judaism regards religion as a holistic system: rituals must lead to repentance, ethical responsibility, and the transformation of practical conduct (Dein & Loewenthal, 2013; Yadgar, 2006).

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive and analytical research design, drawing on documentary and textual analyses. The methodological orientation is shaped by religious and civilisational studies, integrating scriptural exegesis, historical consciousness, and sociocultural interpretation. This approach is particularly suited to the study's central objective: examining the scriptural foundations, rituals, and social functions of Jewish religious festivals and assessing their role in preserving religious identity, cultural continuity, and communal cohesion across generations and diaspora contexts.

Primary Sources

This research centres on canonical Jewish texts. The Hebrew Bible (Torah), especially the Five Books of Moses, provides direct commandments regarding the observance of nine selected festivals. Complementing this are rabbinic sources such as the Babylonian Talmud, the Mishnah, and the Zohar, which elaborate on ritual prescriptions, theological interpretations, and the mystical dimensions of festival practice. These texts are analysed to uncover the theological foundations, ritual structures, and historical narratives that underpin each festival. In line with the conceptual framework, this analysis highlights how festivals embody covenantal remembrance and moral responsibility, thereby reinforcing Jewish national identity and ethical renewal.

Secondary Sources

To contextualise and interpret the primary corpus, the study engages with authoritative scholarly works in Jewish religious studies, history, and civilisation. Key references include Telushkin (2001), Donin (1991), Jacobs (1995), Bloch (1980), and Sanders (1992), as well as entries from the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (2007) and *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion* (Werblowsky & Wigoder, 1997). The study also draws upon peer-reviewed journal articles indexed in Scopus and Web of Science, including studies on Jewish identity formation (Haji et al., 2011; Creese, 2022), collective memory and national days (Ariely, 2019), diaspora resilience (Sadjed, 2022; Prashizky & Remennick, 2018), Sabbath observance and well-being (Gabriel et al., 2024; Dein & Loewenthal, 2013), family ritual transmission (Shoham, 2014; Pomson & Schnoor, 2018), and community contexts and identity (Hartman & Sheskin, 2012; Kosmin, 2022; Weinfeld, 2020).

Analytical Procedure

The analysis proceeds in three structured stages. First, the nine major Jewish religious festivals are identified and categorised by their scriptural and rabbinic foundations. Second, the rituals, customs, and symbolic practices associated with each festival are described using textual evidence, with particular attention to their covenantal and ethical dimensions. Third, the social functions and impacts of these festivals are examined through content analysis, focusing on their role in strengthening family bonds, fostering communal solidarity, preserving cultural

identity, transmitting historical memory, and promoting moral responsibility. This layered approach ensures that both theological foundations and sociocultural functions are systematically addressed in line with the study's objective.

Conceptual Integration

The methodology is explicitly guided by the study's conceptual framework. The dimension of divine covenant and national identity directs the analysis toward understanding festivals as instruments of covenantal remembrance and collective identity. The dimension of worship, repentance, and moral responsibility ensures that the study highlights the ethical and spiritual functions of festivals, particularly their role in moral accountability and spiritual renewal. Together, these categories provide the interpretive lens through which textual evidence and scholarly perspectives are synthesised, ensuring coherence between the study's objective and its analytical process.

Contemporary Relevance

In addressing the broader significance of Jewish festivals, the study draws on scholarly discussions of their role in resisting cultural assimilation, strengthening diaspora identity, and sustaining religious consciousness in secular environments. This ensures that the analysis is not confined to historical or theological dimensions but also engages with contemporary challenges facing Jewish communities.

Scope and Limitations

The scope of the study is limited to textual and analytical review. It excludes field surveys, interviews, or ethnographic observation. Instead, the research adopts a civilisational and comparative lens, situating nine Jewish festivals within broader discussions of religious identity, cultural resilience, and interfaith understanding.

NINE RELIGIOUS FESTIVALS

Rosh Hashanah

Rosh Hashanah, literally "Head of the Year", is the Jewish New Year, celebrated in memory of the creation of the world. It is one of Judaism's most important religious festivals. According to the Jewish calendar, it falls on the first day of the month of Tishrei, usually in September or October. Scripturally, it is associated with divine judgement and is regarded as Yom Ha Din (Day of Judgement). On this day, God is believed to review the deeds of all people from the past year and inscribe decisions for the coming year. Rosh Hashanah thus initiates the Ten Days of Repentance, which culminate in Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement (Exodus 12:1–13).

The central ritual of Rosh Hashanah is the blowing of the shofar (ram's horn), whose sound symbolises repentance, awakening, and a new beginning. The shofar is blown at least thirty to one hundred times, marking the solemnity of the occasion. Symbolic foods are eaten,

such as apples dipped in honey to invoke a sweet and pleasant year and pomegranate seeds to symbolise the abundance of good deeds. Families gather for festive meals, special prayers are recited, and the day is associated with the creation of the world. These rituals combine symbolic acts with communal worship, reinforcing both the spiritual and social dimensions of the festival (Pomson & Schnoor, 2018).

Rosh Hashanah is a powerful occasion for reflection, repentance, and renewal. It strengthens family bonds through shared meals and gatherings, fosters communal solidarity through collective prayer, and promotes ethical responsibility by encouraging forgiveness and reconciliation. Rosh Hashanah reaffirms the covenantal relationship between God and Israel, demonstrating Judaism's holistic view of religion where ritual observance is inseparable from ethical responsibility.

Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement)

Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, is regarded as the holiest and most important day in Judaism. It is observed on the tenth day of the Hebrew month of Tishrei and is dedicated to the forgiveness of sins, repentance, and spiritual purification. The Torah commands the Children of Israel to fast on this day and present themselves before God with humility and submission (Leviticus 23:27; Donin, 1991). The festival concludes the Ten Days of Repentance that begin with Rosh Hashanah, marking a period of moral reflection and accountability.

The central ritual of Yom Kippur is a strict fast lasting approximately twenty-five hours, during which participants abstain from food, drink, and physical comforts. Worship takes place in synagogues, where special prayers are recited, including communal confession of sins and requests for divine mercy. The liturgy includes Kol Nidre, recited on the eve of Yom Kippur to annul past vows, and Ne'ilah, the concluding prayer that symbolises the closing of the heavenly gates. In ancient times, the high priest performed sacrificial rituals including the symbolic "scapegoat" ceremony. After the Temple's destruction, these rituals were replaced by prayer, fasting, and repentance.

Yom Kippur fosters moral accountability and reconciliation within Jewish society. It emphasises that forgiveness must be sought not only from God but also from fellow human beings. Through its rituals and social functions, Yom Kippur reinforces the values of repentance, forgiveness, and moral responsibility, ensuring continuity of Jewish identity and ethical consciousness across generations (Dein & Loewenthal, 2013; Friedlander et al., 2010).

Passover (Pesach)

Passover, or Pesach, is one of the central religious festivals in Judaism. The Hebrew term means 'to pass over', recalling the biblical event in which God spared the homes of the Israelites during the final plague in Egypt (Exodus 12:1–30). The festival begins on the fifteenth day of the Hebrew month of Nisan, observed for seven days in Israel and eight days in the diaspora. The Torah commands eating unleavened bread (matzah) during this period (Leviticus 23:5–8).

The central ritual of Passover is the Seder, a ceremonial meal retelling the Exodus through readings from the Haggadah, prayers, songs, and symbolic foods (Donin, 1991). A distinctive feature is children's participation, who traditionally ask, "Why is this night different

from all other nights?” ensuring intergenerational transmission (Shoham, 2014). Jewish households remove all traces of leaven before the festival (Bloch, 1980).

Passover holds profound significance in Jewish religious consciousness, commemorating the foundational event in Israel’s national identity. It symbolises liberation, divine providence, and the fulfilment of God’s promises. Passover also holds significance in Christianity, as the Last Supper is generally understood to have occurred during the Passover season (Matthew 26:17–29; Mark 14:12–25; Luke 22:7–20). Socially, Passover strengthens family bonds, preserves collective memory, and reinforces communal identity (Telushkin, 2001).

Shavuot

Shavuot is one of Judaism’s major religious festivals. The Hebrew term literally means “Weeks,” referring to the seven-week period counted from Passover (Leviticus 23:15–16). It is celebrated on the sixth day of the Hebrew month of Sivan. Shavuot commemorates the giving of the Torah to the Children of Israel at Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:1–20:17). According to Jewish tradition, this day marks the covenantal moment when God entered into a binding relationship with Israel.

Shavuot has both historical and agricultural dimensions. In biblical times, it marked the completion of the grain harvest (Deuteronomy 16:9–12). A distinctive custom is Tikkun Leil Shavuot, an all-night study session (Telushkin, 2001). During synagogue services, the Ten Commandments are publicly recited (Exodus 20:1–17). Another custom is consumption of dairy foods (Bloch, 1980).

Shavuot marks the transition from physical liberation to spiritual responsibility. In Jewish thought, true freedom is achieved through adherence to God’s commandments and ethical living (Jacobs, 1995). It strengthens communal identity through collective study and worship (Haji et al., 2011) and fosters intergenerational transmission through family gatherings.

Sukkot

Sukkot is one of the most joyful and significant religious festivals in Judaism. The Hebrew word means “booths” or “tabernacles” (Leviticus 23:34). It begins on the fifteenth day of Tishrei, five days after Yom Kippur, observed for seven days in Israel and eight in the diaspora (Berlin & Brettler, 2014). Sukkot commemorates the forty years the Children of Israel wandered in the wilderness. The Torah commands dwelling in temporary booths as a remembrance of divine providential care (Leviticus 23:42–43).

Sukkot also has an agricultural dimension as the “Feast of Ingathering” (Exodus 23:16; Deuteronomy 16:13). A central feature is the Sukkah, symbolising dependence on God (Donin, 1991). The Arba Minim (“Four Species”) are waved during prayers as expressions of thanksgiving and unity (Telushkin, 2001). Along with Passover and Shavuot, it is one of the three pilgrimage festivals (Deuteronomy 16:16).

Hanukkah (Festival of Lights)

Hanukkah is one of the most widely celebrated festivals in Judaism, commonly known as the “Festival of Lights.” The Hebrew word means “dedication” and refers to the rededication of the Second Temple following the Maccabean Revolt in the second century BCE (Encyclopaedia Judaica, 2007). The festival begins on the 25th of Kislev, observed for eight days (Jacobs, 1995). Under Antiochus IV Epiphanes, Jewish practices were suppressed. The Maccabees revolted and rededicated the Temple (1 Maccabees 4:36–59).

According to the Talmud, only one container of pure olive oil was found, yet it miraculously burnt for eight days (Werblowsky & Wigoder, 1997). The central ritual is lighting the Hanukkah (Donin, 1991). Foods fried in oil are eaten (Telushkin, 2001). Hanukkah celebrates the preservation of Jewish faith and identity in the face of persecution (Bloch, 1980) and ensures continuity of identity in diverse contexts (Mittelberg, 2019; Wald, 2019).

Purim

Purim commemorates the deliverance of the Jewish people from annihilation in the Persian Empire. It is based on the Book of Esther, observed on the fourteenth of Adar (Esther 9:20–28; Berlin & Brettler, 2014). The name derives from *pur* (“lot”), referring to Haman’s lots (Esther 3:7; Werblowsky & Wigoder, 1997). Through Queen Esther and Mordecai, the plot was exposed and the Jewish people were saved (Esther 3–9; Jacobs, 1995).

Principal observances include reading the Megillat Esther, Mishloach Manot, Matanot La’Evyonim, and festive meals (Donin, 1991; Esther 9:22; Encyclopaedia Judaica, 2007; Bloch, 1980). Purim symbolises the triumph of faith and divine providence over oppression. Its joyous character ensures the memory of deliverance is transmitted across generations, preserving Jewish identity and historical consciousness (Ariely, 2019; Klar et al., 2013; Telushkin, 2001; Sanders, 1992).

Tu B’Shevat (New Year of the Trees)

Tu B’Shevat is observed on the fifteenth of Shevat (Werblowsky & Wigoder, 1997). Its origins are in calculating tree ages and agricultural tithes (Mishnah, Rosh Hashanah 1:1; Encyclopaedia Judaica, 2007). Communities eat fruits of Israel (Deuteronomy 8:8). Customs include tree planting (Donin, 1991). In the sixteenth century, mystics developed a Tu B’Shevat Seder. In contemporary Judaism, it is associated with environmental awareness and ecological responsibility (Bloch, 1980; Sanders, 1992; Telushkin, 2001; Jacobs, 1995).

Shabbat (Sabbath)

Shabbat is the most sacred weekly observance in Judaism. It begins at sunset on Friday and ends at sunset on Saturday (Exodus 20:8–11). Shabbat is regarded as a covenantal sign between God and the Jewish people (Exodus 31:16–17). Its theological foundation is set out in the Torah: God created the heavens and the earth in six days and rested on the seventh (Genesis 2:1–3). The Children of Israel were commanded to observe the Sabbath as a perpetual reminder of

divine creation and liberation (Exodus 20:8–11; Deuteronomy 5:12–15). During Shabbat, observant Jews refrain from thirty-nine categories of labour (Mishnah, Shabbat 7:2; Encyclopaedia Judaica, 2007). Preparation begins before Friday sunset with candle lighting, blessings over wine (Kiddush) and bread (challah). Meals are shared with family, accompanied by prayers, songs, and Torah study.

Shabbat plays a vital role in strengthening family and social relationships. It provides a weekly rhythm of rest and renewal, fostering communal solidarity and reinforcing Jewish identity. Historically, Shabbat has been one of the most important institutions for preserving Jewish religious consciousness and cultural continuity (Gabriel et al., 2024; Dein & Loewenthal, 2013; Telushkin, 2001; Bloch, 1980; Jacobs, 1995; Donin, 1991).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of Jewish religious festivals reveals their enduring role as instruments of resilience, identity formation, and moral cultivation. Rooted in scriptural foundations and enacted through ritual practice, these festivals function as dynamic social systems that strengthen family bonds, transmit collective memory, and foster moral responsibility. In doing so, they preserve Jewish religious identity, cultural continuity, and communal cohesion across generations and in diaspora contexts.

Jewish festivals provide structured opportunities for families to gather for worship, meals, and shared rituals, strengthening family ties and embedding religious identity at home. Shabbat offers a weekly rhythm of rest and renewal. Pesach transmits traditions across generations through the Seder. Sukkot emphasises hospitality. Hanukkah brings families together around the Hanukkah. These practices transform festivals into intergenerational experiences, ensuring that family life remains the primary locus of religious and cultural continuity (Shoham, 2014; Pomson & Schnoor, 2018; Gabriel et al., 2024).

Jewish festivals serve as “living memory”, linking past events to present identity. Pesach recalls deliverance from Egyptian slavery, while Tisha B’Av mourns the destruction of the Temple. Purim commemorates survival from annihilation, and Hanukkah recalls the rededication of the Temple. The ritual of children asking questions at the Seder ensures active transmission of historical consciousness. In schools and educational institutions, festivals function as a “living curriculum,” awakening national spirit and embedding historical lessons in new generations. Through these practices, collective memory is safeguarded against cultural homogenisation, ensuring continuity across diaspora contexts (Ariely, 2019; Jacobs, 2011; Prashizky & Remennick, 2018).

Jewish festivals embed ethical responsibility in ritual observance, demonstrating that worship is inseparable from moral conduct. Yom Kippur emphasises repentance and reconciliation. Purim highlights charity (Tzedakah) through gifts to the poor. Pesach ensures that no one remains hungry. Tu B’Shevat fosters ecological responsibility by linking worship to stewardship of creation. These practices nurture social justice, compassion, and moral accountability, embedding ethical values in the rhythm of communal life (Yadgar, 2006; Sadjed, 2022).

Preservation of Identity and Cohesion

By strengthening family bonds, transmitting collective memory, and fostering moral responsibility, Jewish festivals function as a complete social system. They stabilise relationships, reinforce communal solidarity, and protect the nation from disintegration by providing shared identity and historical consciousness. In an era of globalisation and cultural homogenisation, these festivals serve as vital instruments of resilience, enabling Jewish communities to maintain distinctiveness while engaging meaningfully with broader societies (Kosmin, 2022; Weinfeld, 2020; Creese, 2022).

CONCLUSION

Jewish festivals are not limited to religious worship; they function as a comprehensive social system. They connect families, stabilise social relationships, provide support for the poor, and protect the nation from disintegration through shared identity and memory. Through communal worship in the synagogue, educational engagement, and the preservation of national unity and historical consciousness, these festivals remain vital institutions that ensure the continuity of Jewish religious and cultural life across generations.

From the perspective of divine covenant and national identity, festivals such as Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot reaffirm Israel's covenantal bond with God and preserve collective identity by recalling liberation, revelation, and divine protection. They situate the Jewish people within a sacred narrative that transcends historical upheavals, ensuring that national consciousness remains rooted in covenantal memory.

Equally, through the lens of worship, repentance, and moral responsibility, festivals such as Yom Kippur, Purim, and Tu B'Shevat show that worship in Judaism is inseparable from ethical conduct. Repentance, reconciliation, charity, and ecological stewardship are embedded in ritual observance, transforming festivals into occasions for moral accountability and social justice.

This study contributes to scholarship on religion and society by demonstrating how Jewish festivals embody the integration of ritual, memory, and morality as mechanisms of resilience. They illustrate how religious communities can resist cultural homogenisation by embedding covenantal identity and moral responsibility in everyday life (Hartman & Sheskin, 2012; Haji et al., 2011; Rebhun, 2014). Thus, Jewish festivals provide a model for understanding how ritualised memory and ethical practice sustain communal resilience in pluralistic and globalised contexts.

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