

**Text for QR code**

Introduction to the Festivals of the Lord (Moadey Adonay) by Rabbi Avraham Soltes

Eighty years ago an Egyptian peasant woman kicked over a stone in a ruined village and uncovered the *Tel-el-Amarana Letters* – a group of inscribed clay tablets. They told a remarkable, monotheistic Pharaoh, *Ikhnoton*, an Egyptian king of the eighteenth dynasty (1375-58 B.C.E.), who had established the worship of *Aten*, the sun-god and, with absolute powers, uprooted the worship of all others. For three thousand years, until the peasant woman took her stray step, this religious revolution was forgotten, buried in the sands.

One hundred years after *Ikhnoton*, in the same Egypt, a meek, tongue-tied shepherd, with no power save that which sang from his fervent eye, taught an undisciplined mob, a mixed multitude of unruly, runaway slaves about an invisible God, who thundered commandments from a mountain top and whispered conscience through their own souls. The theology of *Ikhnoton* expired with him, while the improbable spirit of the shepherd, *Moses ben Amram*, lives on in the descendants of those slaves and in the hundred cultures that have been influenced by them. The first seal of the United State, for example, show the Israelites, led by Moses the shepherd, standing safely on the shore, while Pharaoh and his charioteers drown in the wave. The motto around the seal reads: “Rebellion to Tyrants is Obedience to God.” (Suggested to the Continental Congress in 1776 by a committee of Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and John Adams. – O. Strauss “Origin of Republican Form of Government,” New York, 1908).

Why did the wilderness shepherd succeed where the civilized Pharaoh failed? Why has his faith endured while the King’s vision was forgotten? Moses, according to Jewish tradition, was a teacher – *Moshe Rabbenu* (Moses, our Teacher); like a good teacher he took the abstract and made it concrete, he fashioned the theoretical ideal into the practice of every-day. He wished to teach his followers that there was an invisible Spirit uniting the universe, that man was a creator, not a puppet, that the separate tribes and nations they knew were one brotherhood of mankind, that justice and mercy were the practices by which men should live, that man is capable of learning and may thereby be redeemed from physical slavery and drudgery of the spirit. To teach these principles, Moses garbed the girders of his thought in an edifice of concrete ceremonies– sabbaths, festivals, rituals – that made them simple to comprehend and easy to remember. Subsequent generations continued to erect upon this biblical foundation a growing temple of customs and mores that have borne living witness to the strength and the wisdom of the building materials he used.

From the parched wastes of Sinai to the gutted ghettos of Eastern Europe, this colorful heritage has brought the humblest Jew a sense of intimacy with the Divine, a feeling that he is endowed with a personal mission to better the universe. In the symbolic writings of Sholom Aleichem, even a wagon driver talks to God like a partner: «Would it have upset your Divine plan so much if you had provided me with a small fortune?» *Teveye*, the driver, never acquired his fortune, but he was blessed with a heritage that paid high dividends «quarterly» —four times a month: every Sabbath with extra monthly dividends each festival.

Chaim Gross grew up in the grinding poverty of Eastern Europe, the youngest of ten children., the son of a poor, hardworking lumber company laborer. They were devout Jews, members of the Hassidic sect,

whose faith expresses itself through rejoicing in life and facing its challenge with a festive, optimistic spirit.

Central in this way of life was the weekly Sabbath and the necklace of festivals that sparkled the drab year with color and light. One worked all week only to reach the Sabbath and enjoy a foretaste of paradise; one anticipated the festivals with preparation, flavoring the preceding weeks with their special taste of joy and excitement.

Long before young Chaim grasped abstract concepts like freedom, morality, repentance or history, these holiday celebrations captured his imagination, bound him in spirit to his family, related him to his ancestors and imbued him with group values and ideals: *slavery is bitter, freedom is sweet*. The contrasting taste of the bitter herbs and the sweet Passover *haroset* (a mortar-like mixture of apples, nuts and wine), imprint the message on a child's tongue years before his lips can even pronounce the words.

In these lithographs, Gross recaptures the color of his childhood and his skill makes them come alive for those who have shared the experience. For those to whom this vanished world is mere history, Gross offers an emotional insight as well as aesthetic pleasure. While drawing upon the conscious memories of his early years, the unconscious undertones that have hibernated within his being these five decades surface and palpitate in the contrapuntal rhythms of his conceptions. These festivals still live today, but the special form and feeling of their observance for four centuries in the Jewish world of Eastern Europe is gone. Through the memory of movement and modelling that is the special gift of Chaim Gross that world breathes again.

by Rabbi Avraham Soltes (1937–1983) was ordained at New York Campus of Hebrew Union College in 1942.

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