

# Celebrating Nature

## Nature conservation and religious festivals

Julia Glaeser



Religious festivals play a well-established part in community life. Their repetition makes them highly sustainable. Many of these festivals have their roots in our connectedness with the natural world, although people are often not aware of this.



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VERANTWORTUNG  
DER EVANGELISCHEN KIRCHE  
IN HESSEN UND NASSAU



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<b>Project manager:</b>	Dr Jürgen Micksch
<b>Project coordinator:</b>	Julia Glaeser
<b>Contact:</b>	Phone: +49 (0) 6151-39 19 741 Fax: +49 (0) 6151-39 19 740 Email: <a href="mailto:info@abrahamisches-forum.de">info@abrahamisches-forum.de</a>
<b>Website:</b>	<a href="https://abrahamisches-forum.de/">https://abrahamisches-forum.de/</a>

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**Consultant at the German Federal Agency for Nature Conservation (BfN):**

Dr Andreas Wilhelm Mues      Division I 2.2 'Nature conservation and society'

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## Introduction

The conservation of nature is a firmly established theme in most religions: it is the subject of stories in their holy books and of festivals and commandments. Many religious festivals have their roots in nature and the need to care for it. Religions therefore champion nature conservation. The associated festivals provide a good opportunity to celebrate with others and to achieve a profound togetherness. As festivals come round repeatedly, their goals are internalised and acquire substance. In this publication we describe a few of the many festivals and explain their relevance today.

The booklet *Celebrating Nature* has been produced as part of the project 'Religions for biodiversity', which links religious communities and nature conservationists in Germany in a dialogue process coordinated by the Abrahamic Forum in Germany. The aim is to communicate the value of nature, nature conservation and biodiversity and to give members of religious communities an opportunity to realise this value locally, nationally and internationally. The booklet sets out to highlight the various religious festivals that connect with nature and that can be used to address its conservation. This approach enables people of other religions or of no religious affiliation to learn about these festivals. In addition, it reminds religious communities themselves of the links between their faith and the natural world and of the associated need to protect nature and the environment. When members of different religions celebrate festivals together, they learn from and about each other and new contacts and even friendships may be formed and contribute to the conservation of nature.

The publication profiles festivals from Alevism, the Bahá'í religion, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Yezidism that relate to the appreciation and safeguarding of nature. Each description includes the name of the festival and details of when it is celebrated and how it is originated. The rituals and practices associated with the festival in our own time are explored, together with the potential significance of the festival for nature conservation. Similarities with the festivals and rituals of other religions are also highlighted.

The description of each festival concludes with an appropriate action page; this is intended to encourage readers to get involved and therefore offers suggestions and ideas for possible activities during the festival. These pages can be removed by cutting along the dashed line to make them easier to use when pursuing the suggestions.



The multi-religious nature of German society, which has become more and more pronounced in recent years, provides an opportunity for religious communities to open their doors during their festivals and invite others to join them. One project that does just this is '*Religionen laden ein*' ['Religions invite people in'] organised by the Stiftung für die Internationalen Wochen gegen Rassismus [Foundation for International Weeks against Racism]. The project encourages religious communities and groups to organise events – either on their own or in collaboration with other local institutions – that lead to personal encounters between people of different religions.

*Celebrating Nature* is a work in progress. We therefore welcome your comments and suggestions.

Julia Glaeser

Dr Jürgen Micksch

Darmstadt, January 2020



## **Religious festivals** (in calendar order)

### **Orthodox Blessing of the Waters** (Christianity)

This festival is also known as the Great Blessing of the Waters and as the Feast of the Epiphany.

#### **Date**

The Orthodox Blessing of the Waters is celebrated on 6 January (Epiphany). The Great Blessing of the Waters came to Eastern Europe from the Middle East via Constantinople and then spread further southwards and westwards. Blessing ceremonies now take place in Austria, Switzerland and Germany as well as in other countries.

#### **History and religious significance of the festival**


The service of the Great Blessing of the Waters commemorates the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist on the day of the manifestation of the Lord, which is known in Eastern Christian churches as the theophany. The Great Blessing of the Waters dates back to an early Christian practice. Although there were originally no fixed rules as to when, where and on what occasions the Blessing of the Waters was performed, the ceremony had an established form, which always involved prayers and the dipping of the cross in the water. As a result of the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan, the water of this river and every other river was considered blessed.

#### **Relevance to nature conservation**

Through the Blessing of the Waters, all nature and all creation is consecrated and hence honoured. What is important for nature conservation is that the faithful should reflect on the safeguarding and preservation of creation – i.e. nature – and on communicating the associated values. Water is essential for life on Earth: together with oxygen, it is our most vital asset and one that should be protected and used carefully.

#### **Commonalities with other religions**

Water plays a central part in other religions too. In Islam it is regarded as the source of life and a special gift of God: 'We made out of water every living thing' (Koran 21: 30). For this reason it is particularly important in Islam to keep water clean and pure. The cleansing aspect of water is also important for Muslims; washing before prayer is about internal as well as external purification.

A vertical photograph of a body of water, possibly a river or lake, with green foliage in the foreground and background. The water is calm, reflecting the light, and the foliage is lush and green.

In Hinduism water is considered to be the wellspring of life and is regarded as 'immortal'. Hindus believe that water carries the souls of the dead to the place of eternal life. By bathing in holy places or through ritual washing with holy water, sins can be washed away and the soul purified.

### **Rituals and practices today**

For the Orthodox Blessing of the Waters the community gathers with processional banners at a river or lake. The priest lays the cross and the Gospels on an analogion (lectern); then candles are distributed to the faithful and lit. The priest censes the objects and the congregation. He then dips the cross three times into the river or lake whose water is being used in the consecration of creation on this day. Often the faithful plunge into the water in turn. The ritual consecrates not only the river but the whole of nature. The ceremony of the Blessing of the Waters is therefore an expression of the Christian commitment to preserve the integrity of creation. The faithful take some water home with them in small containers in order to bless their homes or particular objects. The water is often kept for times of sickness or great need. Members of other religions can also attend this ceremony.



## Incense meditation

If the bark of a tree is damaged,  
resin oozes out.  
It flows and closes the wound.  
When exposed to the air, it solidifies into hard drops.  
The trees of the Boswellia genus  
grow in the arid regions of Africa and Arabia.  
They can reach a height of eight metres.  
Their resin has a special property:  
it is fragrant when burnt.  
Incense!  
This is why, for hundreds of years,  
people have scored the bark of these trees to get incense.  
The incense grains that are produced  
are the result of an injury.  
They cover wounds.  
They become hard.  
They provide protective armour for the tree.  
And this incense is harvested.  
It is laid on glowing coals.  
That changes it:  
it becomes soft and melts.  
And it is fragrant.  
From the wound of a tree  
there emerges something special, something precious.  
Incense can be a symbol for us,  
a sign of how we can deal with injuries and wounds.  
We too are injured and injure others.  
We don't like dwelling on such injuries.  
We lock them away, insofar as we can.  
Injuries and wounds  
can make us hard.  
We protect ourselves with hardness.  
That can in turn inflict wounds on others.  
We try to change ourselves.

(Sebastian Fiebig)





## Tu BiShvat: New Year of the Trees (Judaism)

The term 'Tu BiShvat' is Hebrew and means literally 'the 15<sup>th</sup> day of the month of Shevat'.

### Date

The 15<sup>th</sup> day of Shevat, the day on which Tu BiShvat is celebrated, marks the end of the rainy season in Israel and hence the start of the ideal planting period there. In many places in Germany the ground is still frozen hard on that date.

In Israel, much of the winter is still to come in the month of Shevat, but because a large proportion of the year's rain has already fallen and the trees are starting to bloom, the New Year of the Trees is celebrated in this month.

The date is based on the time when the trees start to bloom; this marks the divide between one agricultural year and the next. As soon as the tree blossoms, its fruits belong to the next year. Its blossoming marks the start of a new growth cycle. Although there are still many winter days ahead, the first signs of spring can be spotted at this time or on this day. These signs enable this day to be designated the New Year of the Trees.

In 2020 Tu BiShvat lasts from the evening of 9 February until the evening of 10 February in the Gregorian calendar.

### History and religious significance of the festival

In the Talmud, the collection of writings that detail the laws and traditions of rabbinic Judaism, we read that the School of Hillel ruled that the New Year of the Trees falls on the 15<sup>th</sup> of the month of Shevat, known as Tu BiShvat. For trees and plants the year is therefore counted from 15 Shevat. This is particularly relevant to the *orla* prohibition, since Tu BiShvat is the cut-off date for determining the age of a tree. In the first three years of a tree's life, its fruits may not be eaten; in the fourth year the fruits must be given to the temple and not until the fifth year can they be eaten. This is why it is so important in Judaism to be able to determine the age of the trees and to celebrate their birthday.

But the tree itself also has an extremely important role in Judaism. For example, in Midrash Kohelet Rabbah 1 on Ecclesiastes 7: 13 we read:

'When G-d created the first human beings, G-d led them around the garden of Eden and said: Look at my works! See how beautiful they are — how excellent! For your sake I created them all. See to it that you do not spoil and destroy My world; for if you do, there will be no one else to repair it.'





The Torah itself is also known as *Etz Chaim*, meaning 'the Tree of Life'. In the Hebrew Bible the word 'tree' occurs 150 times. For example, Deuteronomy 20: 19 states '*ki ha'adam kmo etz ha-sa-deh*': 'For the tree of the field is man's life'. As a result of this comparison we can celebrate with the trees.

The most specific rule in the Torah on the protection of trees is found in Deuteronomy 20: 19-20: 'When thou shalt besiege a city a long time, in making war against it to take it, thou shalt not destroy the trees thereof by wielding an axe against them; for thou mayest eat of them, but thou shalt not cut them down; for is the tree of the field man, that it should be besieged of thee?'

Some rabbis now interpret this passage as meaning that man should not harm nature in general.

### **Relevance to nature conservation**

The prohibition on picking and eating the fruits of the trees in the first three years is good for the tree, since it guarantees at least some undisturbed development. In addition, new trees are planted at the time of the festival, which is important for species conservation and for protecting the environment as a whole. This also celebrates spring, which symbolises the re-emergence of life.

It is a tenet of the Kabbala tradition that everything possesses a divine spark; herein lies part of the deep significance of the New Year Festival of the Trees. For just as humans have their tasks in the world, so also do trees have their special mission. They possess a divine spark that causes them to fulfil their task.

Tu BiShvat is a good opportunity to bring the values of the Jewish tradition into the current debate about food technology and sustainability. During Jewish services to mark Tu BiShvat, many rabbis also stress that communities need to become more active in caring for creation and protecting the environment.

It is increasingly the case that consideration of the environment and of sustainable production and consumption patterns in Israeli society is not confined to Tu BiShvat. There are already projects that involve solar panels on synagogue roofs or organic *kashrut* labels. Another sign of the growing interest in protecting the environment is the fact that people are putting money in the donation boxes of the Jewish National Fund (*Keren Kayemeth Lelsrael* – KKL) and more and more adherents of Judaism are buying tree planting certificates. The KKL has been planting trees in Israel for more than 100 years in order to bring more life to the desert. It promotes education in schools by encouraging tree planting ceremonies in which children and



young people participate, especially at Tu BiShvat. In the past 30 years people have again started celebrating a Tu BiShvat seder. The Tu BiShvat seder evening is based on the original Passover seder (see page 39) and is celebrated with fruit and wine. This custom goes back to the Kabbalist Rabbi Yitzchak Luria of Z'fat (Safed) and his disciples, who adapted the seder evening to Tu BiShvat. The fruits and trees of Israel have a particular significance in this. They are blessed before the meal, thus symbolising that G-d is the source of all life and that every part of creation is to be valued.

### **Commonalities with other religions**

Trees are an important religious symbol in the Bible and in Christian tradition. Metaphorically they stand for life, time and the world. The Hebrew Bible describes Paradise as a rich garden full of trees. The trees are hung with an abundance of tempting fruit. Two of these trees standing in the middle of the garden are particularly important: they are the Tree of Life and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

In Nordic mythology the immense ash tree Yggdrasil is the cosmic tree and a symbol of life. It grows over another symbol of life – water.

An example of how the tree can be used as a symbol of interfaith dialogue is the apple blossom festival at the Bergisches Museum in Bensberg, Bergisch Gladbach (North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany). Since 17 April 1999 the museum has possessed a botanical rarity: an apple tree that bears apples of seven different varieties. The tree is a symbol of international understanding and of the peaceful coexistence of the seven world religions, represented by the seven apple varieties. The motto of the *Gesellschaft für Internationale Völkerverständigung* [Society for International Understanding] is 'Live together, learn from each other and understand each other.' The apple blossom festival is held in spring (April/May) each year.

### **Rituals and practices today**

At Tu BiShvat the table is decked with the finest fruits of the seven species with which the land of Israel was blessed: 'For the Lord thy G-d bringeth thee into [...] a land of wheat and barley, and vines and fig-trees and pomegranates; a land of olive-trees and honey' (Deuteronomy 8: 8).

In addition, fasting is prohibited and no eulogy is delivered. People go out into the countryside and often plant new trees there, provided it is not a sabbath year (fallow year) in which agricultural activity is not permitted. Friends and neighbours can be invited to join in and people can eat and celebrate together.





## How to plant a tree

Plant a tree with friends, neighbours or members of your religious community in order to give something back to creation. Every tree helps protect our climate. Trees provide a home for many species and give us shade in summer.

1. Trees are best planted in spring or autumn, as they are then more likely to have enough water.
2. Choose a tree species from your region, as these trees are already adapted to the prevailing climate and will thrive. When making your choice, also consider the type of soil in your garden (see the action page 'Knowing and protecting our earth').
3. Choose a suitable site for the tree. How tall and wide will it grow? Does it prefer sun or shade? How far away from a building, a fence or other trees should it be?
4. Dig a hole twice the size of the root ball.
5. Mix the earth you have removed with potting soil and organic fertiliser, such as horn shavings. Put some of the mixture back in the bottom of the hole so that the tree will be at the right level when you plant it: the root ball should be completely covered with earth.
6. Before placing the tree in the hole, hammer a post into the earth in the hole to stabilise the tree.
7. Using a knife or secateurs, make slight incisions into the roots on the edge of the ball. The incisions will encourage the roots to re-grow in the earth.
8. Now place the tree in the hole, backfill with the remaining earth, firm the soil by treading on it and tie the tree to the post, ensuring that the tie does not choke the trunk.
9. Create a rim of earth around the tree to retain water and water the tree generously. Spread a layer of bark mulch around the tree to protect it.
10. The tree must be well watered, especially in the first growing season.





## **Makar Sankranti** (Hinduism)

The word *sankranti* means ‘solstice’; in ancient Hindu tradition the time of the solstice is a time of blessing. The festival has different names in different regions. In Tamil Nadu in southern India it is called Pongal. In Gujarat and Rajasthan it is known as Uttarayan, while in Punjab it is celebrated as Lohri.

### **Date**

In mid-January the sun turns: on 14 or 15 January it commences its northward arc into the zodiac sign of Makara. Makar Sankranti is one of the few Hindu festivals that is based on the path of the sun and not that of the moon.

### **History and religious significance of the festival**

The festival of Makar Sankranti marks the end of winter and the start of the planting and harvesting season. For some, the celebrations include a pilgrimage to the Ganges. The mythical background to this festival is the story of Bhagiratha, who brought Ganga – as Hindus call the River Ganges – to Earth from Himalaya.

### **Relevance to nature conservation**

This festival, which is firmly rooted in Hinduism, is a reminder of spring and hence of the start of the planting season. It thus honours not only the annual cycle as such but also the crops that will be harvested in the autumn. To promote the conservation of nature, it is necessary to recognise and demonstrate the importance of nature and plants for humans.

### **Commonalities with other religions**

Because the harvest cycle is also celebrated in other religions (e.g. in the form of Harvest Festival in Christianity or the Naw-Rúz festival at the start of the planting season for the Bahá’í), the festival is an opportunity to put an end to hostilities and thus also resolve potential conflicts between the religions. It can be used to bring the different religions together and allow them to celebrate the harvest cycle with each other.

### **Rituals and practices today**

The sugar cane harvest plays a particularly important part in the festival. In every house the women prepare *til-gud* or *til laddus*. Til-gud are sweets made of sugar from the fresh sugar cane, mixed with sesame seeds (*til*). The sweets are given to friends and neighbours, accompanied by the words ‘*Til-gud ghya, god bola*’ – ‘Take this sweet *til* and speak sweet words’. The



sweets are to be shared with everyone, thereby putting an end to any enmity.

In South India the festival is known as Pongal: Pongal means 'to boil over' or 'to overflow'. Hindus who celebrate Pongal boil rice in milk at sunrise until it boils over and then clap their hands for joy. This symbolises the overflowing of joy because the sun's energy feeds the crops, which then provide food for humans. As soon as the sun rises, the sun god Surya is thanked with fresh fruit and prayers. On the second day the animals are thanked: farm animals are not made to work, but are honoured and celebrated by being washed, decorated and well fed.

In West Bengal the great pilgrimage festival, the Gangasagar Mela, is held to mark Makar Sankranti. People gather on the banks of the Ganges near Kolkata and pay homage to the sun god Surya at sunrise. At a certain time they then plunge into the water, praying as they do so.



## Til-gud – Indian sesame balls

*Til-gud* or *til laddus* are made of jaggery, an unrefined sugar obtained from date palms or sugar cane. Unlike the whole cane sugar available in Germany, for instance, jaggery is sold in block form and is caramel coloured.

### Ingredients:

- 1 cup jaggery (whole cane sugar)
- 2 cups sesame, hulled
- 3 tablespoons water
- 1-2 teaspoons butter

### Optional:

- some sweetened condensed milk (to make the balls sweeter)
- a few almonds or peanuts

### Method:

1. Melt the butter in a pan over medium heat.
2. Add the whole cane sugar and stir for several minutes until the mixture is sticky.
3. Add the sesame seeds.
4. Stir over low heat until the ingredients are well combined.
5. Nuts (almonds/peanuts) and a little condensed milk can be added at this point if desired.
6. If the mixture is too firm and dry, simply add a little water.
7. Pile the mixture onto a piece of baking paper and allow it to cool briefly.
8. You now need to work quickly: the mixture can only be worked while it is still warm. It is best to use a teaspoon to separate small portions of the warm mixture (caution: don't burn your hands!) and then shape them into small balls with your hands.
9. If the mixture is too sticky, simply grease your hands with some butter.
10. Allow the finished balls to cool completely.





**Holi** (Hinduism)

The festival of Holi has many different names: for example, in Maharashtra it is called *Shimga*, in Goa *Shigmo*, in Madhya Pradesh *Phaga* and in West Bengal and Odisha *Dol Yatra*. In the south the festival is known as *Kama-dahana*.

**Date**

The festival starts on the last full moon day in the month of Phalguna (February/March). Holi is a spring festival and it lasts up to ten days.

**History and religious significance of the festival**

Holi is one of India's oldest festivals and it is celebrated exuberantly. People sprinkle each other with coloured water and coloured powder. Like other festivals, Holi has many different levels of meaning. At one level it serves as a reminder of the divine game played by Krishna and his eternal companions, the gopis. The gopis – male and female – were the cowherds of Krishna's tribe.


According to Indian mythology, Krishna was in his youth desperate to know whether the fair-skinned Radha and the other gopis would like his own dark-blue complexion. His mother Yashoda advised him to approach Radha and to colour her face whatever colour he wanted as part of a game. He did this and Radha and Krishna became a couple. The playful colouring of Radha's face has been celebrated as Holi ever since.

Another spiritual aspect is the triumph of good over evil. In nature the festival marks the victory of spring over winter, since it starts with the blossoming of nature. All disputes should be put aside in the days of the festival.

However, there are other stories about the festival's origins. One such story recounts how the god Vishnu triumphed over the evil demon Holika and killed her by burning her on a bonfire.

The father of the young prince Pahlada tried to persuade his son to worship him as a god, but the son refused to worship any god other than Vishnu. The king then made various attempts to kill his son, but each time Vishnu intervened and saved the child. Finally, the king turned to cunning. His sister, Holika, had special powers that protected her from fire. The king wanted her to leap into the fire with Pahlada on her lap and thus burn him to death. But the flames spared the child and of Holika only a pile of ashes remained. Accordingly people celebrate Holi to commemorate the demon's destruction.





The erotic character of the spring festival is also expressed in the festival of Kamadahana, which is celebrated in South India at the same time. The legend relates how Kama, the god of love, once tried to disturb Shiva in his meditation but the angry Shiva turned him into ash with his third eye. However, Shiva was placated by the pleading of Ratri, Kama's wife, and he restored him to life. Since then the day has been dedicated to the god of love.

### **Relevance to nature conservation**

Commercial Holi festivals are now popular in Germany and other countries. They are not entirely harmless fun, since they can be harmful to human health. The synthetic coloured powder is often a respiratory hazard and environmentally damaging. Analysis by the German Environment Agency (UBA) showed that up to 97 percent of the paint particles were PM<sub>10</sub>. On average, each person at a Holi event is handed about 500 grams of coloured powder. If an estimated total of 650,000 people take part, this would mean that 300 tonnes of coloured powder are used at Holi festivals in Germany. If one assumes that an average of 70 percent of the powder consists of PM<sub>10</sub> particles, this results in about 230 tonnes of particulate matter being released each year. Most Holi powders consist of corn or rice starch, which can cause dust explosions. Other carrier substances such as talcum powder do not present this hazard, but the talc mined in some areas may contain asbestos or asbestos-like fibres. These fibres can cause lung irritations and even lung cancer.

By contrast, the coloured powders originally used in India are derived from plants and flowers and pose no risk to humans or the environment. They celebrate spring and remind people how valuable nature is.


### **Commonalities with other religions**

Other spring festivals are celebrated by Alevi (the Newroz festival) and the Bahá'í (Naw-Rúz) (see pages 22 and 26).

Far more important, though, than the similarities with the spring festivals of other cultures and religions is the fact that social norms and moral codes are suspended for the period of the Holi festival and social hierarchies are thus loosened. During the festival it is irrelevant who is of higher status. Everyone celebrates in unifying fellowship, regardless of their social standing.

### **Rituals and practices today**

On the eve of Holi Hindus gather to burn a figure of Holika in the streets. The figure is made of wood or straw. It is traditional to put coconuts on the fire. The coconuts, which symbolise bad deeds, are later eaten. The fire is supposed to put evil spirits to flight and free people of their sins. On the day



of Holi itself, the spring and the new religious year are greeted exultantly and exuberantly. The Hindus throw coloured powder and water at each other, which often leads to colour and water fights. The coloured powder was originally made from particular flowers, roots and herbs with a therapeutic effect. The spectacle is accompanied by music, dancing and singing. The songs that are sung recount the traditional stories of the gods' heroic deeds.

The festival is no longer confined to India. Detached from its religious significance, it has spread throughout Europe, where commercial Holi festivals are now common. The new trend arrived in Germany in 2012 when a company called Holi Concept GmbH launched a series of music festivals entitled 'Festivals of Colours'. Since 2013 another company, Justa Event GmbH in Hanover, has organised a number of music festivals under the name 'Holi Farbrausch Festival'.

Large numbers of mainly young people attend the festivals organised by these companies. There is live music on a festival site and the participants are given bags of coloured powder that they throw over each other, or the powders are flung into the air after a countdown. Even the date of the festival differs from that of the religious event, with multiple festivals taking place from spring through to autumn.



## Celebrate Holi without harming the environment

If you celebrate Holi, it is important not to forget the festival's religious background: celebrations should respect the Hindu faith and participants should remember the original significance of Holi for Hinduism. One way of achieving this might be to ask Hindus to demonstrate or explain the traditions and rituals of the festival.

And to avoid having to worry about the use of coloured powders, you could make environmentally friendly powders yourself. If you do this, you should bear in mind the fact that the natural dyes may be difficult or impossible to remove from clothing and therefore wear clothes that you don't mind getting stained. All participants should be informed about the natural dyes that are being used (e.g. with regard to possible allergies).

### These dyes are not harmful to the environment:

Orange = paprika powder

Yellow = saffron or turmeric

Green = matcha tea, spinach, also wheatgrass powder or barley grass powder

Brown = cinnamon or cocoa

Bright red = raspberries or redcurrants (cook and sieve)

Dark red = blueberries, red cabbage, beetroot (cook and sieve)

### How to make dyes yourself

**You need:** cornflour, a bowl, water, a fork, food colouring (bought or home-made as described above) and a sieve

- **Step 1:** Put the cornflour in a bowl.
- **Step 2:** Dissolve the food colouring in water. You can vary the quantity of colouring depending on how intense you want the colour to be. Stir well with the fork.
- **Step 3:** Leave the mixture to dry for at least a day.
- **Step 4:** Break the hard mass into fine crumbs with the fork. Ideally it should then be sieved to make an even finer powder.





## **Newroz (Alevism)**

Newroz comes from the Persian: it means ‘new day’ and is comprised of the words *nu* (new) and *roz* (day), which over time have become *nuroz* or *newroz*.

### **Date**

Newroz marks the start of spring (at the vernal equinox); in the Gregorian calendar it is usually celebrated on 21 March.

### **History and religious significance of the festival**

During the festival of Newroz, Alevi ceremonially welcome the spring and the reinvigoration of nature. They are also celebrating the birthday of the Blessed Ali, who was born on 21 March, New Year’s Day (Nevruz = literally ‘new day’) 598 A.D. in Mecca. For the Alevi he embodies the divine light. The important position of the Blessed Ali in Alevi teaching is evident in the confession of faith: ‘There is no god but God, Muhammad is his messenger and Ali is his friend.’ The start of spring therefore carries potent symbolism in Alevi teaching.

According to Alevi beliefs, Ali worked for justice and scholarship and attained ‘divine truth’. For this reason he is called the ‘gate of divine knowledge’.

In 2009 the festival of Newroz, which is more than 3,000 years old, was inscribed on the UNESCO list of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

### **Relevance to nature conservation**

Newroz is a celebration of the end of a hard winter and the blossoming of nature. At the heart of the festival is the beauty of nature and the gifts that spring brings. It also celebrates the victory of light over darkness as the days become ever longer. The light is of central importance in Alevism, because it is regarded as the source of all creation. The divine light illumines the world and all life within it. The Blessed Ali and the Prophet Muhammad are part of the divine light and hence figures of light.

### **Commonalities with other religions**

The Bahá’i religion celebrates the festival of Naw-Rúz, which links with the Newroz festival and extends its meaning. Because the festivals have very similar origins, Alevis and Bahá’i can organise the festival together, with each group explaining the special features of its festival to the other.



### Rituals and practices today

Alevi organise a festival on the evening of Newroz. Members of the community gather together and discuss the life and teachings of the Blessed Ali and his messages and significance in modern society.

On the eve of the last Wednesday before Newroz, the 'Wednesday fire' is lit. This ancient Iranian or Zoroastrian custom is one of the most important rituals of the Persian New Year festival. On the previous evening, children and young people go from house to house and neighbours give them sweets.

In some places muhabbet evenings (philosophical discussions) and cem ceremonies (*Nevruz Cemi/Sultan Nevruz*) take place. In the cem ceremonies, religious leaders (called *dede* or *pir*, or *ana* if the leader is a woman) sing prayers (the *nefes*). The participants usually sit in a semicircle around the ana or dede, so that all can see and participate equally well. In consequence there is no second row, no beginning and no end. Alevi call this seating arrangement in which people come face-to-face as equals *cemal cemale*.

The *semah*, a dance in which people turn in circles, is also practised. The *semah* symbolises the universe and the revolution of the planets around the sun. The Alevi turn barefoot, one arm raised, thus symbolically linking themselves with heaven and earth.

In some parts of Anatolia the Hawtamal or Hewtemal festival (literally: 'seven of the animals') is celebrated at the start of spring. The last Wednesday before 21 March is when day and night are of equal length (the vernal equinox); it is called *Kara Çarşamba* (Black Wednesday). Because after this the days become longer than the nights and nature comes to life again, the start of spring is celebrated at this time in the Hawtamal or Hewtemal festival. Special rituals are performed; these may involve blessing the animals and distributing gifts to neighbours and people in special need.



### **Light a camp fire together**

Because an important component of Newroz is the Wednesday fire, the festival can be marked by lighting a camp fire with people of other religions (people of the Bahá'í-religion would be a good choice, as they celebrate a very similar festival in the form of Naw-Rúz). It is of course important that the camp fire does not endanger the natural environment: do not light a fire in nature conservation areas, in dry conditions, or where there is a risk of forest fires. In many places there are also specific rules on the lighting of fires in the open air; it may be necessary to notify the authorities, as a fire might otherwise be considered an infringement of the regulations or even a criminal offence.

The special features of Newroz can be explained to everyone in the gathering around the fire. A discussion of different spring festivals and the significance of spring for our flora and fauna deepens the feeling of community and awareness of conservation concerns.

In accordance with Alevi tradition, you may choose to dance to celebrate the blossoming of the plant world, but you can also simply listen in reverent silence to the sounds of nature and the fire.





## **Naw-Rúz (Bahá'í)**

The Nouruz festival is Persian in origin; translated literally the word means 'new day, new year'. Among the Bahá'í the spelling Naw-Rúz has become customary.

### **Date**

The Naw-Rúz Festival is celebrated at the start of spring in the northern hemisphere; it is held on the vernal equinox on 20 or 21 March. Naw-Rúz is one of nine holy days in the Bahá'í calendar; it marks the start of the new year and the end of the Bahá'í period of fasting.

### **History and religious significance of the festival**

Naw-Rúz is a religious festival in its own right with its own spiritual meaning. Occurring as it does at the start of the annual cycle of nature and the end of the dark time of the year, Naw-Rúz symbolises spiritual renewal – a renewal that receives a divine impulse through the messengers of God (such as Jesus, Buddha, Moses, Mohammad, Bahá'u'lláh). This impulse is directed at both the spiritual and the material wellbeing of all. The founder of the Bahá'í religion, Bahá'u'lláh, writes of Naw-Rúz:

'This day, verily, is the crown of all the months and the source thereof, the day on which the breath of life is wafted over all created things. Great is the blessedness of him who greeteth it with radiance and joy. We testify that he is, in truth, among those who are blissful.'

### **Relevance to nature conservation**

The festival marks the end of the winter darkness and the reappearance of light, warmth and the beauty of the spring flowers. At the time of the vernal equinox, a new spurt of life is observable throughout the plant kingdom. The human and animal kingdom experiences a new vitality and moves forward with a new dynamism. The whole world seems re-born, resurrected. The spring wind invigorates nature, flowers and trees bloom, and the air is pleasant and refreshing. The heart is enlivened by the sight of reinvigorated landscapes.

### **Commonalities with other religions**

See the Alevi Newroz festival.



### **Rituals and practices today**

Naw-Rúz is a festival of encounter. It is celebrated merrily and accompanied by prayers. Because it is also the first day of the month of Bahá in the Bahá'í calendar, it marks the start of the new year.



## Greeting the spring

With the arrival of spring, nature is reinvigorated. This provides a wonderful opportunity to share the joys of the re-awakening with others – for example, with a hyacinth that exudes the scent of spring and, when accompanied by a quotation from the holy writings of the religions, also appeals to the spiritual senses.

### Instructions

#### Hyacinths in a glass:

1. Put the bulb in a tumbler.
2. Fill the glass with water, ensuring that the water does not touch the bulb. The distance between the water and the bulb should be about two millimetres. If possible, use a glass that becomes narrower towards the bottom so that the bulb cannot slip downwards.
3. Now place the glass in a dark room at about 10 °C.
4. As soon as the pointed bud is about 4 cm tall, move the hyacinth to a bright, cool room.
5. When the flower bud has emerged fully from the bulb, the hyacinth can be moved to a warm living room.

#### Hyacinths in a pot:

1. Plant the bulbs in a flowerpot or basket filled with loose potting soil.
2. The bulbs should protrude slightly from the soil: as a general rule, at least one-third of the bulb should remain visible.
3. Now cover it with moss or tree bark.
4. The bulb is then treated as described above.
5. Water regularly.

#### Attach a quotation:

1. Find a quotation from the holy scriptures of the religions that has to do with spring. For example: 'Ye are the fruits of one tree and the leaves of one branch. Deal ye one with another with the utmost love and harmony, with friendliness and fellowship. So powerful is the light of unity that it can illuminate the whole earth.' – Bahá'u'lláh, from the Bahá'í sacred writings.
2. Print the quotation on a card or write it by hand; feel free to decorate it artistically.
3. Punch a hole in the corner of the card, thread a ribbon through it and tie the card to the pot or glass with a bow.



## Çarşema Sor (Yezidism)

*Çarşema Sor* means 'Red Wednesday'. *Çarşem* consists of the Kurdish *çar* meaning 'four' and *şem* meaning 'week'. *Sor* means 'red', thus producing the name 'Red Wednesday'. The day is often also known as *Sersal* meaning 'new year' – in other words, it is the new year festival.

### Date

Çarşema Sor is celebrated on the first Wednesday in April in the Yezidi calendar, which in that calendar is also 1 April. The Yezidi calendar is 13 days behind the Gregorian calendar used in Europe. It is important that the day is always celebrated on a Wednesday. In Germany, therefore, the festival is observed on 14 April, if that falls on a Wednesday, or on the first Wednesday thereafter.

### History and religious significance of the festival

On this day, God commanded the angel Tawisî Melek to create the Earth and make it habitable for all living beings. Tawisî Melek (which means 'God's angel') is chief among the Yezidi archangels and their central figure. As he is in the middle of the seven archangels, he also represents Wednesday, the middle of the week. 'Red Wednesday' is also the day on which the creation of the Earth was completed. On this day the sun's rays reached the Earth for the first time and bathed the firmament in red light; it is from this that the name 'Red Wednesday' is derived. Every year at Çarşema Sor the angel is said to return to Earth to bring people happiness and blessings. The whole day focuses on the year's new start and the new start of life in general.

### Relevance to nature conservation

The festival is about asking for support, protection and a fruitful harvest.

Yezidis believe that Çarşema Sor is the day on which creation was brought to completion. The body of the first human, Adam, was accordingly created on Wednesday. The process was a progressive one: first came the earthly elements (fire, water, earth, air) and finally the soul was added to give Adam life. The festival is therefore celebrated as the start of life and the faithful are reminded of the need to treat creation as something special and to protect it. People delight in the incipient blossoming of nature.





### Commonalities with other religions

Many religions have new year festivals of one sort or another; almost all involve welcoming the new year and hence the cycle of nature. The Orthodox Blessing of the Waters, the Hindu Holi festival and the Nouruz festival of the Bahá'í all have similar significance.

### Rituals and practices today

At Çarşema Sor each family makes a sacrifice in the form of an animal, usually a sheep. A bread called *sewik* is also baked. Among Yezidis this bread is regarded as sacred. On this day the Yezidis adorn the doors of their houses with splendid floral decorations and they dye or paint hens' eggs in bright colours. These eggs represent the original pearl. The entire universe was formed from the bursting of this pearl (*dur*). The coloured eggs are a reminder of the completion of the Earth's creation, the accompanying commencement of life and the annual blossoming of nature. In memory of the creation of the Earth, Yezidi dignitaries weave armbands (*bazinbar*) and distribute them to the Yezidi. These armbands are to protect the wearer from harm. As well as the armbands the dignitaries bring water from the holy Kanîya Sipî or 'White Spring.' Many families gather to celebrate together.

It is customary for no weddings to be held in this month, because according to Yezidi and Babylonian tradition it is the month in which the angels marry. For this reason the month of April is known among the Yezidis as *bûka salê* or 'the bride of the year'.



## Painting eggs together

### Painting eggs together

It is not only the Yezidis who paint eggs at Çarşema Sor; many Christian and atheist Germans also do this at Easter. The tradition therefore provides an excellent opportunity to get together and paint eggs with other people. To show consideration for the environment, use organic free-range eggs – preferably from a nearby farm. This page tells you how to colour eggs using natural dyes.

### Making a coloured liquid to dye Easter eggs

For the coloured liquid, put about a litre of water in a pot. Because the dye may stain the pot, it is best to use an old one that is not particularly precious. Now boil roughly 20-50 grams of your chosen material in the pot (see below for further information on the various ingredients for the different colours). After about 30-60 minutes the water should have absorbed the colour well and the liquid is ready. Remove the plant residue with a sieve and let the liquid cool. Then rub the eggs that you have previously boiled (white eggs are best) with vinegar – this enables the colour to take better. Place the eggs in the cold liquid and leave them there for about 30 minutes. To ensure that the eggs are evenly coloured, the liquid should completely cover them. Alternatively, the eggs can be boiled directly in the liquid – but for no more than 8-10 minutes, as otherwise they will become too hard to eat. Then let the eggs cool. So that they last longer, do not rinse them in cold water. Rinsing makes the shells more porous, which means that bacteria may get in and cause the egg to go bad sooner.

### What materials for what colours?

**Red:** red onion peel, mallow tea, red cabbage leaves, beetroot

**Brown:** dried marigolds, black tea, coffee, bark, brown onion peel

**Yellow:** ground turmeric root (10 g to ½ litre of water), saffron, chamomile flowers

**Green:** spinach, nettles, parsley, maté tea, horsetail

**Blue:** elderberry juice, bilberry juice or purple cabbage

**Orange:** carrots

**Tip:** If you want pretty patterns on your eggs, you can use leaves or flowers. Before dyeing the eggs, moisten the flowers or leaves, stick them on the egg and then cover both with a nylon stocking. Tie the stocking firmly in place so that the egg and leaves cannot slip.





## Passover (Judaism)

The name of Passover or Pesach is derived from the Hebrew *Pesah*. It refers to the time when God 'passed over' the people of Israel, sparing the lives of their first-born.

### Date

Passover commences on the 15<sup>th</sup> of the month of Nisan and lasts until the 21<sup>st</sup> in Israel or until the 22<sup>nd</sup> for Jews elsewhere. Nisan usually falls in March or April of the Gregorian calendar. In 2020 Passover begins on 9 April and ends on 16 April; in 2021 it lasts from 28 March until 4 April.

### History and religious significance of the festival


Passover is a reminder of the time of the Exodus – the departure of the people of Israel from Egypt and their liberation from slavery. The retelling of this story, which is summarised in the Passover Haggadah, connects each new generation with the key liberation experience of the Jews.

The story relates how the Egyptians prohibited the Hebrews from leaving. G-d then sent nine plagues to make the Egyptians change their minds. When this failed, he declared that he would come himself and slay the first-born of all humans and animals. To be spared this fate, each Israelite family was to slaughter the young of a sheep or goat the evening before and mark the doorpost of their home with the animal's blood. The animal was then eaten. All the houses thus marked were spared or 'passed over' during the night, while the Egyptians experienced G-d's punishment. The Egyptians then beseeched the Israelites to leave the land, which they promptly did.

### Rituals and practices today

One of the key aspects of this seven-day festival (eight days for Orthodox Jews) is the ban on eating leaven (*chametz* in Hebrew) or even having it in one's possession. 'Leaven' covers all grain products that have undergone any form of fermentation at any stage, even before milling. It includes all foods made from five types of grain: wheat, oats, rye, barley or spelt.

Before Passover, houses are cleaned meticulously to remove every morsel of *chametz*. On the evening of 14 Nissan – or a day earlier if the 14<sup>th</sup> is a Sabbath – the whole house must be thoroughly searched for leaven. If any is found, it is burned the following morning. All residue of leaven is removed from kitchen utensils and cutlery by boiling them. Special tableware that is kept separate from other crockery is used for Passover.



A special domestic ritual takes place on the first two evenings. It takes the form of a festive meal, known as a *seder*; the word comes from the Hebrew word for 'order'. The whole family, plus any guests who may be present, gathers and eats together. The symbolic foods required for this meal are assembled on a plate. They consist of:

- three matzos (unleavened bread), each wrapped in a serviette or cloth
- 'fruits of the earth' (radishes, celery or parsley)
- a container of salt water
- bitter herbs (horseradish or lettuce)
- a brown paste of grated apples, almonds, cinnamon and wine
- a bone with roasted meat attached
- a boiled egg

The bone with meat attached is a reminder of the paschal sacrifice, the sacrificial lamb. However, only rarely is lamb used for this. The egg symbolises the pilgrimage sacrifice. The egg and the bone must be edible, but they are left untouched. All the other foods on the seder plate are eaten in the course of the evening. These foods symbolise the bondage of the Jews in Egypt: the salt water in which the fruits of the earth are dipped are a reminder of all the tears that have been shed; the bitter herbs represent the suffering of the Israelites; the brown paste is symbolic of the clay from which they made bricks, and the matzos are the 'bread of affliction'. Unleavened bread is a reminder of the haste with which the Israelites fled: there was no time to allow the dough to rise and so they baked it straight away.

Many of the customs of the seder evening have their roots in ancient times. For example, it is traditional to recline rather than sit to eat the seder meal. Nowadays many Jews only partially observe this custom and use cushions to support the back. Each person drinks four cups of wine during the evening. A fifth cup of wine is placed in the middle of the table: it is for the prophet Elijah, the herald of the Messiah.

However, the main feature of the seder is the reading of special texts from the Passover Haggadah about the exodus from Israel. The reader is also expected to explain the stories. This is accompanied by the blessing of the foods, starting with the festival *kiddush* (blessing of the wine). The dinner should consist of at least two courses. Hard-boiled eggs in salt water are eaten first. In Judaism, eggs are a symbol both of life and of mourning. After the eggs comes a meat course, and many Jews follow this with a symbolic dessert, the *afikomen*, which is a piece of matzo. Making the matzo should take no longer than 18 minutes.





The second part of the evening is less tightly structured. There is a lot of singing, with the best-known song being *Chad Gadya* or 'One little goat'. Another important aspect of Passover is the presentation of the omer on the second day of the festival. Omer means 'gift' (a bundle of grain) and the presentation of the omer signifies that a portion of the new harvest is being sacrificed. This marks the start of the counting of seven weeks, ending on the fiftieth day, which is the Feast of Weeks or Shavuot.

### **Relevance to nature conservation**

Agriculturally, Passover is linked to the harvest of winter barley. But Passover is also a family festival in which family members recall and reaffirm the origins and traditions of their people. Passover reminds people that the Jews had to leave most of their possessions behind when they fled and were able to live with very little. It therefore admonishes the present generation to be less wasteful. One of the defining features of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in Europe and many other places is capitalism and the accompanying pressure to constantly buy more instead of being content with little. Eighteen million tonnes of food are thrown away each year in Germany; much of it is not even opened and is still edible. It is estimated that more than half of this waste could be avoided.

### **Commonalities with other religions**

In the Bible, Passover is also known as the Feast of Unleavened Bread. According to the New Testament, the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ in Jerusalem took place during Passover week. Jesus' death is therefore linked to the people of Israel's hope of liberation. His resurrection is seen as affirmation of that hope, and the extension of this hope to all people is anticipated. The Paschal Lamb in Christianity is also a reminder of the Passover sacrifice that was slaughtered at the temple until the temple was destroyed in 70 A.D.



## **Passover – Gratitude, community and good food**

Passover is a reminder of the exodus of the Jews, during which people had to leave many of their material possessions behind. They managed to live with very little. Today the story can be a valuable lesson not only for Jews but for everyone. Passover helps us remember that many people – especially in western countries – do not simply have enough but often too much.

So here is a suggestion of Passover that is suitable for non-Jews.

Invite friends, neighbours and/or members of the community and arrange a cooking evening with what you have in the house (without going shopping first). Often far too much food is thrown away because people buy too much or stock up with things and the food then goes bad. From the assortment of foods assembled for a meal of this sort you can create interesting new recipes and try out ingredients that you have never used before.

If you like you can incorporate aspects of the Jewish tradition, for example by making matzos.

### **Matzos**

#### **Ingredients:**

- 500 g flour
- 200 ml water
- a pinch of salt

#### **Method:**

1. Combine the flour and salt in a bowl.
2. Add water and knead well until the dough is no longer sticky.
3. Make the dough into 15-20 small balls.
4. Roll out the balls very thinly with a rolling pin and prick each piece several times with a fork.
5. Place the flatbreads on baking paper or a hot stone and cook them in the oven at approx. 220 °C (top/bottom heat) until they are golden brown and lightly blistered.
6. Remove the cooked matzos from the oven, allow to cool slightly and enjoy.





## Shavuot (Judaism)

The name of the festival comes from the Hebrew word for 'weeks'. In Yiddish it is written as *Shovuos*. In the Torah the festival has several names: the Feast of Weeks, the Festival of Reaping and the Day of the First Fruits.

### Date

The Festival of Weeks (Shavuot) is held on 6 and 7 Sivan – precisely 50 days (seven weeks and a day) after Passover.

### History and religious significance of the festival

The day reminds the Jewish people of the second giving of the ten commandments on Mount Sinai. When the commandments were first received as a gift of G-d, Moses wrote them on tablets of stone, but he then destroyed the tablets because the children of Israel worshiped the golden calf. The second time, the Israelites had to request the commandments. Their acceptance of the commandments signals the start of the covenant between G-d and the people of Israel.

However, Shavuot also has a second significance: it is a harvest festival, because in Israel the first wheat is harvested at this time. In biblical times Shavuot was just the Feast of the First Fruits: on this day, two loaves of wheat made from the flour of the new harvest were offered in the temple in Jerusalem. Likewise, the first fruits of other agricultural products could not be brought as an offering before the start of Shavuot. Nowadays, synagogues are decorated with fresh greenery and flowers at Shavuot as a reminder of this ancient custom. In this case the synagogue also symbolises Mount Sinai.

### Rituals and practices today

The first day of Shavuot is marked by readings from the Torah. The reading is often preceded by a poem and accompanied by singing. The Book of Ruth is also read, because the book recounts the stories of the ancestors of David, who was born on Shavuot. Extracts from the Book of Ruth describe Ruth's devotion in leaving the court of her father in order to join the people of Israel and follow G-d.

It is also customary not to work on this day and to drink milk or eat dairy products. This is a reminder that the Torah is like mothers' milk; the Hebrew word for milk is *chalav*. In the Song of Solomon, the Torah is also compared to honey and milk in the words 'Honey and milk are under thy tongue' (Song of Solomon 4: 11). If the numerical values of the letters of the word *chalav* are totalled, the result is forty. To receive the Torah, Moses spent forty days on Mount Sinai.



### **Relevance to nature conservation**

Shavuot is a harvest festival and thus a reminder of the importance of creation. Without biodiversity there would soon be nothing to harvest. Shavuot is also an occasion to reflect on the Ten Commandments and the covenant between G-d and the people of Israel. The Jewish people were chosen by G-d to act in His name. Caring for creation is an important aspect of this.

### **Commonalities with other religions**

According to the Acts of the Apostles in the Christian Bible, the Holy Spirit descended on the disciples of Jesus during the Jewish Feast of Weeks. There is thus a historical link between Shavuot and the Christian festival of Pentecost. There are also harvest festivals in other religions, such as the Christian Harvest Festival.





## It's harvest time: Go out into the fields!

In keeping with the spirit of Shavuot, the time of the first harvest provides an opportunity to go out into the fields with your family and harvest the first fruits yourselves. In Germany there are excellent ways of doing this – you could, for example, pick strawberries at a strawberry farm.

If you particularly want to think about the environment, it is a good idea to visit an organic farm. CSA (Community-Supported Agriculture) farms or Demeter farms provide great ways of getting involved: young and old can dig, plant, harvest and above all learn. Children can see where our fruit, vegetables and cereals actually come from, and adults can learn a lot about organic agriculture and the reasons for the price differences between organic and non-organic products.









## **Vassa** (Buddhism)

The name 'Vassa' comes from the Pali *vasso* and/or the Sanskrit *varsa*, both of which mean 'rain'.

### **Date**

Vassa is observed during the rainy season, which lasts for three lunar months – roughly July to October. The festival always starts on the first day of the waning moon in the eighth month of the lunar calendar. The previous day is celebrated as Asalha Puja. In Thailand, where all male Buddhists spend time in a monastery, it is common to use Vassa to live temporarily as a monk.

### **History and religious significance of the festival**

Even before the time of the Buddha, it had become customary for monks not to go out and about during the rainy season but instead to concentrate on their studies and on meditation. This may have been partly because it was difficult to travel at this time of year. The Buddha himself is said to have withdrawn to a refuge in a forest during the wet season, and his disciples continued to do so after his death. However, because Mahayana Buddhism is practised mainly in districts which lack a pronounced rainy season, this tradition was not adopted by Mahayana Buddhists.

Other accounts relate how the Buddha noticed people walking about in the rain at a time when the seed was sprouting the fields; he thereupon dictated that, except in special cases, the monks should stay put in the temple during the rainy season in order not to trample the emerging crops.

### **Relevance to nature conservation**

The protection of seedlings symbolises the need to take care of newly emerging life. This can be transferred to all aspects of nature, because every species deserves to be protected. The festival therefore encourages both Buddhists and non-Buddhists to be more heedful of nature and all its species. Only by developing an attitude of mindfulness can we start to take deliberate action to conserve species. If people are to re-think their behaviour, they must first become aware of how valuable nature is.

### **Commonalities with other religions**



Although the translation of 'Vassa' tends to make us think first of World Water Day, the significance of the festival actually has more in common with the Jewish New Year of the Trees 'Tu BiShvat', which specifies that the fruits of a tree must not be eaten until the tree is three years old. Both festivals give the plants an opportunity to develop and hence to reproduce, thus contributing to species conservation.

#### **Rituals and practices today**

*Bhikkhus* (Buddhist monks) should not walk about during the three months of the rainy season. This protects plant seedlings. Instead they must be in the monastery at sunrise every morning and greet the sun there. For the rest of the time they go about their normal duties, unless they are unable to return to their temple at night. However, there are exceptions to this rule in the form of 'seven-day matters' and 'valid hindrances'.

## Creating wildflower meadows – Protecting seedlings

From the point of view of nature, the most important aspect of Vassa is the monks' avoidance of walking about, in order to protect the seedlings. To follow this example, you could sow a wildflower meadow in your garden. The meadow not only promotes the species diversity of plants and hence also of animals; it also looks great and attracts butterflies and other pollinators that are so important for ecosystems.

To encourage the seed mix to germinate well, you need loosened soil that is free of turf. It is therefore best not to sow the seed on an existing area of thick grass. Simply scatter the seed lightly on the ground, rake it in gently and firm it by treading on a board or plank. It is particularly important to keep the ground well watered for the first four to six weeks and, like the *bhikkhus*, not to walk on it.

When choosing the seed, take care to select regional plants. To make things easier for you, we list below some sources of suitable seeds in Germany:

- Bio-Saatgut Gaby Krautkrämer
- Bingenheimer Saatgut AG
- Netzwerk Blühende Landschaft
- Bioland-Versandgärtnerei Strickler
- Dreschflegel-Versand
- Hof Berggarten
- Naturnahe Gärten







## **Ecumenical Time/Creation Day** (Christianity)

### **Date**

The period from 1 September to 4 October – the feast of St Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of animals and nature in the Catholic tradition – is observed ecumenically as Creation Time or the season of Creation.

The choice of dates illustrates the ecumenical thinking behind the designation of this season. In the Catholic Church 1 September is observed as the World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation; this links with the Orthodox commemoration of God's creation and the start of the Orthodox liturgical year on the same date.

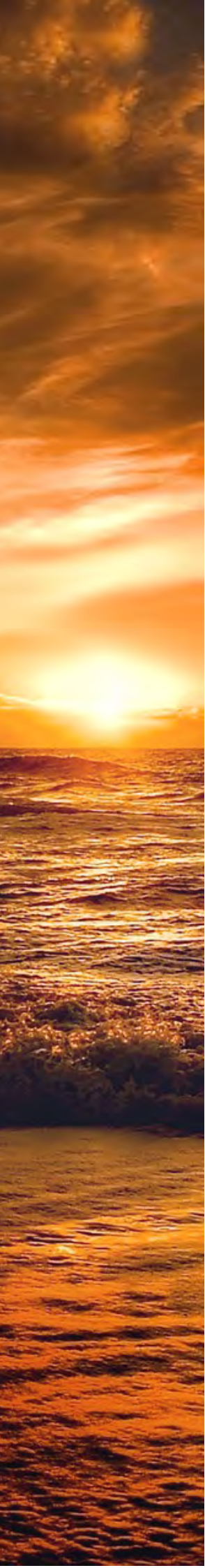
The first Friday in September is designated Creation Day but communities can also observe the day on any other date between 1 September and 4 October. This enables existing local and religious traditions to be taken into account.

### **History and religious significance of the festival**

In 1989 the Ecumenical Patriarch, Dimitrios I of Constantinople, urged the whole Orthodox and Christian world to pray for the preservation of creation. Patriarch Dimitrios stated:

'Therefore, we invite the entire Christian world through this our Patriarchal Message to offer together with the Mother Holy Great Church of Christ (The Ecumenical Patriarchate) every year on this day prayers and supplications to the Maker of all, both in thanksgiving for the great gift of Creation and in petition for its protection and salvation. At the same time we paternally urge, on the one hand, all the faithful in the world to admonish themselves and their children to respect and protect the natural environment, and, on the other hand, all those who are entrusted with the responsibility of governing nations to act without delay in taking all necessary measures for the protection and preservation of natural creation.'

Eight years later, at the Second European Ecumenical Assembly in Graz in 1997, the issue was again discussed and a resolution was passed recommending 'that the churches consider and promote the preservation of creation as part of church life at all levels' and stating that 'one way would be to observe a common Creation Day'.



The recommendation that the five weeks after Creation Day be observed as Creation Time was adopted at the Third European Ecumenical Assembly in Sibiu, Romania, in 2007. The following year the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches invited churches that were members of the WCC to mark Creation Time with prayers and appropriate activities.

The Working Group of Christian Churches (ACK) in Germany has also discussed the recommendation of the European Ecumenical Assemblies at several of its meetings. The issue was addressed at conferences in Brühl (2008) and Mainz (2009) and at a general meeting in 2009. The formal proclamation of the ACK's recognition of Creation Day was delivered at the second Ecumenical Church Congress (*Kirchentag*) in Munich in 2010: Bishop Friedrich Weber, the then president of the ACK, announced that the nationwide festival would be observed on the first Friday in September each year. The day is to focus on praise to the Creator, repentance for the destruction of creation and specific action to protect it.

In 2015 Pope Francis also declared 1 September to be a World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation for the Roman Catholic church worldwide.

### **Rituals and practices today**

On Creation Day and during Creation Time, the churches are urged to reflect on their relationship to creation and their behaviour towards it and to include both praise and sorrow in services and other events.

The celebration of Creation Day starts with an ecumenical service in which the emphasis is on praise and thanks to God, the Creator. The service is also a reminder of mankind's responsibility to care for creation. Creation Day should encourage people to start taking concrete steps to fulfil this task.

Each community and each individual can decide for themselves exactly how to organise the day. The ACK publishes a *Gottesdienst- und Materialheft zum ökumenischen Tag der Schöpfung* [Service and Materials Booklet for Ecumenical Creation Day] which suggests many different ways in which the message of care for creation can be communicated; it includes readings, prayers, songs and practical examples.

Since 2017 the Abrahamic Forum in Germany has been encouraging groups and communities to celebrate the first Sunday in September as 'Religious Conservation Day'. This can be linked to religious conservation days or weeks that can be organised and celebrated by different religions, preferably together.



## Knowing and protecting our earth

### Part one:

Pick up some earth, let it trickle through your fingers and smell it. Find out what sort of soil you have in your garden:

**Sandy soil** crumbles immediately in the hands and cannot be formed into a solid ball. It is light and permeable to water. It dries out quickly and also warms quickly but it does not retain water and nutrients well.

**Loam soil** can be shaped into a roll, but the roll breaks when bent into a loop. Loam soil is the perfect garden soil because it consists of roughly equal parts of sand, silt and clay and is therefore good at retaining water and nutrients.

**Clay soil** can be easily shaped and bent into rolls or loops. It is heavy and easily compressed. It can hold a lot of water and nutrients but runs the risk of becoming waterlogged.

### Part two:

#### **Holy plants of the Bible, Torah and Koran**

Many plants with which we are familiar occur in the Bible, the Torah and/or the Koran. They include:

- date palm, olive, fig, vine, pomegranate, sycamore, carob tree, Jerusalem thorn, almond tree, papyrus, wheat, barley, flax, lentil, broad bean, chickpea, onion, leek, garlic, dill, black cumin
1. Choose one of the plants.
  2. Invite people of different religions.
  3. Each guest should research the significance of the plant in his or her religion and the places in the holy writings that mention it.
  4. In addition, each guest could contribute a dish in which the plant is an ingredient.
  5. You can discuss the differences and similarities together.
  6. The various dishes can be shared out and eaten together.





## **Feast of Tabernacles** (Judaism)

The Feast of Tabernacles or Feast of Booths is known in Judaism as 'Sukkot'. The name comes from the Hebrew word *sukka* or *sukkah* (tabernacle).

### **Date**

The feast is celebrated in September or October, five days after the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur. It lasts for seven days, from 15 to 21 Tishri, the first month of the civil Jewish year.

The first and second days are holidays, while days three to seven are intermediate days. The seventh day of Sukkot, Hoshana Rabbah, has special religious significance. This day commemorates the day of judgement over the water. On that day G-d decided on the 'living rain'. The 'living rain' falls only during the winter half-year. Prayers are also said for a blessed harvest in the coming year.

In addition, there is an eighth and a ninth day that can be added on. The eighth day is Shemini Azeret, which is the festival that closes Sukkot but also counts as a separate holiday. The ninth day is Simchat Torah, the day of 'rejoicing with the Torah'; this is the second day of the closing festival, but it is observed only in the diaspora.

### **History and religious significance of the festival**

Sukkot is one of the three major biblical pilgrimage festivals. The most important aspect is the building of a *sukkah* or booth. Some Jews live in this sukkah throughout the seven days. It is this tradition that has given the festival its name. It marks the second harvest festival that Jews celebrate in the year.

The festival has two meanings. Firstly, it is a harvest festival and for this reason it is also called the Festival of Ingathering. During the festival, G-d is thanked for the harvest. This aspect is symbolised by the *lulav*, a bundle of branches that is used during the morning service. It consists of a frond of the date palm which is bound together with three myrtle twigs and two willow twigs, together with the *etrog* (a type of lemon). The etrog symbolises a person's heart. Secondly, the festival is a reminder of the 40 years that the people of Israel spent in the wilderness: 'And ye shall keep it a feast unto the Lord seven days in the year. It shall be a statute for ever in your generations: ye shall keep it in the seventh month. Ye shall dwell in booths seven days; all that are home-born in Israel shall dwell in booths: that your generations may know that I made the children of Israel to dwell in booths,



when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your G-d. (Leviticus 23: 41-43)

Another important aspect of Sukkot was the fact that the festival was celebrated by everyone together: no social class was to be excluded: 'Thou shalt keep the feast of tabernacles seven days, after that thou hast gathered in from thy threshing-floor and from thy winepress. And thou shalt rejoice in thy feast, thou, and thy son, and thy daughter, and thy man-servant, and thy maid-servant, and the Levite, and the stranger, and the fatherless, and the widow, that are within thy gates.' (Deuteronomy 16: 13-14)

### **Relevance to nature conservation**

The Feast of Tabernacles marks the end of the harvest year. Joy and gratitude for the harvest are part of the celebration of this festival. The various branches and fruits that are waved during the procession are a sign of the fertility of the land as a gift of G-d. The festival is thus a reminder of the importance of nature to humanity and it calls on the faithful to value the diverse species.

The festival also reminds people not to cling to material things. This aspect can be linked to the idea of nature conservation. People's excessive and thoughtless consumption, especially in economically successful countries, has a detrimental effect on the environment – for example, through the accumulation of plastic waste – and exacerbates the problem of climate change.

### **Commonalities with other religions**


The Feast of Tabernacles is mentioned in a number of places in the Hebrew Bible. For example, Exodus 23: 16 states:

'[...] and the feast of harvest, the first-fruits of thy labours, which thou sowest in the field; and the feast of ingathering, at the end of the year, when thou gatherest in thy labours out of the field.'

And in Deuteronomy 1: 13-15 we read:

'Thou shalt keep the feast of tabernacles seven days, after that thou hast gathered in from thy threshing-floor and from thy winepress. And thou shalt rejoice in thy feast, thou, and thy son, and thy daughter, and thy man-servant, and thy maid-servant, and the Levite, and the stranger, and the fatherless, and the widow, that are within thy gates. Seven days shalt thou keep a feast unto the Lord thy God in the place which the Lord shall





choose; because the Lord thy God shall bless thee in all thine increase, and in all the work of thy hands, and thou shalt be altogether joyful.'

The Feast of Tabernacles can be seen as a counterpart to the Christian Harvest Festival (see 'Harvest Festival').

### **Rituals and practices today**

Living in a sukkah reminds the Jewish people that G-d's protection is more important than the protection of a solid house. In the seven days in the hut people experience how transient life is, but God always shelters them, regardless of the external conditions in which they live. G-d is thanked for this.

Every year at Sukkot a sukkah is therefore built in the garden, yard or parking space or on a balcony or roof. It is covered with branches, straw or foliage and must be under the open sky. It is important that the hut retains its provisional nature and is not a permanent construction. People were originally supposed to spend the entire seven days in the sukkah, but if the weather does not permit this, it is sufficient just to eat all meals in it.

The festival begins on the eve of 15 Tishri. The housewives light candles, preferably in the sukkah. An evening service is then held.

At the service in the synagogue the following morning, the bundle of branches known as a lulav is carried. The lulav is made up of the *arba minim* – the 'four kinds' or 'four species' that represent the points of the compass and the various types of vegetation in the Israel of the Bible. These four kinds are:

- a bound palm frond (*lulav* in Hebrew) that gives the bundle its name and represents tropical plants;
- three myrtle twigs (*hadassim* in Hebrew) representing the plants that one cannot eat but can use for fragrance and healing;
- two willow twigs (*aravot* in Hebrew) representing all the plants that one neither eat nor use for fragrance but that make good firewood;
- and the *etrog*, a sort of lemon, representing fruits from the orchard.

The four species are also said to represent four types of person. The palms stand for Jews who study the Torah but do not perform good deeds. The etrog symbolises those who both study the Torah and do good deeds. The myrtle represents Jews who do good deeds but do not know the Torah, and the willow twigs represents those who neither study the Torah nor do good deeds.



During the prayers, the *arba minim* are waved in six directions – east, south, west, north, up and down – to thank G-d for having blessed mankind with His gift in all areas of nature.

During the Feast of Tabernacles it is appropriate to invite non-Jews, converse with them and build a sukkah together. This can promote dialogue, and working together on a project such as building a sukkah helps people get to know each other better, thereby overcoming their prejudices or even their fear of strangers.



### **Instructions: Build a shelter/sukkah**

The Feast of Tabernacles is also known as the Feast of Booths, and to mark the festival a shelter or 'booth' is built of branches and other materials. Jewish tradition specifies that construction should commence immediately after Yom Kippur. There are some points to be borne in mind when building the sukkah, and they are listed below:

- The sukkah should have four walls, but one wall can be that of a house or garage (this makes the sukkah easier to build).
- To make the other two corners of the shelter, you can use two posts and erect the walls between them.
- Lay pine twigs, large branches and/or leaves on the roof.
- In addition, the roof should be constructed so that there is more shade than sun inside the sukkah, but the stars must still be visible.
- According to Jewish belief, the people who have built the sukkah should sleep in it for seven nights: 'Ye shall dwell in booths seven days' (Leviticus 23: 42). If non-Jews are also planning to do this (and for children in particular, spending a night outdoors like this is a real adventure), you must make sure that the shelter is big enough to lie in.
- Among less conservative Jews in Germany, the rules about spending the night in the shelter take account of the weather: if it is too cold or wet, it is sufficient to take a meal in the shelter.
- Once the sukkah is built, children in particular can get involved and decorate it with pictures and with objects they have made from chestnuts, acorns and leaves.
- The sukkah must be dismantled after the festival, but all the materials can be retained and re-used the following year.
- Building the shelter is an experience for the whole family and when it is finished you can invite friends and neighbours to eat and spend time with you in it. We particularly encourage Jewish people to invite people of other religions and cultures so that they can discover an aspect of the Jewish tradition.





## **Harvest Festival** (Christianity)

Harvest Festival is also known as Harvest Thanksgiving.

### **Date**

There is evidence that Christians have celebrated Harvest Festival since the third century. Because of the different climate zones around the world, the harvest is brought in at various times, which means that the date cannot be standardised internationally.

In Germany, Catholic communities celebrate Harvest Festival on the first Sunday in October. This date was laid down by the German Bishops' Conference in 1972. The Protestant Church in Germany, on the other hand, marks Harvest Festival on the Sunday after 29 September (Michaelmas) – which often falls on the first Sunday in October too. The Protestant Church's decision to designate the Sunday after 29 September (Michaelmas) as Harvest Festival is based partly on an edict of the Prussian king in 1773.

A particularly important point is that, while the festival is assigned to a specific day, harvest thanksgiving as such lasts throughout October.

### **History and religious significance of the festival**

Harvest celebrations are not a Christian invention but existed before the Christian era. The Romans, for example, used to thank their gods for the harvest.

What should come to the fore in the Christian Harvest Festival is the basic concept of gratitude. On the one hand, the festival is about thanking God the creator for the harvest and for the integrity of creation. There is a lot that people can do so that their work (in the fields) bears fruit. But the outcome is in the hands of God. At the same time, Harvest Festival is also about an attitude of gratitude in general. Humans should remember to live their lives gratefully. And gratitude goes hand-in-hand with sharing, which is why harvest festivals are often combined with acts of solidarity with people in need.

### **Relevance to nature conservation**

The songs and prayers used at this time remind us of the goodness of God's creation, the beauty of nature and the human responsibility to care for creation. As a result of industrialisation and the global food trade, many people who do not work in agriculture forget the importance of a good harvest in every season. Harvest Festival is therefore also an opportunity to become aware of humanity's dependence on the whole of creation and the inter-



connectedness of all created things. As an expression of care for creation, Harvest Festival in many communities now focuses on protection of the environment, development aid and sustainability in agriculture. This shift is described by the cultural researcher Manfred Becker-Huberti (in his dictionary of customs and festivals entitled '*Lexikon der Bräuche und Feste*'). According to Becker-Huberti, the economic perspective on the world is increasingly being supplemented by an ecological one and Harvest Festival reflects this social awareness.

### **Commonalities with other religions**

Harvest Festival is also celebrated by other cultural groups. In India, for example, the Tamil community observes the festival of Pongal in January. Rites and prayers for a good harvest exist in many regions, cultures and religions. Thus in Judaism, Sukkot (see page 57) – the Feast of Tabernacles – marks the end of the harvest in the autumn.

### **Rituals and practices today**

The festival is usually held in a church, but in some regions is it marked by a procession. Altars are festively decorated with vegetables, grain and fruit. In some places, people make harvest crowns from corn or vines. After the festival the harvest gifts are eaten in a communal meal or distributed within the parish, in shelters for the homeless or to charitable institutions.

Harvest Festival provides a good opportunity to invite people of other religions or of no religion or religious background who work together in harvesting.



## Weaving harvest baskets

Harvesting apples, pears, plums, pumpkins and other fruit and vegetables is best done with a large basket. So why not use Harvest Festival as an opportunity to make a basket yourself with friends, neighbours or people you don't yet know? Simply invite other parents from your school or nursery to come along and so also meet new people and find out about their culture and/or religion.

### Instructions:

- You need to start by getting hold of long, thin twigs, plus some thicker ones (willow twigs are best). You can buy them or cut them yourself – but bear in mind that willow should only be cut between October and the end of February, because the flowering catkins provide the first source of food for pollinators after the winter.
- The twigs must then dry out for several weeks.
- A few days before you start weaving, place the twigs in water to make them pliable.
- Select eight of the thick twigs for the base and cut them to the same length – about 30 cm for a small basket and 90 cm for a large one.
- To make the base cross, you need to make a 5-cm long slot in the middle of four of the twigs. The other four twigs will be threaded through the slot.
- Bind the cross together with a thin, flexible material. When it is stable, bend the ends of the rods apart until they look like the spokes of a wheel.
- Now weave the thin twigs through this wheel, always going over one base twig and then under the next one.
- When the base is finished, fasten the long, moderately thin twigs by pushing them towards the centre of the base alongside the spoke twigs. The long twigs should now be sticking out a long way.
- Now bend the long twigs so that they point upwards and bind them all together at the top; they will then stay upright.
- Continue weaving in all the long, thin twigs, working from bottom to top.
- Important: Try to weave closely and evenly so that there are no holes in the basket.
- Cut off all the protruding ends with a knife or make a pointed end and fasten them into the basket. Finished!





## **Govardhan Puja** (Hinduism)

### **Date**

The festival is celebrated on the day after the full moon in the month of Kartika (October/November).

### **History and religious significance of the festival**

Govardhan Puja is held on the fourth day of Diwali. At this festival, Hindus honour the actual hill of Govardhan. Krishna directed the people living in the area around the hill to respect and worship the hill and its rivers, grass and trees because these aspects of nature underpin their livelihood. Symbolically, Hindus can do this anywhere in the knowledge that in honouring the natural world around them they are serving God.

According to one story, Govardhan Puja celebrates how Krishna lifted the Govardhan Hill and saved the gopis from a storm.

The storm had been sent by Indra, the weather god and the king of the angels and gods. The people had until then made offerings to Indra on that day so that he would send rain for a good harvest. But Krishna suspected that Indra had become arrogant and persuaded the people that it was the hill's earth that ensured the good harvest. The people turned to celebrating the hill rather than Indra. Indra was so angry that he sent the storm, intending to harm the people, but Krishna saved them by lifting the hill with the little finger of his left hand so that they could take refuge beneath it. The rain lasted for seven days but Krishna saved all living things and Indra finally accepted defeat and bowed down before Krishna. At Govardhan Puja people still pray that Krishna will protect them against all the storms of life and bring them safely through.

### **Relevance to nature conservation**

Venerating Govardhan Hill – which is a key element of the festival – can be transferred to hills, rivers and trees in general, which means that Hindus the world over can honour the natural world around them.

In Germany and elsewhere, uninhabited natural areas are on the decline as the population grows and cities steadily expand. Forests are cleared and wild meadows are built on. The constant expansion of the transport network also eats up green space. Many insect and plant species are being put at risk as a result.

Govardhan Puja can be used not only by Hindus but also by people of other religions and cultures to honour and appreciate the nature around them.





### **Commonalities with other religions**

There are parallels between the story of Govardhan Puja and the story of the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles. In the latter story people also had to struggle with storms and other weather conditions and ultimately they survived the forty years of wandering in the wilderness because they trusted God, just as the gopis were saved by the god Krishna because they trusted him. The present-day rituals of the two festivals are also similar in that both urge people to go out into nature and to value both nature and life.

### **Rituals and practices today**

On the predetermined day, the story of how Krishna lifted the hill is told. There is also music and dancing and some people even build a mountain of various foods. Krishna and the mountain are worshipped with prayers and God is thanked for the rescue. The food in the mountain is then distributed fairly to the public.



### Build a mountain of food

At Govardhan Puja many Hindus build a mountain of food in honour of Krishna and later distribute the individual foods to the public. Every day, far too much food ends up in the garbage because we don't manage to eat it and then throw it away. At Govardhan Puja people of other religions or no religion can also use the day to collect all the food that they have in the house and pile it into a big mountain. Invite family, friends and neighbours to join in too. You may be surprised at how many things there are in your cupboards. Now use some of the food to cook up something nice with your guests. You could give away all the rest of the food that is still unopened and not perishable before it perhaps goes bad.

There are excellent projects such as Foodsharing that enable leftover food to be shared so that it doesn't get thrown away.









## **Movable religious festivals** (movable in the Gregorian calendar)

### **Ganga Puja** (Hinduism)

#### **Date**

The festival is usually celebrated in March, April or May; the date is fixed according to the Hindu lunisolar calendar. Throughout India the festival lasts for ten days.

#### **History and religious significance of the festival**

Ganga Puja celebrates the first appearance of Ganga Devi, the goddess of the River Ganges. The Ganges is India's holiest river. Lord Krishna says in the Gita: 'Of the rivers I am the Ganges.' According to legend, the Ganges used to flow in heaven. With the agreement of Brahma and Shiva, it was sent by Vishnu to descend to Earth when the planet was experiencing a severe drought. But because the Ganges was too big and heavy to be simply dropped down, Shiva brought it to Earth – tangled and with a certain delay – via the Himalayas. That is why Shiva's hair is shown in drawings as representing the Ganges.

Hindus believe that no seed can germinate in the water of the Ganges. It is saturated with antiseptic minerals. The Ganges is not merely a river – it is a sacred *tirtha*, a place of pilgrimage.

#### **Relevance to nature conservation**

Environmental aspects are becoming increasingly important in modern celebrations of Ganga Puja. Keeping our water clean is one of the top priorities of nature conservation. Some of the water in lakes and rivers seeps into our groundwater. If this water is polluted by chemicals and other substances, the groundwater also becomes contaminated. Cleaning it again is a very complex and expensive process. Furthermore, there are many poor countries in which people's houses are not connected to a sewerage system. These people usually draw their water directly from a village well or a nearby river. If these water sources are polluted, people can become seriously ill. In Germany, 96 percent of waste water from private households and public institutions is piped to sewage treatment plants and cleaned. In addition, the discharge of untreated water into rivers and lakes is prohibited. However, many unnoticed pollutants withstand the treatment process and in consequence still enter our water bodies. These substances include drug



residues, antibiotics from livestock farming, microplastics from cosmetics and chemicals that have a hormone-like effect.

It is not only we humans but also many plants and animals that depend on clean water and cannot survive without it. Because we depend on water, we must be careful with it – as the traditions of many religions urge.

### **Commonalities with other religions**

The festival's rituals are reminiscent of the Orthodox Blessing of the Waters in Christianity.

### **Rituals and practices today**

Like all festivals in India that are linked to rivers, Ganga Puja is also celebrated by bathing. If a Hindu is unable to go to the river, a bottle of water from the Ganges can be used instead. Most Hindus have a bottle of Ganges water that they keep for this purpose. Bathing in the Ganges is said to cleanse the faithful of their sins.

There are seven ways of worshipping Ganga:

- by calling out her name
- by submerging oneself in her
- by touching her water
- by bathing in her water
- by standing in her water
- by carrying clay out of the water

## Workshop on water pollution

You could mark Ganga Puja by considering water and water pollution.

To involve people from other religions, you could organise a workshop. Invite one or more water experts or – even better – have all the participants prepare a contribution themselves. For example, each person could report on the significance of water in their religion and think of a way in which we could be more careful with our water and protect it better.

Here are a few suggestions:

- Avoid plastic waste (it pollutes our oceans)
- Litter-picking along rivers, canals, lakes and beaches
- Use biological cleaning agents (lemon juice, vinegar, bicarbonate of soda) instead of chemical ones
- Use biological dishwashing detergent. Although EU regulations have limited the phosphate content of dishwashing detergents such as tablets and powder since the start of 2017, a purely biological solution is always better. If too many phosphates are discharged into rivers and lakes via the waste water, the nutrients thus introduced cause algae to multiply significantly. This deprives plants and animals of oxygen, so that they die.
- Wash cars without using chemicals (if the vehicle is not standing on a concrete surface with proper drains, the untreated water flows into the soil and then enters the groundwater)
- Use natural cosmetics that do not contain microplastics. Products labelled as certified natural cosmetics can be reliably regarded as plastic-free.
- Buy less – especially when it comes to clothing. The manufacture of clothing uses thousands of litres of water and the associated transport emits CO<sub>2</sub>.
- Eat organic grains. Pollutants used in agriculture enter our groundwater. This can be prevented if more and more consumers buy organic products.
- Support projects that are working to protect our water
  - *Gewässerretter* (site in German): <https://www.gewaesserretter.de/>
  - The Ocean Cleanup: <https://www.theoceancleanup.com/>
  - 4 Ocean: <https://4ocean.com/>
- Involve your children so that when still young they learn to value and protect our nature. For children and teachers there are excellent worksheets on the subject of water at: <https://www.klassewasser.de/content/language1/html/3673.php> (site in German)





## Noah Festival / Noah Remembrance Days

(Alevism, Bahá'í, Christianity, Judaism, Islam)

The Noah Festival is known in Islam as Ashura (from the Arabic word *ashara* – the tenth day). The festival is observed by Sunni Muslims in commemoration of Noah. Shia Muslims also observe Ashura, although for them it is a day of mourning to mark the Battle of Karbala (in what is now Iraq).

### Date

Ashura falls on the tenth day of Muharram, the first month in the Islamic lunar calendar. In 2019 this was 9 September in the Gregorian calendar. In Germany, the Forum for Intercultural Dialogue (FID) first designated Ashura Day as the Noah Festival in 2005: the event has been marked annually by Jewish, Christian and Muslim participants ever since.

In 2012 the German state of Hamburg declared Ashura a holiday, thus putting it on the same footing as Reformation Day, Corpus Christi and the Day of Repentance and Prayer.

### Noah Remembrance Days

- |                       |   |
|-----------------------|---|
| • Protestant Lutheran | 29 November in the calendar of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod |
| • Roman Catholic      | 16 December (not classed as a saint's day or holy day)              |
| • Orthodox            | 10 May, 3 <sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Advent                            |
| • Armenian            | 26 December   |
| • Coptic              | 1 August, 7 September   |
| • Syrian              | 2 May   |
| • Islamic             | 10 Muharram (Ashura)  |


### Which religions celebrate the festival?

The Noah Festival is observed in many religions, albeit under different names and with differing emphasis. These religions include Alevism, the Bahá'í religion, Christianity, Judaism and Sunni Islam.

### History and religious significance of the festival

#### Islam

In the Islamic faith, Ashura is said to be the day on which the prophet Noah and his ark landed on a mountain after the flood. This event is often linked with Mount Ġūdī (Surah 11: 40-48) (probably the mountain Cudi Dağı – known as Mount Judi in English – in what is now Turkey). In Islam Noah is a prophet and a Surah (Surah 71) is dedicated to him. He is seen as a messenger of God akin to Adam, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Mu-



hammad and is regarded as a leader of mankind. The story of the Flood is told in Surah 11. To celebrate their survival after the Flood, Noah and his family prepared a banquet. But because they had only a little food, they made a soup – the ashura soup – from all the leftovers.

### **Christianity**

According to chapters 5-9 of the biblical book of Genesis, Noah built a ship – the ark – in which he was able to survive the Flood that God had sent. In the ark he saved himself and his family – eight people in all – and the land animals from the Flood. God gave him precise instructions for building the ark (Genesis 6: 14-16). When the Flood subsided, the ark ran aground on Mount Ararat (Genesis 8: 4). God and Noah made a covenant in which God promises that mankind will never again experience such a flood. God sent a rainbow as a sign of peace.

### **Judaism**

The Torah describes the Noahide Covenant and lists the seven Noahide Laws (Torah Genesis 9: 1-17). There, too, God promises to never again send a flood: '[...] neither shall there any more be a flood to destroy the earth.' (Torah Genesis 9: 11). According to Jewish understanding, the commandments are bequeathed to all people and they are therefore also found in other religions.

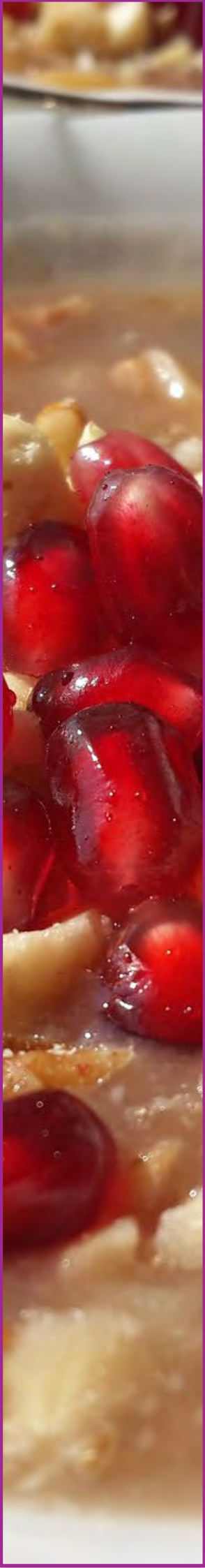
### **Yezidism**

There are also references to Noah and the ark in the Yezidi faith. In the Yezidi story a snake plays a prominent part (black snakes are regarded by the Yezidi as sacred). According to this story, it was a snake that wound itself around the ark to stop a hole in it, thus preventing the boat from sinking.

### **Relevance to nature conservation**

Remembering the Flood is not only of religious significance: it is also an important issue in nature conservation. In the face of climate change, the future of humanity is under threat from droughts, catastrophic fires, storm surges and floods. Scientists warn of rising sea levels as a result of climate change and the associated melting of the polar ice caps, triggered by our careless treatment of nature – a scenario that is in some ways reminiscent of the Flood in the Bible. This is therefore a day for thinking not only about how Noah saved mankind but also about the sins of humanity that caused God/G-d/Allah to send the Flood in the first place. People should be reminded of this on the day and become better people as a result. Becoming better people includes respecting and safeguarding nature.





### Commonalities with other religions

The Bahá'í religion does not include the Noah Festival in its annual cycle of festivals and remembrance days although it honours Noah in its scriptures. It interprets the symbolism of the Noah story as transcending religious differences: Noah is depicted as the 'Holy Seafarer' who leads the faithful to an awareness of God through his teachings. The acceptance of these divine teachings that are progressively revealed to mankind through the founders of religion is comparable to the landing of the ark on Mount Ararat. In accordance with this the Flood is interpreted as timeless: it represents the decline of the inherited world order and social systems so that new religions can develop their efficacy and cultural impact.

People of the Alevi faith are also familiar with the Noah tradition. On the 13<sup>th</sup> day of the month of Muharram – at the end of the 12-day Muharram fast – they also make a sweet dish called *aşure*. As a symbol of gratitude, the food is shared with friends, relatives and neighbours and eaten together. The *aşure* always consists of twelve ingredients, which represent the twelve prophets. At the same time, the soup is a reminder of the prophet Noah, who made this soup with the supplies that he had left after the Flood. For the Alevi the *aşure* is also an expression of gratitude for the fact that Zayn al-Abidin, the son of Husayn ibn Ali (and hence the great-grandson of Muhammad) survived the battle of Karbala on account of illness.

### Rituals and practices today

The ashura soup is still made by Turkish Sunnis on Ashura Day and given to relatives and neighbours to commemorate Noah's rescue from the Flood and hence the rescue of mankind. The soup should contain at least seven ingredients and should be distributed among at least seven friends.

The taste of the soup has special significance: although all the ingredients combine harmoniously, the taste of each one can be identified separately. This property is applied more generally to the festival as a whole: many different religions and cultures come together, resulting in a harmonious whole. This aspect is promoted by the fact that many religions observe the Noah Festival, although they do so in different ways.



## Recipe for ashura soup

### Ingredients:

- 100 g white beans
- 100 g chickpeas
- 100 g wheat
- 100 g short-grain rice
- 100 g walnuts
- 100 g hazelnuts
- 100 g almonds
- 100 g raisins
- 5 figs
- 13 dried apricots
- orange peel
- 200 g sugar
- pomegranate and pistachios

### Method:

1. Chop the hazelnuts, apricots and figs into small pieces.
2. The wheat, chickpeas and beans should have been soaked in plenty of water the day before.
3. The next day, drain the water. The wheat must be boiled in plenty of water for ten minutes and then washed in a sieve.
4. Put the beans, wheat and chickpeas in a large pot with water and boil until the ingredients are soft.
5. Then add the nuts, sugar and orange peel and simmer for another 15 minutes.
6. Now add the dried fruit. Turn off the heat and let the soup infuse for a while on the warm hob.
7. When the soup has thickened but is not yet lumpy, it is ready. It will become more solid as it cools. If it is too thick, you can add some more water while it is on the hob.
8. Now ladle the soup into bowls and decorate with pomegranate seeds and small pieces of apricot and pistachio. The pieces of pomegranate not only give the soup visual appeal but also add a sweet, fruity taste. When the soup has cooled you can enjoy it and invite friends and neighbours to share it with you.





## **Festival of Sacrifice (Islam)**

The Festival of Sacrifice, which is the highest Islamic festival, is also known as Idul Adha (Arabic), Kurban Bayrami (Turkish), Eid al-Adha (Arabic) and the Kurban Festival.

### **Date**

The Festival of Sacrifice is celebrated at the climax of the Hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca. It begins on the tenth day of the Islamic month of Dhu al-Jijah (the twelfth lunar month of the Islamic calendar) and lasts four days. In the Gregorian calendar it lasts from 31 July to 2 August in 2020 and from 20 to 22 July in 2021.

### **History and religious significance of the festival**

In the Festival of Sacrifice, Muslims worldwide commemorate Abraham, who is regarded as a patriarch by Jews, Christians and Muslims alike. The emphasis is on the mercy of Allah. For this reason the festival also focuses on values such as helpfulness, friendship and reconciliation.


Every Muslim believer who can afford it is expected to present a sacrifice at the festival. A sheep is usually sacrificed, but goats or large animals such as cows and camels are also permissible.

A third of the animal is given to those in social or financial need, another third is given to neighbours and the remainder is shared with the family. On the first morning of the Festival of Sacrifice, Muslims go to the mosque to pray together and listen to the festival sermon. Devotion to God and trust in His mercy are at the heart of the festival.

### **Commonalities with other religions**

The story of Abraham and his son Ishmael is told in the Koran, Surah 37: 99-113. According to Islamic tradition, Abraham was prepared to sacrifice his son Ishmael to Allah. His willingness to do this was accepted by Allah as proof of Abraham's love and loyalty and Allah sent an angel to stay Abraham's hand. Allah accepted a sheep as an offering instead. In the Jewish and Christian tradition, Abraham planned to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice (Genesis 22: 2).

As in Islam, the slaughtering of animals is also a commandment in Judaism. The Torah states: 'Thou shalt kill of thy herd and of thy flock, as I have commanded thee' (Deuteronomy 12: 21). The Talmud (Tractate Chullin 1-2), the Mishneh Torah (Sefer Kedushah) and the Shulchan Aruch (Yoreh De'ah 1-28)



set out additional rules on *shechita*, based on the biblical prohibition on eating blood.

### **Relevance to nature conservation**

Animal welfare, meat consumption and factory farming are issues that everyone – religious or not – needs to address urgently. And they are issues related to nature conservation. Because the world population is growing, global meat consumption is also increasing. According to a report on the finite nature of agriculture in the *Meat Atlas 2018*, the world population has doubled over the past 50 years but global meat production has more than trebled in the same period. The problem is that rearing livestock needs large areas of farmland to provide feed for the animals. In consequence, grasslands and forests are often cleared so that the land can be used for monocultures. This impacts on biodiversity, because the majority of species depend on forests and meadows for their habitat. Carbon stored in the soil is released into the atmosphere as CO<sub>2</sub>. The large-scale use of fertilisers and pesticides ultimately reduces biodiversity. The *Meat Atlas* also explains that a report published by the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) in 2017 holds food systems – especially meat and feed production – responsible for more than sixty percent of worldwide biodiversity loss. The studies show clearly that if people were to reduce their consumption of meat, this would make a significant contribution to biodiversity conservation.


A vegetarian or even vegan diet with the right intention is permitted in Islam. But because Muhammad ate meat, the eating of meat cannot be prohibited on grounds of faith in Islam.

The Koran states: '[...] And when you are secure, then he who avails of 'Umrah before the time of Hajj shall give the offering he can afford; and if he cannot afford the offering, he shall fast for three days during Hajj and for seven days after he returns home; that is, ten days in all' (Surah 2: 196). The sequence set out in this rule must be followed. This means that the slaughtering of a sacrificial animal can only be replaced by fasting if one is unable to perform the slaughter – for instance, if no suitable animal is available or the cost is unaffordable.

Ritual slaughter is prohibited in Germany, but permits can be issued in special cases. The Muslim slaughterer must show that it is for religious reasons that stunning has not been used. In addition, he must provide the veterinary authority with evidence that he belongs to a school of law that rejects stunning. This evidence takes the form of a report and a certificate.

According to the Muslim faith, respect for life and for God's creation means that all animals must be kept in a manner appropriate to their species. In addition, they must not be killed arbitrarily but only for the purpose of con-





sumption and they must not suffer in the process. Many Muslim scholars explore the problems associated with this, because the Koran states that foods should be permitted and good. The question of whether stunning is necessary and/or permitted is a controversial one that frequently rears its head, because even some Muslims are critical of the methods used.

The opponents of slaughter claim that the direct manual killing of the animal without stunning causes pain. Other arguments support the method of slaughter. A report published by the Centre for Social Responsibility of the Protestant Church in Hesse and Nassau (EKHN) in 2002 comments on the considerate aspects of the slaughter process, such as the smaller number of animals and the shorter time involved.

### **Rituals and practices today**

All over the world, animals are ritually slaughtered on the first day of the Festival of Sacrifice. Many Muslim believers in Germany and other European countries have an animal slaughtered in a country in which there is more poverty than in Europe. The meat is then distributed to needy Muslims in that country. Otherwise they celebrate the Festival of Sacrifice in the same way as Muslims outside Europe. On the first morning, prayers are said together in the mosque or in a specially designated public place. The faithful then offer each other their good wishes and friends and relatives are visited in order to eat together in a festively decorated house. Children and people in need receive gifts.





A photograph of several sheep in a metal-fenced enclosure. The sheep have thick, light-colored wool and some have black and white faces. They are looking towards the camera. A semi-transparent white box with rounded corners is overlaid on the image, containing text.

### **Meat as a topic in the service**

Muslim communities and preachers can use the Festival of Sacrifice as an opportunity to discuss the links between careful consumption of meat, climate change mitigation and nature conservation.

The emphasis should be on moderation: although Muhammad ate meat, meat was a luxury at that time and was eaten far less often than is now customary in western countries.









## **Feast of Ramadan** (Islam)

The Feast of Ramadan, also known as the Festival of Breaking the Fast, is called Eid al-Fitr in Arabic and Ramazan bayrami in Turkish. The word 'Ramadan' comes from the Arabic root *ramida* or *ar-ramad*, meaning 'scorching heat' or 'dryness of the soil'. There are thus links with the thirst that those who fast experience during Ramadan.

### **Date**

According to some schools of thought, the start of Ramadan is determined not only by astronomical calculations but also by the actual sighting of the crescent of the new moon. This means that it is sometimes not possible to specify the exact date until the evening before. Because of geographical circumstances, the specified date may vary by a day in the various Islamic countries.

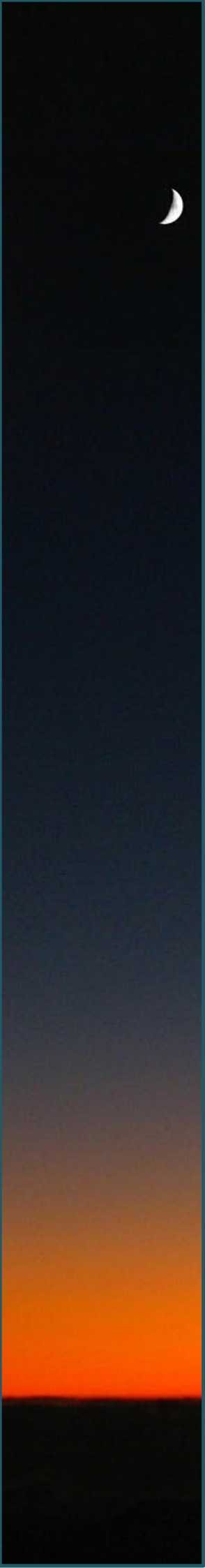
In Islamic countries, the Feast of Ramadan begins on the first day of the month of Shawwal, which follows the month of Ramadan, and it lasts for three days. The lunar months in the Islamic calendar have 29 or 30 days. This means that the year has 354 or 355 days and differs from the solar year by about 11 days. As a result, Ramadan and the Feast of Ramadan occur at varying times of the solar year that underlies the Gregorian calendar and migrate through all the seasons in due course.

### **History and religious significance of the festival**

Ramadan is the ninth month in the Islamic lunar calendar and the month of fasting in Islam. It is a holy month that has been particularly marked out by Allah, because the revelation of the Koran in 610 A.D. started in this month. Fasting during this month did not become obligatory for Muslim believers until the year 624, when the following verses of the Koran were revealed: 'O you who have believed, decreed upon you is fasting as it was decreed upon those before you that you may become righteous' (Surah 2: 183).

'The month of Ramadhan is that in which was revealed the Qur'an, a guidance for the people and clear proofs of guidance and criterion. So whoever sights [the new moon of] the month, let him fast it; and whoever is ill or on a journey – then an equal number of other days. Allah intends for you ease and does not intend for you hardship and wants for you to complete the period and to glorify Allah for that to which He has guided you; and perhaps you will be grateful' (Surah 2: 185).

### **Commonalities with other religions**



As is described in Surah 2: 183, fasting was prescribed for religious communities that existed before the time of Islam. A period of fasting is also practised by followers of Judaism and Christianity. For Roman Catholics, Lent is a time of fasting that lasts 40 days and serves as preparation for Easter. Lent begins on Ash Wednesday and ends on Maundy Thursday. The Lenten fast also includes Good Friday and Holy Saturday but excludes Sundays, resulting in an overall duration of 40 days. The 40 days are based on the period for which Jesus fasted during his time in the wilderness. During this time believers are also to give up things that they like and enjoy, such as driving or cigarettes. During the day they should take just one full meal and two smaller snacks. On the Fridays in Lent it is also usual to abstain from meat as a reminder of the death of Jesus Christ. Among Protestant Christians, too, fasting is again becoming more popular, as demonstrated by the 'Seven Weeks Without' initiative organised by the central media corporation of the Protestant church in Germany, the GEP. Each year, a different slogan is adopted for the seven-week fast, so that the thing abstained from varies from year to year. In 2018 the slogan was 'Show yourself! Seven weeks without wimping out' and in 2019 it is 'Be honest! Seven weeks without lying'.

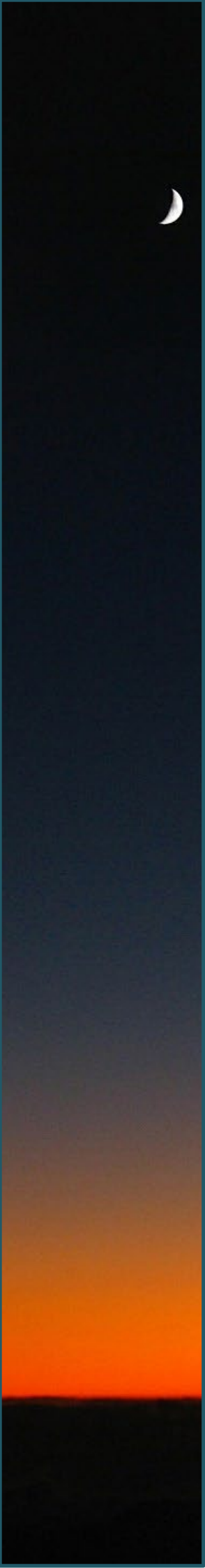
Fasting is also important in Judaism. On Yom Kippur and Tisha B'Av, Jews fast for the whole day. The fast begins at sunset on the eve of the fast day and ends with the onset of darkness 24 hours later. Fasting is intended to pacify the wrath of G-d and reconcile people with G-d. Thus people may fast to do penance for past deeds or to attain spiritual purity, for example on the day of their wedding.

### **Relevance to nature conservation**

The Koran requires moderation in all things. For example, it says: 'Indeed, the wasteful are brothers of the devils, and ever has Satan been to his Lord ungrateful' (Surah 17: 27). The greatest practical benefit of the month-long fast, which is a spiritual and physical exercise, is that the self-control and abstinence from certain things also permeate other aspects of the life of a Muslim believer. This becomes possible because believers conduct a sort of internal audit during Ramadan which enables them to draw up new resolutions for the future. In 2018, for example, many mosques participated in the campaign for a plastic-free Ramadan, often refraining from using plastic plates and bottles when serving food. Plastic can also be avoided when choosing and preparing food. Many aspects of this – such as selecting organic and locally produced ingredients without plastic packaging – can have a positive environmental effect.

On frugality, the Prophet Muhammad is recorded as having said: 'The Son of Adam will not fill a pot worse for himself than his stomach. It is enough for





the Son of Adam to eat a few bites that strengthen his spine. If he likes to have more, then let him fill a third with food, a third with drink and leave a third for his breathing.'

### **Rituals and practices today**

During Ramadan, practising Muslims perform special rituals: reading the Koran, fasting between dawn and dusk, almsgiving, *taraweeh* prayer, the 'lesser pilgrimage' (*umrah*), *ibadat* (acts of blessing) during the last ten days of Ramadan and on the Night of Determination, and staying in a mosque to pray. The Night of Determination is one of the last ten nights of Ramadan (although always an odd-numbered night – usually the 27<sup>th</sup> of the month). It is called Laylat al-Qadr and is the night when the first verses of the Koran were delivered to the world.

For practising Muslims, fasting means abstaining from eating and drinking from dawn to sunset (at latitudes with a 'normal' length of day). Sexual relations with one's spouse are also prohibited. These forms of fasting are classed as external fasting. The aim is to purify the body.

However, fasting also has an internal dimension. During Ramadan Muslim believers are accordingly required to be even more careful than usual not to sin: they should not deliberately look at anything reprehensible, not speak evil, not listen to anything evil and not do anything despicable.

At the end of Ramadan a major festival is held on the first day of the following month; it begins with special prayers after sunrise consisting of two prayer units and a sermon. Muslim men and women greet each other after the prayers, expressing the wish that Allah will accept their fasting and their other acts of service. The fast is usually broken with a date or a sip of water, while a prayer that originates from the Prophet Muhammad is spoken: 'O Allah! I fasted for You and I believe in You and I put my trust in You and I break my fast with Your sustenance. In the name of Allah, the most beneficent, the most merciful'. This is followed by the evening prayers, after which the meal itself is eaten. The communal breaking of the fast often takes place at the mosque; in some mosques food is served every evening during Ramadan. The festival lasts for three days, during which friends and relatives get together, exchange gifts, wear new clothes and enjoy good food. Children are given lots of sweets, which is why in Turkey the festival is also known as the Festival of Sweets. Gifts are also given to the poor.



According to the Koran, the strict fasting rules do not apply to travellers and the sick, pregnant women, those who are frail and those for whom it would be excessively problematic. Islamic scholars (*ulama*) can issue recommendations on what illnesses exempt people from the requirement to fast. Regardless of the specific medical condition, an individual can be exempted from the obligation to fast if a Muslim doctor rules that fasting would exacerbate the illness or endanger the person's health.

In recent years many communities have also started inviting non-Muslims to the communal breaking of the fast (known as *iftar*). Speeches by municipal representatives and representatives of other religions demonstrate solidarity with practising Muslims in Germany and emphasise that they all belong to Germany. There are readings, prayers and speeches by the high-profile guests.



## **Fasting for nature and the environment**

For practising Muslims, Ramadan is the month of fasting. In western countries such as Germany fasting is often not just about abstaining from food but also about going without luxuries (such as shopping or television) or avoiding environmentally damaging practices (such as driving). Doing without these things for a while is good for the environment.

### **Seven Weeks Without**

Every year the central media corporation of the Protestant church in Germany, the GEP, chooses a new slogan for its 'Seven Weeks Without' campaign and provides tips and materials designed to inspire and motivate those who decide to fast. The themes, which vary from year to year, have ranged from 'false ambition' to 'making excuses' and 'wimping out'; they are intended to encourage people to reflect on their habits and attitudes, direct more of their attention inwards and be more mindful. The slogan for 2019 is 'Be honest! Seven weeks without lying'.

### **Fasting from driving**

Fasting from driving has become part of the tradition of Protestant and Catholic churches and many non-Christians have also adopted the practice. The joint 'Fast from driving' campaign of the Catholic dioceses of Trier, Mainz and Fulda, the archdioceses of Luxembourg and Cologne, the Diocesan Council of Catholics in the diocese of Aachen and the Protestant churches in the Rhineland and Hesse-Nassau aims to encourage people to leave the car at home as often as possible during the seven weeks of Lent and to try getting about by other means such as bus, train, walking or carsharing. While the aim is to do without the car completely, even some avoidance of car use cuts CO<sub>2</sub> emissions.

### **Fasting from plastic**

For many people, avoiding plastic is far more difficult than doing without the car or cutting back on consumption, since it involves changing many of our habits. It is not only about buying fruit and vegetables loose rather than packaged and having a shopping bag ready at the checkout instead of buying yet another plastic carrier bag: personal care products also need to be considered, as does the need to avoid creating plastic waste when out and about. But once you turn your mind to it, it is easier than you might think to do without many plastic items. Even in traditional chemist's shops you can buy soap and shampoo in bar form rather than in plastic bottles. It is best to use natural cosmetics, because many cosmetics contain microplastics. You can also decide to avoid takeaway products and always have your own storage box or reusable drinking bottle with you. Fasting from plastic is supported not only by nature conservation organisations but also by the Muslim-led environmental organisation Nour Energy, which encourages Muslim communities and others to avoid plastic.





## Afterword

The project titled 'Religions for biological diversity' is carried out by the Abrahamic Forum in Germany and is based on a Joint Declaration adopted in 2015 by representatives of nature conservation bodies, government agencies and nine religious communities. The goals set out in the declaration include carrying out religious nature conservation weeks each September, converting outdoor areas to places of biological diversity, setting up religious teams for nature conservation and building a network.

That network's core is the Religions and Nature Conservation Working Group of the Abrahamic Forum in Germany, which plans and coordinates project activities. The members of the working group, and of an advisory council on the same theme, provided substantive contributions to the present publication. We warmly thank the group and council members for their comments, suggestions and draft wording.

Dr Jürgen Micksch  
Managing Director  
Abrahamic Forum in Germany  
Darmstadt, Germany

Julia Glaeser  
Desk officer

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