

Rosh Hashanah and the Jewish Holy Days

“The LORD spake unto Moses, saying, Speak unto the children of Israel, saying, In the seventh month, in the first day of the month, shall ye have a sabbath, a memorial of blowing of trumpets, an holy convocation. Ye shall do no servile work therein: but ye shall offer an offering made by fire unto the LORD.”
—Leviticus 23:23-25

AT THIS TIME OF YEAR, during the latter part of September or the early part of October, which varies each year according to the Hebrew lunar calendar, people of Jewish faith begin their preparation for celebrating one of their most important religious holidays, Rosh Hashanah. It is also called the Feast of Trumpets. In Biblical times, the blowing of a ram’s horn, a “shofar,” proclaimed the approaching new moon and Rosh Hashanah. In some Jewish communities, it was blown every morning for the entire previous month.

In more recent times, a variety of horns are used to summon Jews to take part in this religious observance.

Rosh Hashanah, which means “Head of the Year,” is the Jewish civil new year, the first day of the month Ethanim, more commonly known as Tishri, the seventh month of the Jews’ religious year, according to the Hebrew calendar. (I Kings 8:2; see later discussion of the Hebrew calendar) The Jewish highest holy days are observed during a twenty-one day period beginning with Rosh Hashanah. Yom Kippur, which is also known as the Day of Atonement, begins nine days later, on the tenth day of the month. (Lev. 23:27,28) This year’s Rosh Hashanah celebrations will begin after sundown on Wednesday, October 2nd, and end on Friday, October 4th, marking the beginning of the New Year according to Hebrew reckoning. The Feast of Tabernacles is the final celebration during the Jewish high holy days, and is observed for seven days beginning on the fifteenth day of Tishri.—vss. 33,34

JEWISH TRADITIONS

Rosh Hashanah is celebrated as a special time of year that is particularly associated with personal prayer and introspection. Some devout Jews may begin a self-examination and period of repentance during the preceding month Elul, a process that culminates in the ten days beginning with Rosh Hashanah and ending with Yom Kippur.

Typically, this season is also a joyous time of year with the sending of cards, wishing one another well, and happy gatherings among friends and

family. In many Jewish homes, traditional foods may be expected to accompany the occasion. Often, a blessing will be said over two loaves of bread known as “challah.” These loaves are especially prepared into a round shape which symbolizes a crown. The crown, in turn, is said to represent the kingship of God. Challah also suggests the circle of life and the hope that Jewish lives will long endure.

Another tradition may include apples dipped in honey, which symbolizes the hope for the year ahead. Honey may also be spread on the challah. Various other foods with symbolic meaning may be prepared as well, such as tongue, which symbolizes the “head,” or beginning of the civil year. Fruits may also be served, which are a reminder of the ingathering of that portion of the season’s harvest.

This year’s celebrations of Rosh Hashanah will likely be much more subdued than usual, given the fact that Israel has been at war on multiple fronts for the past year. Many Jews will likely pray for an end to the conflict, though they may not be aware of God’s overruling in their national affairs. At this time especially, they, and we, as students of the Bible, should keep before our minds the sentiments of these words of the psalmist David: “Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: they shall prosper that love thee. Peace be within thy walls, and prosperity within thy palaces. For my brethren and companions’ sakes, I will now say, Peace be within thee. Because of the house of the LORD our God I will seek thy good.”—Ps. 122:6-9

VARIATIONS AND RABBINIC THOUGHT

Rosh Hashanah observances may vary from one Jewish community to another. For example, some

Orthodox Jews may celebrate the occasion during the first two days of the month Tishri, whereas Reform Jews may observe it for only the first day. During ancient times, the moon determined the dates for all Jewish festivals. Special watchers were appointed to observe the sky that would indicate the approaching new moon, which signified the beginning of a new month. In the case of Rosh Hashanah, the watchers may not have been able to inform in time some people who were living in distant locations of the exact date, and some would thus miss the festival. Therefore, in some communities, the religious leaders decided that two days should be set aside for the observances so that everyone would have ample time to participate in the event. It is acknowledged, however, that the addition of a second day of observance does not follow the original record of the Hebrew Scriptures.

According to rabbinic tradition, the creation of the world was completed on the first day of Tishri. Therefore, in Jewish thought, Rosh Hashanah is the most important of all judgment days. It is the day on which all mankind must pass before their Creator for judgment. In some Jewish writings it is stated that there are three books of account that are opened on Rosh Hashanah. At that time, the fate of the wicked, the righteous, and those of an intermediate class are recorded. The names of the righteous are immediately inscribed in the book of life and they are thus sealed to live. Those who are in the intermediate class are allowed a respite of ten days to repent and become righteous on Yom Kippur. The wicked are blotted out of the book of

the living. Here again, such details as these are not found in the Hebrew Scriptures.

A HISTORIAN'S PERSPECTIVE

A well-known and respected nineteenth century scholar and writer on Jewish history and culture, as well as a major work on the life of Christ, was Alfred Edersheim (1825-1889). He was born and raised in a Jewish family and later converted to Christianity, becoming a minister in the Presbyterian, and then the Episcopalian, Church. His writings provide an important and historical perspective in the study of Jewish traditions during the time of Jesus' earthly ministry.

In his book, *The Temple: Its Ministry and Services as They Were at the Time of Christ*, he pointed out, "Scarcely any other festive season could have left so continuous an impress on the religious life of Israel as the New Moons. Recurring at the beginning of every month, and marking it, the solemn proclamation of the day, by 'it is sanctified,' was intended to give a hallowed character to each month, while the blowing of the priests' trumpets and the special sacrifices brought, would summon, as it were, the Lord's host to offer their tribute unto their exalted King, and thus bring themselves into remembrance before Him. ... And so we trace its observance onwards through the history of Israel; marking in Scripture a special psalm for the New Moon Tishri (Ps. 81:3); noting how from month to month the day was kept as an outward ordinance, even in the decay of Israel's religious life. (Amos 8:5) ... And in New Testament times we still find the New Moon kept

as an outward observance by Jews and Judaizing Christians.”

Continuing, Edersheim wrote, “Quite distinct from the other new moons, and more sacred than they, was that of the seventh [religious] month, or Tishri, partly on account of the symbolical meaning of the seventh or sabbatical month, in which the great feasts of the Day of Atonement and of the Tabernacles occurred, and partly, perhaps because it also marked the commencement of the civil year.”

HIS VIEW ON THE DAY OF ATONEMENT

The Day of Atonement, or Yom Kippur, took place on the 10th day of the month Tishri. (Lev. 16:29; 23:27) Concerning the significance of this feast Edersheim points out: “The Levitical arrangements for the removal of sin bear on their forefront, as it were, this inscription: ‘The Law made nothing perfect’ (Heb. 7:19)—having neither a perfect mediatorship in the priesthood, nor yet a perfect atonement in the sacrifices, nor yet a perfect forgiveness as the result of both. ‘For the law having a shadow of good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never with those sacrifices which they offered year by year continually make the comers thereunto perfect.’ (Heb. 10:1) And this appears, first, from the continual recurrence and the multiplicity of these sacrifices, which are intended the one to supplement the other, and yet always leave something to be still supplemented; and, secondly, from the broad fact that, in general, ‘it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats should take away sin.’”

—vs. 4

The author further states that the Day of Atonement symbolically completed the sacred or Sabbath of months, and that it also had a distinct position relative to all other Jewish festivals. We again quote: "The seventh or sabbatical month closed the festive cycle, the Feast of Tabernacles on the 15th of that month being the last in the [religious] year. But, as already stated, before that grand festival of harvesting and thanksgiving Israel must, as a nation, be reconciled unto God, for only a people at peace with God might rejoice before Him in the blessing with which He had crowned the year. The import of the Day of Atonement, as preceding the Feast of Tabernacles, becomes only more striking, when we remember how that feast of harvesting prefigured the final ingathering of all nations."

THE FEAST OF TABERNACLES

The Feast of Tabernacles, also known as the "Feast of Ingathering" or "Booths," was the third and last of the special seventh-month Jewish festivals. It began on the 15th day of the month Tishri, therefore five days following the Day of Atonement, and lasted for seven days. (Lev. 23:33-43; Exod. 34:22) Edersheim writes: "The most joyous of all festive seasons in Israel was that of the Feast of Tabernacles. It fell on a time of year when the hearts of the people would naturally be full of thankfulness, gladness, and expectancy. All the crops had been long stored; and now all fruits were also gathered, the vintage past, and the land only awaited the softening and refreshment of the later rain, to prepare it for a new crop. ... The

harvest-thanksgiving of the Feast of Tabernacles reminded Israel, on the one hand, of their dwelling in booths in the wilderness, while, on the other hand, it pointed to the final harvest when Israel's mission should be completed, and all nations gathered unto the Lord."—Isa. 25:6-8

From the foregoing quotations, we see that Edersheim's historic perspective emphasizes the solemnity and importance of the various arrangements associated with Israel's high holy days. In addition, these writings from a Jewish-born convert to Christianity provide an interesting insight into the traditions of the Israelite people.

LEVITICUS CHAPTER 23

In our opening Scripture, God is giving specific instructions to the Israelites concerning their seventh-month festivals. (Lev. 23:23-25) They were to sound their trumpets on the first day of the seventh month Tishri, a Sabbath Day, which served to announce the two feasts to follow—the Day of Atonement and the Feast of Tabernacles. (vss. 27-44) In Leviticus chapter 23, however, we note that these are merely the last three of seven festivals that are therein recorded.

God's instructions concerning Israel's first four feasts, which were to be observed at the opposite time of year, in the spring, provides a broader overall perspective of the importance and meaning of the festivals. Three of them were to be observed during the Jewish month Abib, later called Nisan, corresponding to our March/April months. (Exod. 23:15; Deut. 16:1) These were: (1) the Lord's Pass-over; (2) the seven-day Feast of Unleavened Bread,

or Feast of Passover, which began the following day; and (3) the waving of the sheaf of the first-fruits, which took place on the second day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. (Lev. 23:5-14) The fourth spring feast was to be celebrated fifty days later during the Jewish month Iyyar, and was called the Feast of Weeks, or Feast of Harvest.—vss. 15-21; Deut. 16:10; Exod. 34:22

THE HEBREW CALENDAR

The Hebrew calendar was based on lunar calculations that divided the months of the year that ran from one new moon to the next new moon. The Prophet Isaiah establishes the fact that the moon is the basis for this division of months. “It shall come to pass, that from one new moon to another, and from one sabbath to another, shall all flesh come to worship before me, saith the Lord.”—Isa. 66:23

There are two principal Hebrew words that have been translated “month” or “moon” in our English Bibles. One of these is *chodesh*, which is translated both “month” and “moon” and comes from a root word meaning “new.” The other word is *yareach*, which means “moon,” and is solely translated by that word. In the foregoing Scripture, Isaiah uses *chodesh* to emphasize the beginning of each new month, which is based on lunar calculations.

For comparison, we note the prophet describing the glory of the future kingdom when the symbolic features, the sun and moon, are fulfilled. “The sun shall be no more thy light by day; neither for brightness shall the moon [*yareach*] give light unto thee: but the LORD shall be unto thee an everlasting

light, and thy God thy glory. Thy sun shall no more go down; neither shall thy moon [*yareach*] withdraw itself: for the LORD shall be thine everlasting light, and the days of thy mourning shall be ended.” (Isa. 60:19,20) John the Revelator also uses these same symbols to describe this beautiful scene. Speaking in vision he says, “I saw no temple therein: for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple of it. And the city had no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it: for the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof.”—Rev. 21:22,23

RELIGIOUS AND CIVIL CALENDAR

Ancient Israel followed two calendars—one civil and one religious. Ethanim [or Tishri] was the first month of the civil year and Abib was the seventh month. The month Abib was the time of year that the Jewish nation was delivered from Egyptian bondage. (Exod. 13:3,4; 23:15; Deut. 16:1) To celebrate this passing over and to emphasize its great importance and significance, God designated Abib as the first month of Israel’s religious year calendar. “This month shall be unto you the beginning of months: it shall be the first month of the year to you.” (Exod. 12:2) Abib later became known by the name Nisan, and it remains the beginning of Israel’s annual religious celebrations. (Esther 3:7) To include the observance of the Feast of Weeks in the new sacred arrangements, Israel’s month Zif—later called Iyyar, corresponding to late April to early June—became the second month of the Jewish religious calendar.—I Kings 6:1,37

With new and greater emphasis being placed on the institution of Israel’s religious calendar, Nisan,

changed from Abib, became the first, or the beginning, of months. Tishri, changed from Ethanim, though the seventh month of the religious year, retained its place as the first month of the civil year. The month Ethanim is indicated as the time of year when King Solomon gathered the elders and religious leaders of Israel to bring the Ark of the Covenant into the Temple, which was its final resting place. It is recorded, "All the men of Israel assembled themselves unto king Solomon at the feast in the month Ethanim, which is the seventh month."—I Kings 8:2

PICTURE OF A GREATER WORK

God set aside the nation of Israel and their religious life to serve as an illustration, or pattern, of a far grander future work. The observances of their feasts and holy days were divinely instituted and foreshadow the overall plan of God for the eventual reconciliation and recovery of not only Israel, but the entire human family, from sin and death. Trumpets were thus commanded to sound on the first day of Tishri to announce the new civil year and the coming of the Day of Atonement and the Feast of Tabernacles, or Ingathering. The sins of the people needed to be atoned for every year, and the killing of sacrificial animals was necessary in order to provide them a standing of righteousness before God.

In particular, the Atonement Day celebration was the means by which God brought the Israelite nation back to a standing before him on an annual basis. Under this arrangement, justice was satisfied with the sacrifice of the bullock and the Lord's goat. (Lev. 16:11-15) Two rams were also provided

as a burnt offering to indicate God's acceptance of the sacrifices of the bullock and the goat.—vss. 3-5

Students of the Bible understand that the bullock represents the sacrificial offering of our Lord Jesus, who left his heavenly home, became a perfect man, and gave his life as the ransom for the sins of the whole world. (I Tim. 2:5,6) It is also understood that the goat represents those who, during this present Gospel Age, faithfully present their lives as a "living sacrifice," which is made acceptable by the redemptive sacrifice of Jesus.—Rom.12:1; Eph. 1:5,6

The work of calling out a people who would respond to the invitation to "walk in newness of life" and make an unreserved consecration to do the will of God, has been extended since the Day of Pentecost. (Rom. 6:4) During this long period of time since then, footstep followers of our Lord Jesus who have consecrated their lives have partaken of his "sufferings." (I Pet. 4:13) When this work of the present age is completed, the glory and blessings associated with Christ's kingdom will be ready to be administered on behalf of the whole groaning creation.—Rom. 8:22

In the festival of Israel's Day of Atonement, the sacrificing of the bullock and the goat took place within a twenty-four-hour day, whereas in the greater Atonement Day, completion of the sacrificial work extends over the entire Gospel Age. In the grander scope, the special features of the Atonement Day celebration pointed forward in time to the ultimate reconciliation and recovery of all earth's inhabitants from the penalty of sin, sickness, and death. (Rev. 21:1-4) This time of

reconstruction will take place under the administration of our Lord's kingdom of peace, truth, and righteousness that will be established over all the earth.—Isa. 9:6,7; Dan. 7:13,14,27

THE WILDERNESS WANDERINGS

The last in the series of Israel's seven annual festivals was the Feast of Tabernacles. "Ye shall take you on the first day the boughs of goodly trees, branches of palm trees, and the boughs of thick trees, and willows of the brook; and ye shall rejoice before the Lord your God seven days." (Lev. 23:40) The record further states that this practice was to be done in memory of the temporary dwellings, called "booths," which the Jews lived in when they were in the wilderness.—vss. 41-44

The children of Israel were thus reminded of God's providential care over them during the forty-year period of time during which they sojourned in the wilderness and lived in temporary dwelling places. This, in turn, served to strengthen their faith and love for him. Israel's wilderness experience pointed forward to the wilderness conditions during this present Gospel Age, and the experiences that the consecrated children of God undergo as they make their way toward the heavenly Canaan.—Rev. 12:6,14

THE INGATHERING OF ALL PEOPLE

The Feast of Tabernacles was also known as the Feast of Ingathering, and is a fitting illustration of the ingathering of the world's people into Christ's kingdom. It very significantly coincided with that special time of year when the crops were being gathered in from the fields, identified in Scripture

as “the feast of ingathering, which is the end of the year, when thou hast gathered in thy labours out of the field.” (Exod. 23:16) It was a time of special reflection to thank God for the bounties of the recent harvest. In its grander sense, it reflects the ultimate purpose of God on behalf of the whole human family.

As we remember this special time of year for those of the Jewish faith, let us be mindful of the pictures and illustrations which Israel’s high holy days and other religious festivals convey to our minds. In them we see foreshadowed the ransom sacrifice of Jesus, the Messiah; the calling, selection, and development of the church; and finally the grand culmination of God’s plan, in which all mankind, Jew and Gentile alike, will be given the opportunity to return to favor with their Creator and live forever on a restored, perfect Earth. May we continue to sound forth the trumpet of these blessed tidings. “Sing aloud unto God our strength: make a joyful noise unto the God of Jacob. Take a psalm, and bring hither the timbrel, the pleasant harp with the psaltery. Blow ... the trumpet in the new moon, in the time appointed, on our solemn feast day.”—Ps. 81:1-3 ■

“The poor will eat and be satisfied. All who seek the LORD will praise him. Their hearts will rejoice with everlasting joy. The whole earth will acknowledge the LORD and return to him.

All the families of the nations will bow down before him. For royal power belongs to the LORD.

He rules all the nations.”

Ps. 22:26-28, New Living Translation