

Rosh Hashanah and the Civil New Year

“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 the month of September or the early part of October, which fluctuates each year according to the phases and positions of the moon, 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 traditional Jewish communities, it was blown every morning for the entire previous month Elul. In

more recent times, a variety of horns are used to summon Jews to take part in their religious observances.

Rosh Hashanah, which means 'Head of the Year,' is the Jewish New Year, and occurs during the seventh month Tishri, according to the Hebrew calendar, which corresponds to our months September and October. The Jewish high holy days are observed during the ten-day period beginning with Rosh Hashanah, which falls on the first day of the Jewish month Tishri. Yom Kippur, which is also known as the Day of Atonement, occurs ten days later. This year's celebrations will begin after sundown on Friday, September 22nd, and end on Monday, October 2nd, marking the beginning of the New Year 5767 according to Hebrew reckoning.

JEWISH TRADITIONS

Rosh Hashanah is thus anticipated 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.

It is a joyous time of year with the sending of cards, wishing one another well, and happy gatherings among friends and family. In a Jewish home, traditional Jewish foods may be expected to accompany the festive occasion. Typically, a blessing will be said over two loaves of bread known as 'challah.' These loaves have been especially prepared into a round shape which symbolizes a crown. The crown, in turn, represents the

kingship of God. Challah also suggests the circle of life and the hope that our lives will long endure. Another Jewish tradition may include apples dipped in honey, which symbolizes the hope for a sweet year ahead. Honey may also be spread on the challah.

Various other foods with symbolic meaning may also be served, such as tongue which symbolizes the 'head' of the year. If there is a second day of observance, fruits may be served as a reminder of the season and the ingathering of fruits.

MANY VARIATIONS

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 other Reform Jews may observe it for only the first day. During ancient times, the moon, instead of the calendar, determined the dates for all Jewish festivals. Special watchers were appointed to observe the sky that would indicate the approaching new moon. Rosh Hashanah began on the first day of the month; but 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 commandments as they are recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures.

RABBINIC THOUGHT

According to rabbinic tradition, the creation of the world was completed on Tishri 1st. 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, even as sheep pass before the shepherd for examination. It is written in the Talmud, in the tractate on Rosh Hashanah, 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.

AN HISTORIAN'S PERSPECTIVE

A well-known and respected 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 thus 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 Judaising Christians.

"Quite distinct from the other new moons, and more sacred than they, was that of the seventh 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 tenth day of the seventh month Tishri. 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'—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 had 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 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." This historic perspective relates to the solemnity and importance of the Tabernacle arrangements in connection with Israel's feast days.

HIS VIEW ON 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 took place on the 15th day of the month Tishri, therefore immediately following the Day of Atonement, and lasted for seven days. 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) 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 featured text (Lev. 23:23-25), God is giving specific instructions to the Israelites concerning their seventh-month festivals. 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 (vss. 27-32), and the Feast of Tabernacles. (vss. 34-44) In Leviticus chapter 23, however, we note that these

are merely the last three of the 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, provides a broader overall perspective of the importance and meaning of the festivals. Three of them were to be observed during the Jewish month Nisan (corresponding to our March/ April). These were the "LORD's passover," (vs. 5) the seven-day Feast of Passover which began the following day (vss. 6-8), and the Feast of Firstfruits. (vss. 10-14) The fourth feast was to be celebrated fifty days later during the Jewish month Iyyar, (vss. 15-21) and was called the Festival of Weeks, or Pentecost.

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" in our English Bibles. One of these is *chodesh* [*Strong's Bible Concordance* # 2320, and comes from a root word meaning "new"], while the other word is *yareach* [#3394 which means "moon"]. In this 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

and typical 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 [*ya-reach*] withdraw itself: for the LORD shall be thine everlasting light, and the days of thy mourning shall be ended.” (Isa. 60:19,20) 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

THE RELIGIOUS NEW YEAR

According to Israel’s ancient secular calendar, Ethanim was the first month and Abib was the seventh. The month Abib was the time of year that the Jewish nation was delivered from Egyptian bondage. (Exod. 23:15; Deut. 16:1) To celebrate this passing over and to emphasize its great importance and significance, Abib became the first month of Israel’s religious 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 was changed to Nisan (Esther 3:7), and remains the beginning of Israel’s religious celebrations. To include the observance of the Feast of Weeks in the new sacred arrangements, Israel’s month Zif—later Iyyar (corresponding to April/May)—became the second month of the Jewish religious calendar.—I Kings 6:1,37

THE CIVIL NEW YEAR

With new and greater emphasis being placed on the institution of Israel's religious new year, Nisan (changed from Abib) became the first, or the beginning, of months. Tishri, the seventh month, became the beginning of the secular new year. The month Ethanim (changed to Tishri) 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

A TYPICAL PEOPLE

God set aside the nation of Israel and their religious life to serve as a type, or illustration, of a far grander future work. The observance of the seventh-month feasts were divinely instituted and are a part of the overall plan of God for the eventual reconciliation and recovery of the whole human family from death. The trumpets were thus commanded to sound on the first day of Tishri to announce 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 him.

THE GREATER ATONEMENT WORK

The Atonement Day celebration was the arrangement 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 (Lev. 16:11-14), and the Lord's goat. (vs. 15) A ram was also offered as a burnt offering in the case of each of these animals (vss. 3,5), to indicate God's acceptance of the sacrifices.

Students of the Bible understand that the bullock represents the sacrificial life 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. It is also understood that the goat represents those who, during this present Gospel Age, continue to present their lives as a "living sacrifice" that have been made acceptable during this age.—Rom.12:1

The work of calling out a people who would respond to the invitation to "walk in newness of life" (Rom. 6:4) and make an unreserved consecration to do the will of God, has been extended throughout this age. The age began nearly two thousand years ago with the earthly ministry of our Lord Jesus, and his total dedication to the great work of atonement for sin. During this long period of time since then, followers of our Lord Jesus have also consecrated their lives and have partaken of his "sufferings." (I Pet. 4:13) They willingly share in that great work of atonement by helping to fill up the measure of the sufferings of Christ which are left behind. (Col. 1:24) When this antitypical age of atonement is completed, the glory and blessings associated with Christ's kingdom will be ready to be administered on behalf of the whole groaning creation.

In the type, the festival of Israel's Day of Atonement was merely a twenty-four-hour day, whereas in the antitype it will require the entire Gospel Age to complete. In the grander scope, we realize too that

the whole world of mankind is also in need of having their sins atoned for. 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. This time of reconstruction will take place under the administration of our Lord's future kingdom of Truth and righteousness that will be established over all the earth.

THE WILDERNESS WANDERINGS

This last in the series of seven 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 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. As a typical people, the nation of Israel also serve to illustrate the wilderness conditions during this present Gospel Age, and the experiences that the consecrated children of God have as they make their way to the promised land.

THE INGATHERING OF ALL PEOPLE

The Feast of Tabernacles was also known as the Feast of Ingathering, and is an 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. “The feast of harvest, the firstfruits of thy labours, which thou hast sown in the field: and 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. ■

