



# Jewish Festivals

By Steve Cohen

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## **The Jewish Festivals**

The cycle of Jewish festivals that govern religious life today are outlined in Leviticus 23. The first festival, held weekly, is given the highest place within Jewish life. It is known as Shabbat, the Sabbath. Leviticus 23:3 reads, “Six days shall work be done. But the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, a holy convocation. You shall do no work. It is a Sabbath to the Lord in all your dwellings.”

The Sabbath begins at sundown on Friday and runs through sundown of the following day, a time when the family comes together. The Sabbath is a time of joy, change, rest and reflection. It is also a time of worship, studying the Scriptures, and reflecting upon God, our Creator. A festive occasion, the Sabbath is welcomed as a bride, or as the “Queen Sabbath.”

The women of the house initiate the Sabbath by lighting candles. Various traditions include eating special bread, known as Challah, in a fine festive meal. If there is a synagogue in the community, people are most welcome to join the worshipers for a Friday night service or a Saturday morning service. Many rabbis are willing to help explain their order of service.

If a group from your congregation wants to attend a Sabbath worship service, it would be best to call the rabbi in advance, announcing your intentions, so that he can make your participation most meaningful.

## **Passover**

The first of the major festivals in the religious calendar falls in the springtime, around Easter, and is known as Pesach, or Passover. Passover, an eight-day festival, is really three festivals combined into one eight-day period: The Feast of The Passover Lamb, The Feast of Unleavened Bread and the Feast of First Fruits.

The Festival of the Passover Lamb commemorates the Exodus event. A first-born lamb was sacrificed and its blood put upon the door frames of Jewish homes. That delivered Jewish people from the grip of the 10th plague, the slaying of the firstborn in Egypt, and brought about freedom from bondage and slavery under Pharaoh.

## **Feast of Unleavened Bread**

Besides commemorating the Passover Lamb, Passover is also known as the Feast of Unleavened Bread. For eight days, Jewish people rid their homes of all forms of leaven, such as cookies, cakes and breads, and only the unleavened bread, usually matzah, are eaten.

## **Feast of First Fruits**

The third festival during this eight-day period is known as the Feast of First Fruits. Leviticus 23:9-11 reads:

*The LORD said to Moses, “Speak to the Israelites and say to them: ‘When you enter the land I am going to give you and you reap its harvest, bring to the priest a sheaf of the first grain you*



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*harvest. He is to wave the sheaf before the LORD so it will be accepted on your behalf; the priest is to wave it on the day after the Sabbath.'*

Passover is celebrated primarily within the home, rather than the synagogue. A festive time, the family gathers to commemorate the Exodus through the feast of the Passover Seder and the singing of traditional songs. As believers in Jesus, we can gain insight into the sacrament of Communion as we understand the Last Supper, which was the Passover meal, and how Jesus celebrated it.

Through the Missouri Synod's Board for Evangelism Services, the Task Force on Witnessing to Jewish People has put together a Jewish Christian Haggadah (order of service), as well as a leader's manual, to help Christians understand how they might celebrate Passover within their own worship setting. Many congregations in North America today, on Maundy Thursday, remember not only redemption from Egypt, but also redemption that has been bought for us through Jesus, our Passover Lamb.

### **Shavuot**

Next in the order of festivals comes Shavuot, or Pentecost, 50 days after Passover. Its name is derived from the Hebrew word which means weeks, because we mark seven cycles of weeks from the seventh day of Passover before we celebrate Shavuot.

This holiday is doubly significant. First, it celebrates the harvest by the offering of the first fruits, commemorating the agricultural phase of the festival. Synagogues are decorated with flowers. Secondly, it commemorates the giving of the Ten Commandments to Israel on Mt. Sinai.

Within the Galut, or Exile (Jewish people not living in Israel), the agricultural phase of Shavuot is diminished. Within American synagogues, this festival is used as a time of confirmation. The children who are confirmed, or initiated, into the Jewish fold are regarded as "first fruits," offered on the altar of God in honor of Israel's covenant on Mt. Sinai. It is commemorated by the consecration of Jewish youth to Torah.

### **Rosh Hashanah**

Next in the religious calendar comes Rosh Hashanah, also known as the Feast of Trumpets, usually falling in mid-September. We find in Leviticus 23:23-25: "And the Lord said unto Moses, "The LORD said to Moses, 'Say to the Israelites: "On the first day of the seventh month you are to have a day of rest, a sacred assembly commemorated with trumpet blasts. Do no regular work, but present an offering made to the LORD by fire." ' " According to Jewish tradition, the world was created on the first day of Tishre. Therefore, this day is most appropriately designated as a day of judgment for Israel and all mankind.

Tishre is the first day of Rosh Hashanah, a time dedicated to prayer and contemplation, the day when spiritual rebirth is considered. The shofar, the ram's horn, is sounded within the synagogue to summon worshipers to an awareness of their spiritual need.

The shofar has a special position within Jewish traditional life today. It is said that on Rosh Hashanah, when the shofar is sounded, God opens up three great books in heaven — The Book of Life, The Book of



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Death and an intermediate book. Those who have lived a most righteous life in the past year automatically have their names inscribed in the Book of Life. Those who have lived a most wicked life in the past year automatically have their names inscribed in the Book of Death. The rest have their names placed in the intermediate book.

We have ten days to restore our relationships with our fellowman. We are to seek forgiveness where we have offended, make restitution of outstanding damages, and fulfill or seek release from vows made. Then we turn to God to seek His forgiveness on Yom Kippur. After the last service ends, the shofar is once again sounded and fates are sealed into one of those books for the coming year. During this time, these greetings are exchanged: L'Shannah tovah tekateivu – may your name be inscribed for a good year.

Leviticus 16 and 17 help us to understand what Yom Kippur was about. On this day, all Israel gathered together in Jerusalem, and the high priest was to make atonement. He was to sacrifice for the people of Israel, so the relationship between the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and the people might be restored. On this day only was the high priest allowed to enter the Holy of Holies with the blood of sacrificed animals.

First, a bull was sacrificed. Then the blood was brought inside the veil, and applied to the mercy seat, in order that the high priest of Israel and his family might first have atonement for their sins. Then, the high priest went out from the Holy of Holies and again, another animal was sacrificed. The blood of that animal was brought back inside in order to atone for the people of Israel. This atonement must be made year after year after year.

The temple in Jerusalem and the altar where the sacrifices were made was destroyed in the year 70. Since then and up to this time, no Jewish sacrifices have been offered even at Yom Kippur. Yet, Yom Kippur plays a central role in the life of Jewish people.

The shofar also serves as a reminder of the faithfulness of our forefather Abraham. He was willing to trust God and the promises God made concerning the nation of Israel, when God asked Abraham to offer up his son Isaac. Just as the knife was about to come down into Isaac, the angel of the Lord stopped the sacrifice, and provided a substitute sacrifice instead, a ram caught by its horns in a thicket nearby.

The sounding of the shofar also is a reminder of the giving of the law and testimony on Mt. Sinai. And it is a reminder of the eventual coming of Messiah.

Many Jews today say that prayer, repentance and good deeds are sufficient to accomplish atonement for our lives. But when many Jewish people are asked if they know for certain that their sins have been atoned for, few would respond with an overwhelming, "Yes."

For those of us who believe in the Messiah Jesus, we know for a fact that our sins have been forgiven. Jesus alone shed His blood for us. He has cleansed us of all sin, and made it possible for us to have that eternal assurance.



### **Sukkot**

The next festival is Sukkot, a holiday occurring on the 15th day of Tishre, five days after Yom Kippur, and continuing for an eight-day period. Sukkot literally means booths, or tabernacles. It is a holiday of Thanksgiving, and the final of the three in-gatherings of the harvest for the ancient people of Israel. The sacrifices offered in the temple during this holiday were considered by the sages as the most important ones, and are bound to be resumed, even if the temple is never rebuilt in Israel, and even if all the other sacrifices were abolished.

It is incumbent upon religious Jewish people today to build three-sided booths, or Sukka, as a reminder of the wanderings of our ancestors in the wilderness. Jewish people are to take meals within these booths during this eight-day festival as a reminder of the temporary tents that were dwellings for the people.

During this festive time of thanksgiving, common foods of the earth are bound together, in order to be waved before the Lord as an offering of praise and thanksgiving. The elements bound together are the best fruit of the land, and are brought into the synagogue as evidence of the providential blessings conferred upon Israel.

The people use four different plants to observe Succot and different rabbinic interpretations describe the symbolism of each. The Esrog, citron, stands for the kind of heart Jewish people should have, caring for others. The Lulav, palm branch, represents the spinal cord, symbolizing courage and steadfastness. The Haddas, or myrtle, some rabbis say, represents the human eye, to see the good in man and to shun the sin of envy. The last is the Arabah, or willow branch. The Arabah represents the mouth, or the power of expression, used to teach man right and straight thinking.

These four plants — citron, palm branch, myrtle and willow — are bound together to represent the ideal Jewish person, combining courage, freedom from envy, and cleanliness of speech. On the seventh day of this eight-day festival of Succot, a time of celebrating is known as hoshana rabbah. Within this synagogue celebration, Jewish people march around the beema, or the lectern, accompanied by the chanting of verses of hoshana, literally meaning “Save us, we pray!” The waving of the Esrog, the Lulov, the Haddas, and the Arbah symbolize man’s desire to lead a clean life and follow God.

The eighth day of Sukkot is known as Shmeni Etzerat, an extra day spent in the presence of the Lord. No time elapses between Sukkot and Shmeni Etzerat, as was the case between Passover and the Feast of Weeks. The rainy season in Israel began soon after Sukkot, and it would have been difficult for large numbers of Jewish people from outlying areas to again revisit the temple at a later time.

Today, rabbis interpret the eighth day of assembly as a plea of God to His people to gather in Jerusalem on a festival of thanksgiving. “Your parting from me and my house makes me unhappy. Please tarry an extra day, that I might enjoy your presence,” rabbis would say. “Being in the presence of the Lord” on Shmeni Etzerat typifies the understanding by Jewish people today of this festival.



## **Simcha Torah**

The day following Shmini Etzerat is known as Simcha Torah, literally meaning, rejoicing in the law. Simcha Torah is celebrated as a holiday in honor of the conclusion of the public reading of the Pentateuch. The reading cycle throughout the religious calendar year calls for the reading from the beginning of Genesis to the end of Deuteronomy. On Simcha Torah the last portions of the Pentateuch are read, and the first portions of Genesis are read. This once again completes the cycle and expresses the continuity of the heritage of devotion to Torah enjoyed by Jewish people in all the lands.

During Simcha Torah, processions with the Torah are made around the pulpit, accompanied by chants and marked by a festive setting. It is customary to serve refreshments at synagogue as well as home. Simcha Torah is a day of the Jewish person's greatest rejoicing that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob has given His words to us, and we rejoice in them.

## **Hanukkah**

Hanukkah, Chanukah, Hanukah, Chanukah (choose your spelling, as experts disagree) is the Festival of Dedication, or the Festival of Lights. This day begins on the 25th day of the Jewish month, Kislev, usually around mid-December, and lasts for eight days.

Hanukkah celebrates the rededication of the temple by the Maccabees, who, in the year 167 BCE, were victorious over their enemies, the Syrian Greeks. Under the leadership of Antiochus, and aided by Hellenized Jewish people, attempts were made to destroy Judaism and Israel.

Today people light candles during this holiday to honor the traditional myth that, at the Temple rededication, a small jug of fine oil lasted for eight days, though it contained only enough oil for one day's light. However, this myth appears nowhere in the books of Maccabees in the Apocrypha.

Jewish observers use a nine-candled menorah, or Hanukkiah, during the eight days. Two traditions dominate the lighting of candles at Hanukah. One tradition holds that we must add to the light of the festival by increasing the number of candles lit on each day. The first night, one candle, the second night, two, the third night three, etc., until all eight are lit. Another tradition holds that we diminish the light, starting with all eight, and then going down to seven, six, etc., until only one candle is lit. The person who lights the candles at Hanukah lights a ninth candle, known as the shamesh, or the helper. Then the shamesh is used to light the festival lights.

Hanukah did not originate as a time of giving gifts. This is a modern addition, borrowed from the custom of exchanging gifts by Christian families at Christmas. At Hanukah, families give modest gifts to each other during the eight days of the festival.

The events leading up to this Festival of Dedication occurred in the time between the writing of the Old and New Testaments as recorded in the apocryphal book of I & II Maccabees. The only reference in the Bible to Hanukah is found in John 10:22: "Jesus is at the temple in Jerusalem during the Feast of Dedication."



## **Feast of Purim**

The last festival in the religious calendar is known as The Feast of Purim, or the Casting of Lots. The book of Esther records how the plot of wicked Haman to destroy all the Jewish people throughout the kingdom of Xerxes was foiled by God through Mordecai and Queen Esther. The congregation and especially the children are given noisemakers, called groggers, on this very festive occasion. As the book of Esther is read, each time wicked Haman's name is mentioned, the congregation boos, hisses and makes noise, trying to blot out from all memory the name of Haman.

In its background, though, Purim has a serious note – the hope that someday in this world, all Jewish people can live in peace and harmony with others, without fear of bigotry and the hatred of Pharaohs, Hamans, and Hitlers. Many religious Jewish people believe this will not happen until Messiah comes.



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