
Messianic *Moments*

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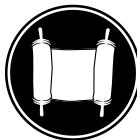
A Messianic Celebration of the Festivals of the L-rd

By RABBI J. MICHAEL TERRETT

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MessianicMoments is a publication of the Council of Messianic Jewish Congregations of Alberta (CMJC of Alberta).

The purpose of this material is provide educational material to Messianic Congregations in Alberta which will promote and teach a Messianic understanding to the Hebrew Roots of our faith.



Council of Messianic Jewish Congregations of Alberta

A little explanation, pronunciation guide: In Hebrew dialect there is no phonetic use of "ch" as in the English word 'chapter'. English transliteration of the Hebrew letter "Khet" or "Het" commonly uses "ch" to represent the Hebrew guttural sound, like the German "ach", and is a guttural or back of the mouth vocalization that is a type of sliding "x" which is not a common sound in English vocabulary. While there is no standardized transliteration for this guttural sound, either the two letters "ch" or "kh" are used to express it. If you are unable to pronounce the guttural sound, it is acceptable to pronounce it as an "h" sound if it is at the beginning of a word and as a "k" sound, if it is in the middle or at the end of a word."

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by J. M. Terrett

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Introduction

There are at least four places in the Torah where the festival cycle is mentioned: Ex. 23:14-17 (34:18-23); Leviticus 23:1-44; Numbers 28:1-29:29 and Deut. 16:1-17. There are seven festivals mentioned, with three of them being pilgrimage festivals when the entire nation was to gather again around the tabernacle in their original camping positions. After the destruction of the second temple and the long dispersion of our people, one of the factors which has contributed to our survival has been allowing our lives to be driven by festival observance.

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The festival cycle begins with Passover and ends with Sukkoth, with two additional winter celebrations, Chanukah and Purim. In order of their occurrence the seven festivals of the L-rd and the two historical celebrations are as follows: Passover, Unleavened Bread, First Fruits, Pentecost, Trumpets, Day of Atonement and Tabernacles. The regular festival cycle ends in the fall, but mid winter there is also Chanukah and Purim, which occurs at the last full moon of winter one month before Passover begins another festival cycle.

Many complicated, ornate traditions have grown up around these festivals and it can be quite overwhelming, unless we understand that these festivals were intended to be celebrated as temporal, practical pictures of the hand of G-d on the Jewish people through the ministry of our blessed Messiah. While we will never be obligated to follow the intricate traditions and laws which have grown up around these special times, we want to make our lives revolve around the provision of the L-rd and this is the main purpose of the annual festival cycle.

Each of the seven Festivals of the L-rd points to a specific feature of the Messiah's ministry and the two historic festivals highlight Jewish bravery in our generational fight against assimilation and antisemitism. I would like to outline for you a uniquely Messianic Jewish approach to these festivals as we annually move closer and closer to His coming Kingdom, with one important caveat: the Sabbath will always be the greatest and most important festival of the L-rd and the one on which all the others are modelled.

The Sabbath

When chapters and verses were added to the Bible by Gentile Christian scholars, the most important feature or climax of Genesis chapter one was wrongly moved to the beginning of chapter two, even though it is the conclusion of the creation dialogue in chapter one. This was done probably because it gave the Sabbath as the only day which the L-rd sanctified and called holy (instead of Sunday). Each of the six days were called good or very good, but none of them were sanctified or called holy and only the Sabbath carries with it the enduring promise of divine rest. Since seven is a symbol of G-d, the seventh day will always be the day of the L-rd and not Sunday.

The first six days refer to the finished work of creation and none of them was set up to be a special celebration of the finished work of creation. As such, only the seventh day has any enduring impact on our lives and is the only day which the L-rd sanctified to be a day of rest.

Thus, whenever we celebrate one of the festivals of the L-rd, we are celebrating a special Sabbath and are resting in some special feature of the

L-rd's provision for His people and, in our Messiah, also provision for the nations and generations of the entire world.

In Hebrews four, Yeshua is called our Sabbath and the coming kingdom is called the Sabbath which is to come (Heb. 4:1-11). So whenever we celebrate the Sabbath, we are both taking a Heaven break and a Creation break as we rest in what the L-rd has done, is doing and will one day do forever. Yeshua is never referred to as our Sunday.

Nowhere in the Bible was the Sabbath abolished or replaced and it remains the only day which the L-rd blessed and the day in which all people are called to rest and this was enshrined in the Ten Commandments. In Matthew 5:17-20, Yeshua says that we are not allowed to break or abrogate any of the commandments and the Sabbath is one of those we should not violate. We can not pick and choose when it comes to the Law of G-d.

This does not mean that all Sunday worshippers will be excluded from heaven or lose their salvation because of their disobedience, it just means that they are violating one of the Ten Commandments and if they try and provide any spurious rationale for doing so, they debase all of the Ten because rationalizing disobedience is never something which the L-rd encourages or blesses.

As Messianic Jews and Gentiles, we want our obedience to the Ten Commandments to be an expression of our faith in our Messiah and we want our observance of the seventh day Sabbath to be a commitment to rest in the grace and provision of our Saviour. It is a time for joy, rest and worship and study, where we put aside the hopes and fears of all the years and recharge in our Saviour and His Word, far from the tyranny of the urgent and the tiring and distracting cares of the week. This is so that each new week and each new weekday is imbued with the refreshing and renewal which only one day, the Sabbath, can provide us with.

As we go through this study, we will always return to this central truth. The L-rd sanctified and blessed only the seventh day as a means of making resting in Him on that day the first and highest expression of obedience which our faith can make. Sunday just happened to be the third day and was never given any special recognition as a special day. There is only one special day in the Bible which the L-rd sanctified and it is such a blessed relief to know that observing this day requires that we rest and rejoice because He is so good and has done so much for us, and because there is so much more to come.

The New Moon

This festival is listed next to the Sabbath in terms of importance, but it has not received much attention, either in Judaism or Christianity. When it is mentioned in Judaism, it is seen as a time of renewal and hope, because just as the moon reflects the light of the sun, so the new moon begins another cycle of renewal, where the reflected light and glory of the sun grows for another monthly cycle. Just like the moon, we are to learn to reflect the glory of G-d and we also express our yearning for Messiah's coming kingdom. We realize that the moon wanes, and we have to remain patient until the full glory of G-d becomes permanent in His kingdom and no longer waxes and wanes as we wander towards His kingdom in our generations.

In our congregation, we observe the L-rd's Table at the new moon, both to renew our grasp of repentance and forgiveness and to express our commitment to the coming Kingdom, which faith in our Messiah gives us access to. We want to bid farewell to time as it passes and continuously look forward to the day when the cares of this world will forever be eclipsed by the arrival of G-d's permanent glory in the Kingdom of our blessed Messiah.

Sometimes we will be waxing, sometimes we will be waning, but as long as we realize that we are called to reflect the glory of G-d, we will continually renew our spiritual yearning and never allow the darkness of this world to fully engulf us or our lives.

Judaism uses a solar lunar calendar where the cycles of the moon are kept in sync with the orbit of the earth around the sun. In a similar way, our lives should revolve around the glory of G-d's Son and we should live our lives so that we reflect His glory, day by day, week by week, month by month and year by year – and generation by generation.

Passover

When our people lived as slaves in Egypt, their time was not their own and they lived at the mercy of their masters and were not free to openly worship YHVH or to serve Him because they belonged to someone else. Passover marks the beginning of the annual festival cycle and as such is considered to be the New Year for the L-rd. Trumpets (Rosh Hashanah) is the new year for the year, but all the dates in the Bible are calculated from Passover. It always occurs at the first full moon of spring and celebrates our deliverance from Egypt, when the angel of death passed over the houses of Jewish people and struck down the first born of Egypt.

It is celebrated between sundown and full dark on the 14th day of Nissan, because when full dark comes, it is considered to be the 15th of Nisan. Jewish days are calculated from sunset to sunset, which is why the weekly sabbath starts at sunset on Friday and ends at sunset on Saturday.

The ten plagues represent a year long, monthly battle between the gods of Egypt and YHVH. Each month was dedicated to a particular Egyptian deity and G-d turned the pagan symbol of that month into a curse. At the Egyptian new year, which celebrated the arrival of the firstborn god and the annual rising waters of the Nile, G-d threatened the first born of Egypt if they did not let His first born go. When Pharaoh refused to let Israel go, Jewish people ate a ritual meal of lamb and put its blood on the doorposts of their houses and in the night, the angel of death passed over all of our homes and struck down all the first born of Egypt.

The blood of the lamb protected the people of G-d and the Egyptians hurried their former slaves out of Egypt, probably fearing that more of them would die if they did not do what YHVH commanded and they did not want to be cursed for another year.

The Passover Seder is the holiest and most important celebration in Judaism, where the events of the Exodus are remembered and acted out with a majestic fifteen part liturgy meal. In order to serve the Lord, we have to be set free from the Egypt of this world.

During the season of Passover, our Messiah added to the symbolism of the Seder meal in order to make it also represent the great price He was going to pay on the cross as the Lamb of G-d who came to deliver us out of the Egypt of this world. While the L-rd's table in no way abrogates, diminishes or cancels the Passover Seder, taking the bread and the cup allows Gentiles and Jews to stand together as equal recipients of the deliverance from sin which our L-rd won for all mankind on the cross. He is the cosmic passover Lamb.

For Messianic Jews and Gentiles, the Passover Seder is our annual celebration of deliverance, first from Pharaoh's Egypt and next from the Egypt of this world. It is celebrated in the interval between sunset and full dark at the end of the day on the 14th of Nissan. It marks the most important date on the Jewish calendar and recalls the most important event in the history of mankind.

When our people were gotten up in the night by the distraught Egyptians and were actually expelled from the country, they did not have a long time to pack and took only what they could carry or what they could fit into whatever carts they owned.

Unleavened Bread

It took the House of Jacob seven days of forced marches to make it out of Egyptian held territory and while they were constantly on the move, they did not have time to stop and let their bread rise, so they had to eat unleavened bread for a full week. The festival of Unleavened Bread is often called Passover week because their exit from Egypt was not complete until they were safely out of Egyptian territory.

In honour of this seven day trek into the wilderness, Jewish homes remove all leavening and refrain from eating any leavened products, though only the first day and the last day are considered holy days, along with the Sabbath which falls during this period. This special seven day period begins officially on the fifteenth of Nissan, which itself starts at full dark at the end of the fourteenth of Nissan. The days between the 15th of Nissan and the 21st of Nissan are considered intermediate days and not as a week of special Sabbaths.

The New Testament exhorts us to put away the leavening of sin and wickedness and to embrace the unleavened bread of purity and truth. It is a time when we remember our people's hurried flight from Egypt and is an opportunity for us to make sure that our lives are lived completely out of the territory and the control of the Egypt of this world. It is a time for believers to remember that we were delivered out of sin and not delivered so that we could continue in sin. It speaks of our responsibility to put a safe distance between us and the former sin from which we have been delivered.

The actual cleansing from all the parasites and diseases of Egypt occurred at the cleansing waters of Mara, which is the first place our people actually stopped to camp and were able to let their bread dough rise before they baked it. This is why the last day of Unleavened Bread is considered a special day. It is a day when we declare ourselves home free and out of danger of being dragged back into Egypt by our former masters and where we can begin to take stock and get ourselves organized to live as people who have been set free from slavery.

Sometimes it takes a while to get out of the reach of the Egypt of this world. And we can only settle down and begin to integrate our new freedom into our lives once we are safely out of reach of our former slavery. Unleavened bread remembers this hurried freedom march out of Egyptian held territory and the safe arrival of our people at Mara, their first stop and the real end of their Exodus out of Pharaoh's domain.

For Messianic believers it is a week to celebrate our need to remove all that remains of the wickedness of this world (James 1:21; I Cor. 5:6-8 and Eph. 4:17-24) and make sure that it does not take root again. We want to get all

the leavening of this world out of our system, once and for all and not allow any of it to follow us into our new found freedom. It is also a time when we remember that we are strangers and pilgrims who are only passing through this life and do not want to have anything to do with its folly (I Peter 2:11).

First Fruits (Festival of Weeks)

In total, it took our people a full 49 days to make the journey from Egypt to the Holy Mountain and we are called to count down the days (the omer) until this blessed arrival occurred. Once our people settled in the land, this festival marked the first harvest of the year, when the barley they had planted before the winter was finally ripe and ready to be harvested. It is called Yom Habikkurim in Hebrew and is the first of the three pilgrimage festivals where the people were to pack up their harvests and make a trip to the tabernacle and lay a tithe of their bounty out before the L-rd.

In the days of the second temple, First Fruits was considered the most important annual festival. It began when sundown on the fifteenth marked the beginning of the 16th of Nissan. The temple was highly decorated and all lit up. It was also filled with music during the first night of the festival and it was then that most of the annual revenues for the temple were collected. It was for this reason that they did not want the body of our Messiah to hang on the cross as the festival started, so they took His body down and quickly buried it so nothing would distract from the temple First Fruits celebrations.

It marked the first annual harvest once they settled in the land and also remembers the time it took our people to journey from Egypt to Mount Sinai. For us, it reminds us that it sometimes takes time for us to be ready to hear from the L-rd and helps us to position ourselves in the right place so the L-rd can speak to us. Wherever we are in our walk with the L-rd, we always need to be moving towards the place where we can hear His Word and be ready to apply it to every area of our lives.

Shavuot (Pentecost) and the Summer Decline

This festival marks the end of the festival of weeks and of the annual counting of the Omer. When our people left Egypt, it took them seven weeks to make it to the mountain and to set up camp at the foot of the holy mountain. It celebrates the giving of the Ten Commandments, which G-d spoke out loud in the hearing of the people and then wrote down for them on two tablets of stone. It was the time when the motley crew which staggered out of Egypt was transformed into the covenant people of YHVH and agreed to abide by the covenant stipulations in three stages: (1) the call,

(2) the conditions and the (3) practical applications.

The Ten Commandments remain the foundation of biblical spirituality and they are the principles upon which any personal application of our faith needs to be based. The mountain shook and smoked as the voice of G-d thundered from its summit and the people declared their generational commitment to walk with Him according to the stipulations which Moses received, both in the Ten Commandments and in their case by case application which Moses wrote down in scroll form and placed beside the Ark of the Covenant, once it was built.

Adhering to the Ten Commandments does not enslave us to a form of legalism, but is really the yoke which G-d wants us to accept so that we can walk the straight and narrow and not be snared or led astray. It is the same call which the Messiah made when He invited all those who are weary and heavy burdened to take His yoke upon them and find rest and peace, because the yoke of the Torah sets us free and transforms us into trees which are planted by the waters and into unshakable houses which are built upon the rock.

The pilgrimage festivals marked the three annual harvest times in the land, when the people were to bring their agricultural tithes to the tabernacle and later to the temple. Shavuot is the second of these pilgrimage festivals where the people were to harvest their wheat and bring a tithe of the grain to offer to the L-rd. The Book of Ruth mentions that she and her mother-in-law came home during the Barley harvest (1:22) and that she stayed gleaning with the young ladies of Boaz until the end of the Barley and the Wheat harvests (2:23).

The celebration of Shavuot never became as big as that of First Fruits, but when the disciples gathered in the Upper Room on the eve of the festival, Jews and converts from many nations had also gathered in Jerusalem. Acts chapter two records the pouring forth of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, where the sound of a mighty rushing wind caused a diverse crowd to gather as the 120 spilled out onto the street, speaking in tongues and glorifying G-d. They were initially attracted by the sound of the mighty rushing of the wind and the encounter with the disciples occurred on the street, where the people gathered to hear Peter preach.

They were told that once they repented and were immersed, they would also receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (2:38, 39), along with all those who were far away and everyone whom the L-rd calls to Himself. This outpouring of the Spirit which first occurred at Pentecost, continued to be poured out throughout the Book of Acts and so for Messianic Jews and Gentile Christians, this festival has also become a time to celebrate the mighty pouring out of the Spirit of G-d, as well as a celebration of the giving of the Ten Commandments.

The Upper Room experience was unique in that after the Messiah ascended, He had to return to dwell in the hearts of all believers, by the Spirit, which He did at that time. He also poured forth the Spirit of G-d upon them and this charismatic outpouring is described as a promise to all believers and should not be seen as a one time historical occurrence which stopped at some point in the history of the early church.

For us, at Shavuot, we celebrate both the giving of the Ten Commandments and also the pouring out of the Spirit, because we want our lives to be based firmly on the Commandments of G-d, as our hearts and lives are filled with the Spirit of G-d. The Word and the Spirit work together to guide us and to empower us and are never in competition with each other.

The period of time between the Festival of Shavuot and Rosh Hashanah is called the summer decline, especially since most of the disasters which befell the Jewish people occurred during the summer months. In memory of the destruction of both temples, Judaism designed three fasts: The fast of the Tenth of Tevet (when the Babylonians set the final siege of Jerusalem usually in December), the Fast of the Seventeenth of Tammuz (when the walls of Jerusalem were finally breached, usually in July) and the Fast of the Ninth of Av (when Solomon's temple was burned and demolished, usually in August).

The Sabbath before Tisha B'Av (The Ninth of Av) is called Black Sabbath and the fast day itself is also referred to as the Black Fast because it marks the lowest point in the history of the Jewish people. Yom Kippur is called the White Fast because it marks the annual renewal of our atonement and cleansing in the festival cycle.

From the 17 of Tammuz to the 9th of Av, the regular prophetic portions (Haftarah) which are read along with the weekly Torah portions, are replaced with prophetic passages of dire warning and are called the Haftarahs of Affliction. The Sabbath immediately after Tisha B'Av is called the Sabbath of Mercy (Shabbat Nachamu) and during the seven weeks it takes to reach the Fall Festivals, passages of comfort from the prophet Isaiah are read on each Sabbath in place of the usual Haftarah portions.

The month of Elul, which is the month just before the Fall Festivals begin, is called the month of repentance and people practice blowing the ram's horn in anticipation of the Festival of Trumpets, which is also called Rosh Hashanah. There are also traditional prayers of repentance which are recited daily in traditional synagogues in preparation for what is, next to Passover, the most wonderful time of the year, and for rabbis, the most tiring time of the year, with up to 18 special services in a row!

Rosh Hashanah

The first new moon of autumn, marks the beginning of the Jewish month of Tishrei and to mark this amazing period of the year, Rosh Hashanah is celebrated with three special services from sundown to sundown on the first of Tishrei. Traditional synagogues usually celebrate Rosh Hashanah (also called Jewish New Year) for two days in order to make sure that they are doing it at the right time. We do not follow this custom.

There are a lot of traditional prayers and observances associated with the Fall Festivals and we observe those which reflect what the Bible teaches and also which highlight the redemptive work of our blessed Messiah. On Rosh Hashanah morning, we blow the ram's horn (shofar) one hundred times to acknowledge the three main themes of the Festival of Trumpets: judgment, kingship and remembrance.

During the service on the eve of Rosh Hashanah, we read a Messianic version of a document called Hatarat Nedarim (the annulment of vows) to spiritually release us from all the unfinished business of the previous year. We also want to make sure that we stand in a right place with G-d, so that when the final day of Judgment comes, we will not suffer loss because of the things we have allowed into our lives year by year. We also want to remember all the good things he has done for us and renew our submission to His Kingship in our lives.

Paul admonished those who took the L-rd's Table lightly and irreverently to first judge themselves to make sure they were free of the stain of sin and were not liable to be judged with the world on that final day. It is a solemn time of self reflection, both for individual believers and for the community as a whole. There is a long prayer, called Avinu Malkeinu (our Father our King) which we have adapted to reflect our faith in the Messiah and it is recited in three sections over the three Rosh Hashanah services on the first of Tishrei.

At the end of each of the three Rosh Hashanah services, we serve round challah (Sabbath bread), along with apples and honey as a symbol of the goodness which is to come in the New Year and we greet one another with the blessing: Shana Tov (happy New Year) ki Nichtav'nu (for we have been inscribed[in the Lamb's Book of Life]). In the Rosh Hashanah evening service, we also perform a tashlikh (casting away), where we formally sign our sins over to G-d through our blessed Messiah and shred or burn the certificate.

We have selected from a wide assortment of traditional readings and prayers those which reflect our faith in the Bible and our confidence in the Messiah and we integrate them in our liturgy. Judgment Day is coming and we testify to this truth as we observe Rosh Hashanah and proclaim that Yeshua is the

one who will judge. Judgment should be seen as a way to identify and root out sin so that none of its poison infects and weakens our spiritual lives.

Yeshua is also the King who will reign forever over all the nations and generations of mankind and we anticipate this wonderful reality at Rosh Hashanah and proclaim His kingship, both in our lives and in the lives of all mankind. We also remember His commandments and His promises as we rest in both His provision and in His protection because as we remember what He has done in the past, it gives us confidence to trust Him even more for our daily and our future provision.

No matter what is going on or not going on in the world around us, In Messiah Yeshua, we proclaim fearlessly at Rosh Hashanah that we live for the King and will daily and constantly seek for both His kingdom and His righteousness as we let our light shine before a lost and dying world.

In traditional Judaism, the ten day period between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur is called the Days of Awe and observant Jewish people wrongly believe that they are being given a chance to earn a good year by being on their best behaviour during this ten day period of time. They attend as many services as they can, and try to make peace and reconcile with people they have wronged and who have wronged them. Once Yom Kippur is over, they can go back to living their real lives, since they feel that they have gained enough spiritual credit before G-d to guarantee a good year of blessing, health and prosperity.

As Messianics, we see repentance as a lifestyle where we constantly realign our lives back onto the straight and narrow, whenever they begin to wander from the ways of the L-rd. He cannot be bought or bribed and we do not follow this superstition. Rosh Hashanah is a time of deep soul searching and of recommitting our lives back to the L-rd under the scrutiny of both His Word and His Spirit.

We spend the ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur reading and meditating on His Word. This is because we want our sense of awe to be renewed as we begin new year where we have determined to walk with Him in the light of His Word.

Yom Kippur

The Day of Atonement is called the Sabbath of Sabbaths in Judaism and is considered the holiest day of the year. It happens on the 10th of the month of Tishrei and commemorates the one day of the year when the High Priest was allowed to enter the Holy of Holies behind the veil and cleanse or atone

for the ark, the incense altar, the sanctuary and the tent of meeting. He was to sprinkle blood on all of the items in a prescribed manner so that they could be made clean and holy again for another year of sacrifices and praise.

The High Priest was also to transfer the confessed sins of the people onto an emissary goat, called Azazel, who was then chased into the wilderness as a sign that the sins were not only forgiven, but irretrievably forgotten. Rather than see this an annual reminder of our sins, we should see Yom Kippur as a reminder that forgiveness and cleansing are renewal functions around which we should build our lives.

In our blessed Messiah we see that He not only forgives us again and again, but He also cleanses us from both the pain and the stain of sin so that we may be set free and walk upright and unburdened for another year. All the symbols of the tabernacle have their actual fulfilment in the ministry of our Messiah because when He ascended to the Father, He entered the actual Holy of Holies, where He ever lives to intercede for us and make atonement for us from the actual mercy seat – which is called the Ha Kapporet or atonement seat in Hebrew.

The High priest went in annually to renew the symbols of the heavenly reality which each of them represented and until he came back out alive, the people did not know whether they were still being forgiven and cleansed for another year. He had golden bells on the edges of his robes and after the sad and foolish deaths of Abihu and Nadab, since no one would be willing to retrieve the body of any high priest who died behind the veil, they tied a rope around his feet, just in case they had to pull him out.

We hold four Yom Kippur services, from sundown to sundown and in the first evening service and the morning service, we recite a long traditional prayer called Al Hayt (for these sins). We have adapted the traditional prayer to reflect our belief in the Messiah from Nazareth and we recite it as a sign that we are accepting individual and corporate responsibility for each other and making sure that none of the sins it mentions are being allowed to take root in our lives and defile us. We are doing a full scan of our hearts and lives so that no sin can take root.

When the inquisition forced many Spanish and Portuguese Jews to pretend to convert to Catholicism in order to save their lives, once a year these secret Jews would attend the first evening service of Yom Kippur and ask to pray with those brave ones who had not feigned conversion. If they were caught, they knew they would be killed as heretics and in order for them to be allowed to pray with their synagogue family, they had to renounce their Catholicism and embrace Judaism again, at least for one day of the year.

To honour their memory a chant called Kol Nidre (all vows) is sung in the first evening service as we reaffirm our primary loyalty to the King and Saviour of Israel.

Yom Kippur is also a fasting day, where only water or warm unsweetened tea is drunk from sunset to sunset. Young children, nursing mothers and the sick are exempt from this custom which is a response to the verse in Leviticus (23:32) where we are instructed to humble our souls on this day.

During the Fall Feasts and on Passover, the rabbi wears a white robe called a kittel as both a symbol of purity and humility. Any members of the community who wish to do so as well, are also encouraged to wear white robes.

The Yom Kippur morning service focuses on the Avodah, which is found in Leviticus 16 and deals with the manner in which the High Priest was to enter the holy place and make atonement. In the afternoon service, special Psalms are read and the Book of Jonah is studied as a lesson on both the futility of stubbornness and the need for repentance whenever we have disobeyed or walked away from the L-rd.

The evening service focuses on verses of holiness found in Leviticus and the service is brought to a close by the blowing of a long shofar blast. A light snack is sometimes provided to give relief to those who have been fasting.

It was also on Yom Kippur that the beginning of the Year of Jubilee was to be announced, but over the years, our people were never able to celebrate this feature of Jewish time, though a Sabbatical (Shemitah) year is observed in modern Israel and observant Jews will neither sow or reap from the land - or plant trees. Our Messiah came as a literal fulfilment of this symbolic Jubilee year where liberty and release from bondage was proclaimed. He came to set us free from sin and death and to grant us an everlasting year of Jubilee, once His coming Kingdom is established on earth.

Sukkoth (Tabernacles)

This is the third pilgrimage festival and begins at the first full moon of autumn on the fifteenth day of the month of Tishrei. It lasts for seven days, until the 21st of the month of Tishrei and was the last harvest festival of the year, when a final crop of grain was harvested and all the ripened fruit was picked. The Jewish people were commanded to dwell in sukkahs, or booths and have but joy during this seven day period of rejoicing. Special holiday sacrifices were offered in the temple and the first day and the eighth day were to be considered special days of rest and the extra day gave the people time to rest up and prepare for the long journey home.

Jewish people around the world build temporary structures, called sukkahs

and invite guests to share festival meals with them throughout this festival period. Jewish people also gather the branches of leafy trees (lulav) and wave them before the L-rd, both as a reminder that this life is only temporary and that He will always meet our needs as we wander through this life.

Every seven years, at the beginning of the Sabbatical year, and during the Festival of Sukkot, Jewish people were to read the Law so that they would learn to fear the L-rd and put practices all the worlds of this Law.

Sukkoth is both a harvest festival where the people were to gather for a week long celebration of G-d's goodness and also a reminder that we are only strangers and pilgrims wandering through this life. We should never become attached to the things of this life because it is always fading, withering and passing, generation by generation.

As believers in the Messiah, for us, it is also a celebration of the coming end of the world and the arrival of Messiah's everlasting kingdom. Combined with the harvest feature of this festival, it is truly a time of rejoicing before the long, cold winter sets in.

There is a special day which has been added to this festival because it is also the time when the annual reading cycle is completed and the scroll needs to be rewound at the start of another Torah reading cycle. This day is called Simchat Torah (rejoicing in the Torah) and the beginning and ending verses of the Torah are read. We add the beginning and ending verses of the New Testament and in our congregation, we read both the verses from the Torah and from the New Testament in as many languages as possible.

Once the scroll is rewound, it is danced seven times around the sanctuary as it is passed to everybody in the congregation who wants to take a turn dancing with it. Instead of throwing hard candies at the children who are carrying it, we have developed a unique custom which is very popular with our children.

We ask all the adults to bring a package of individually wrapped soft chocolate and we set up a table at the front of the sanctuary which ends up covered with these treats. Once we bring the service to a finish, the children are allowed to charge up and eat as much chocolate as they can. I throw chocolates to the adults and they Nichiren are allowed to take home all the uneaten chocolate. We want our children to learn that His Word is sweeter than honey and the honey comb - or the chocolate bar in this case.

We hold two big feasts during the Fall Feasts, one on the sabbath closest to Rosh Hashanah and one on the Sabbath during the week of Sukkoth. Also we study the Book of Ecclesiastes on this sabbath, so that our joy is tempered with wisdom as we walk with the L-rd for one more year.

Our homes, our lives and our bodies all belong to the L-rd and He still wants to dwell (tabernacle) in our midst until that glorious day when we are able to leave these imperfect tabernacles of flesh and are clothed with immortality as we receive our resurrected, heavenly bodies and leave all the sorrows and cares of this life behind forever. When He walked among us, Yeshua took on Himself a tabernacle of flesh and now, by His Spirit He wants to dwell in our bodies because they are the only temple which the L-rd will recognize until the heavenly one descends from Glory.

It is usual to pray for rain during the feast of Tabernacles so that the spring crops can flourish. In our Canadian setting we could also pray for snow for the same reason.

There are two additional minor festivals in Judaism and they are the eight days of Chanukah, which began as a second Sukkoth and usually falls in December and the Festival of Purim which usually falls in March. They were not ordained as part of the regular festival cycle, and represent moments in our history when we have had victory over our enemies when they tried to assimilate or annihilate us.

Chanukah (Dedication)

When our people returned from Babylon, they rebuilt the temple and were left in peace by the Persians to pursue their faith as loyal subjects with special privileges, under the protection of the Persian King. In the fourth century B.C. (B.C.E.), Alexander of Macedonia conquered the Persian empire and gave the Jewish people the same privileges and protection which they enjoyed under their Persian masters.

His empire divided into four parts after his untimely death and his followers pursued an aggressive policy of Hellenization where all the subject peoples were obliged to adopt the Greek culture and religion. When Jewish people tried to resist, a wicked Greek ruler, Antiochus Epiphanes, captured Jerusalem, tore down its walls and set up a statue of Zeus in the holy temple.

The Sabbath was outlawed, along with circumcision and the study of the Torah. Many Jewish people assimilated into Greek culture and tried to force the rest of the nation to follow suit. A violent civil war developed and one man, Judah Maccabee, drove the Greeks out of Jerusalem and cleansed the temple on the 25th day of the Hebrew month of Kislev.

No one had been allowed to celebrate Sukkoth that year, so a second Sukkoth was set up and developed in the eight day Feast of Dedication (Chanukah). At first the priests and leaders of the people suppressed this festival which commemorated a military victory and where the people

thought that just as Judah Maccabee came into the temple and cleansed it, so, one day Messiah would also enter the temple and proclaim his Kingdom. Messiah Yeshua did come into the temple on Chanukah and proclaimed His Kingdom, but the message was not well received by the temple authorities. By the second century of the common era, the rabbis gave in to the inevitable and transformed what was originally a celebration of bravery which anticipated the arrival of the Messiah and His Kingdom, into a celebration of bravery which refused to assimilate, without any mention of the Messiah. They took a nine branched menorah (chanukiah), which is a Greek symbol of victory, and added dreidels (dice) to honour the scribes who pretended to be gambling when they were really studying the Torah. Later, chocolate coins and potato pancakes (latkes) were added and special prayers and Torah passages were assigned to each of the eight days and any connection to Sukkoth was lost.

As believers, we rejoice in the bravery of the Maccabees and the Bible scholars, but just as we want people to put the Messiah back in Christmas, we also want to put Him back in Chanukah. Instead of the legend that one single vial of oil magically burned for eight days, we want to light the chanukiah because we believe that Messiah is the light of the world.

We also want to avoid being assimilated into the paganism of the world in which we live in, but we want to restore the Messiah as the centre around which our lives need to resolve.

Some Messianic believers do their best to ignore Christmas and to point out its supposed pagan origins. But for us, it should rather be a time of rejoicing in the Messiah's birth and as we take the opportunity to share our faith in the holy child who was born into the world to die for our sins and rise again to give us life everlasting.

Right after the feast of Chanukah, the Fast of the tenth of Tevet remembers the beginning of the end for the first temple because it was on this day that the final siege of Jerusalem by the Babylonians occurred. Over the years, orthodox Jewish people have come to believe that the Messiah must be born on one of the three fasts which deal with the destruction of the first temple. Several times a year, Christmas falls on the tenth of Tevet and it is likely that early Messianic believers began to celebrate the birth of our L-rd on that date.

When the church filled up with Gentiles and turned its back on Jews and Judaism, Gentile believers noticed the correlation between the tenth of Tevet and the 25th of December and by the second century of the common era, this date came to be called Christmas and its connection to the fast of Tevet was lost.

Purim

While our people were in captivity, a young Jewish maiden became the Queen of Persia but an enemy of our people got the Persian king to declare a day when all the Jewish people of the Persian empire could be robbed and murdered. Queen Esther skillfully got the King to declare a second day where the Jewish people could kill their enemies before they had a chance to murder the Jews.

Their enemies cast lots (rolled dice) to discover which day would be best to rise up and kill the Jews and in response to the request of Esther, Jewish people were allowed to rise up and kill their enemies on the day when they were supposed to be killed. We celebrate this deliverance on the 14th day of the month of Adar by retelling the story of the bravery of Esther. we dress up in costumes and during the retelling of the story, whenever our enemy Haman's name is mentioned we yell Y'ma shmo (may his name be erased).

We also use noise makers and eat special treats called hamantaschen (Haman's hat) and we eat a big feast as we celebrate another great deliverance of our people out of the hands of their enemies. Since this is not part of the regular festival cycle, we usually observe Purim on the Sabbath closest to the actual date.

We may have to face any number of enemies who may try to annihilate us frequently and ferociously, but we can always count on the L-rd to foil their plans as He did even during the Holocaust so that our people did not and never will, completely disappear. The Crusades, the Inquisition and any number of pogroms (state planned murders of our people) have tried to destroy the great nation which descends from Abraham. However in the Messiah, we have been a great blessing to the nations and His blessing will always follow us more tenaciously than any attempts to destroy us.

Conclusion

The festival cycle was given to Israel as an annual reminder of the goodness, the protection and the provision of the L-rd. It was geared to the annual harvest cycle and each of the seven festivals deals with one or more aspects of the glorious ministry of our Messiah, both in His death, and resurrection. As well the festivals highlight various features of His earthly ministry when He walked among us.

As we observe them, we become truly Sabbath powered and festival driven as our lives turn around celebrating our faith in the L-rd and our confidence in the promises of His Word. There is so much more which can be said about how and why we observe these special times, but I have selected certain

highlights from this cycle which indicate how they have their fulfilment in the L-rd whom we serve.

He is the true King of Israel and the Saviour of all the nations and generations of mankind. Join us as we move through the festival cycle every year and let them recharge and invigorate your faith as you deepen your understanding of His Word and grow closer to Him.

It is both our duty and our privilege to learn new and creative ways to integrate His unchanging Word into the ever changing circumstances of our lives, generation by generation. Part of this involves a thorough, regular purging of any forms of paganism which want to take root in our lives.

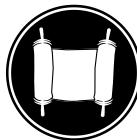
One of the greatest features of paganism is often the traditions of men which are falsely taught to be part of the Word of the L-rd which remains our sole guide to faith and practice on our pilgrimage through this life. Any community will naturally establish traditions which express our faith and obedience to G-d through His Word, but these should always be seen only as dynamic expressions of our faith in our particular context and never as part of the eternal Word of G-d which should shine like a beacon in the darkness of this world.

The festivals should be celebrated both seriously and joyfully and are community opportunities to rejoice in our L-rd as we path our faith onto both our children and to all and any newcomers who take up residence in our midst. we need to know why we are celebrating what we are celebrating and the festivals allow us to join hands with all previous generations of believers who also discovered how good it is to believe in the L-rd and walk with Him through this life according to the teachings of His Word.

Daily, weekly, monthly, annually we will celebrate the goodness of the L-rd both through His provision and His protection. we will also turn our eyes towards Him at all and any major transitions in our life and in the life of our community.

The festival cycle was designed with this purpose in mind and will always be a rich source of blessing and joy for all of those who let their lives be empowered and driven by these special times as we let them enrich our pilgrimage through this life. As Paul said: rejoice in the L-rd always and again I say rejoice! This is because the joy of the L-rd will always be our strength because He will never leave us nor forsake us. Amen and amen.

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