

Yeshua In The Jewish Holidays

God's appointed holidays that are described in the twenty-third chapter of Leviticus accomplish many purposes. Year by year they pace our lives according to the cycle that God has designed into creation. They remind us of the great things God has done in Israel's history. We should never forget that Messiah Yeshua, the apostles, and the early Messianic Jewish movement celebrated these festivals. In addition, each holiday is a prophecy that looks forward to what God is going to do in human history. If understood properly, the festivals in Leviticus 23 reveal God's master plan to restore humanity. Familiarity with these holidays will build up our faith and help us to better understand both the Old and New Testaments.

THE SABBATH

The first holiday mentioned in Leviticus 23 is the Sabbath. Perhaps it heads the list because it is the most important holiday of them all. It is observed every week while the other holidays take place only once a year. The word "sabbath" means "rest." Every seventh day, beginning Friday night at sunset and continuing through Saturday night at sunset, is set aside for rest. Why do we consider the day as having begun at sunset? The answer is found in Genesis 1 where it is written: "There was evening, and there was morning, the first day." All of God's days, from the beginning of creation, start at sunset, and the Jewish people have followed His example. The Sabbath is designed to remind that God created the universe in six days, and on the seventh day He rested.

The Sabbath also reminds us of salvation. It wasn't until the Jewish people were redeemed out of Egypt that we began observing the Sabbath. The Sabbath also reminds us of the redemption of the Messiah, who called Himself the "Lord of the Sabbath." He said, "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls" (Matthew 11:28-9). The secret of victorious living is to learn how to rest in Him while He works through us. The Sabbath also reminds us of the final redemption of all things. One day in the future Messiah Yeshua will return to planet Earth and bring rest to this weary world.

GOD'S CALENDAR IS BASED ON SEVEN

God's calendar is designed around the number seven which, throughout the Bible, is the number that represents completion. Just as seven days make up a complete week, and we rest on the seventh day, so too the seventh month is the sabbatical month, and completes the yearly holidays. Every seventh year was a sabbatical year, in which the land of Israel enjoyed a rest. Furthermore, every seven times seven years, on the fiftieth year, was decreed "Shanat Yovel," the "Year of Jubilee." Property was to be restored to its original owners so that the entire nation of Israel would experience release and rest. There is a tradition among the rabbis that the seven days of creation are symbolic of seven thousand years of human history. As is typical for a normal work week, the first six thousand years will be full of work, sweat and tears. But the Sabbath represents a future thousand year period when the Messiah will rule over a world at rest.

PASSOVER - FIRST OF THE SEVEN YEARLY HOLIDAYS

The first of the seven yearly holidays is Passover, which begins God's yearly calendar. "This month shall be the beginning of months for you; it is to be the first month of the year to you" (Exodus 12:2). Passover occurs in the month of Nisan, which usually falls in March or April. Passover takes place during the spring, when the earth is full of new life, after the cold death of winter. It makes sense that God's calendar would start in the Spring - certainly more sense than starting the new year in the dead of winter, the way we do it in the Western world. Just as Passover begins God's calendar, it also begins Israel's history as a free nation. The story of Passover starts with the Jewish people going down to Egypt in the time of Joseph. Joseph became the savior of Egypt as well as his own people. Years later a new pharaoh came to power who did not remember Joseph. Instead of showing gratitude towards the Jewish people, he enslaved us. God raised up Moses, who went to Pharaoh and demanded that Israel be released. But Pharaoh hardened his heart and refused to let Israel go. So God sent ten plagues upon the land of Egypt.

The tenth plague was the most severe of them all - death for all the first-born sons living in the land of Egypt, both the first-born of man and animals. If you were a first-born son there was only one way you would have survived that first Passover. The Lord God instructed everyone to take an unblemished, year-old lamb. You were to kill the lamb and pour its blood into a bowl. Then you applied the blood to the two doorposts and the top of the door of the house where the Passover lamb was to be eaten. God promised that He would go through the land that night, striking all the houses of Egypt. But God would pass over each house where He saw the blood of a spotless lamb applied by faith to the door. The first-born son would be spared from death, and the next day all of Israel would be redeemed out of Egypt. Then as it were, God took us by the hand, and led us through the wilderness to the promised Land of Israel.

Passover was a prophecy of a greater redemption, a more profound Exodus, and a greater Lamb which was to come. Passover was a prediction that God would send His Son into the world to be the ultimate sacrifice, who would shed His blood on a cross, so that God would "pass over" the sins of those who believe in Messiah, and bring us out of our Egypt, our bondage to the world, our slavery to sin, our captivity to the flesh and our slavery to the adversary. The Lord will take us by the hand, lead us through the wilderness of this world, to the New Jerusalem. "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world". It is no coincidence that Messiah Yeshua died on Passover. His last supper was a Passover Seder and He died the next day, the first day of Passover - in fulfillment of Passover. We will see a similar pattern throughout the rest of the holidays. Each one looks forward to something that the Messiah would accomplish, and each one finds fulfillment on its own day.

FEAST OF MATZAH

The Feast of Matzah (Unleavened Bread) begins with Passover and continues for seven days. Nothing with yeast is to be eaten during that period. One reason why we eat matzah is to remind ourselves of our hasty departure from Egypt. By eating matzah we remember that when God did redeem us, He redeemed us quickly, so quickly that there wasn't time for our bread to

rise. There is another reason why we eat matzah. Throughout the Scriptures leaven is used as a symbol, usually a symbol for sin. Just as little bit of leaven will quickly spread and infect an entire batch of dough, so a little sin will quickly spread and infect an individual or an entire community. Prior to Passover, Jewish families will spend days ridding their homes of leaven. The apostle Paul, was familiar with this ceremony of cleansing our houses of leaven. He wrote this to the community of messianic believers at Corinth: "Your boasting is not good. Don't you know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough? Clean out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, just as you are unleavened, for Messiah our Passover Lamb has been sacrificed. Therefore let us celebrate the Feast, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread (the matzah) of sincerity and truth" (1 Corinthians 5:6-8). Rabbi Paul uses the ceremony of cleansing the house of leaven to teach us to cleanse our lives of sin, if we expect to enjoy the blessings of Messiah, our Passover Lamb, who died for us.

At His Last Supper (which was a Passover Seder), Messiah Yeshua took bread - it would have been unleavened bread - He broke it and gave it to His disciples. But then He gave this matzah new meaning when He said, "This is My body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of Me." "This is My body" declared Yeshua. "I am the fulfillment of this unleavened bread." Yeshua was the first human being who lived in this world who never sinned. He resisted every temptation and was victorious over sin. Finally, on the Feast of Matzah, His sinless life was put to death on the cross, breaking the power of sin. The Feast of Matzah teaches us that when we are joined to Messiah by means of our faith in Him, He empowers us to have more and more victory over sin in our lives. When we are joined to the Sinless One, His victory over sin becomes our victory. One glorious day when He appears, we will be like Him, and in that day we will have total victory over sin.

THE FEAST OF FIRST FRUITS

The Feast of First Fruits is the third yearly holiday. It also takes place during the week of Passover. Passover starts on the evening of the fourteenth of Nisan. First Fruits takes place on the sixteenth day of Nisan, which is the third day of Passover. In ancient times, when the Jerusalem Temple still existed, on that day Israel's High Priest took the first sheaves of the barley harvest, and waved the first fruits of barley as a wave offering. This procedure was a visual prayer. By waving the first fruits of the harvest the High Priest was praying something like this: "Lord God of Israel, thank You for the beginning of this year's harvest. We offer to You the first fruits of this year's harvest. Lord, accept the first fruits, the beginning and best of the harvest. O Lord, accept us, Your people, and please bring in the rest of the harvest." If God would accept offering of the first fruits, it was a guarantee that He would bless us with the remainder of the harvest during the year.

The Feast of First Fruits was a prophecy that the Messiah, who died on Passover, would come back to life. Death would not be able to hold the Sinless One. God would raise Him from the dead. He would be offered up as the "first fruits of those who have fallen asleep" (see 1 Corinthians 15:20). Messiah is the beginning of God's harvest of humanity, the first to be raised from the dead. As the first fruits, He is the strongest, the best, the prototype, the model, the example, for all those joined to Him, who will follow in due time. Because God found Him acceptable, and raised Him from the dead as the first fruits, it is a guarantee that those who believe in Him, the rest of the harvest of humanity, will be raised and given resurrection life.

It is likely that Messiah Yeshua was raised from the dead on the Feast of First Fruits. It was "on the third day" that Messiah Yeshua rose from the dead. Passover starts the evening of the fourteenth day of Nisan. First Fruits take place on the sixteenth day of Nisan. So you have part of the fourteenth day, the whole of the fifteenth day, and the third day, the sixteenth day of Nisan, on which falls First Fruits. It is likely that the same day that the High Priest was offering the first fruits of the barley harvest, God was raising from the dead and accepting Messiah Yeshua, the first fruits of redeemed humanity. The Feast of First Fruits is the true Biblical Resurrection day. I wish the Christian Church would have embraced this holiday, with its God designed symbolism of the resurrection, rather than replacing it with Easter, Easter eggs and bunnies.

SHAVUOT

The next holiday on God's calendar is Shavuot which means "weeks." It takes place seven weeks and one day after the Feast of First Fruits. "Pentecost" is the Greek name for it. Pentecost means "fifty," because this fourth yearly holiday takes place fifty days after First Fruits. Fifty days after First Fruits Jewish men were required to make a second pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Once there we would offer to God the first fruits of the wheat harvest. This time the High Priest waved two loaves of wheat bread that had been made with leaven. This is unusual, since it is one of the only offerings that included leaven. In general, the Biblical principle is that anything offered to God had to be without leaven, since leaven is usually symbolic of sin. "No grain offering, which you bring to the Lord, shall be made with leaven, for you shall not offer up in smoke any leaven or any honey as an offering by fire to the Lord. As an offering of first fruits, you shall bring them to the Lord, but they shall not ascend for a soothing aroma on the altar" (Leviticus 2:11-12).

This offering up of the two loaves was another visual prayer. Through this ceremony the High Priest was in essence praying: "Lord, thank You for extending the harvest to the wheat. We offer up to You the first fruits, the beginning, the best of this crop. Lord of the harvest, we ask you to bring in the rest of the harvest throughout the year." Shavuot was also a prophecy that Messiah's resurrection, which took place fifty days earlier, would be expanded to include more of humanity. Acts chapter two records the fulfillment of this holiday. Fifty days after Yeshua rose from death His first followers, were gathered together in Jerusalem for this holiday. The Spirit that raised Yeshua from the dead was poured out on those first Jewish disciples. The Messianic Community was given His Spirit, resurrection life and power. That happened on Shavuot, in fulfillment of Shavuot.

Since the Jerusalem Temple was destroyed in 70 AD, the Jewish people can no longer wave two loaves of bread as a wave offering. As a result, the emphasis of this holiday has shifted. According to Jewish tradition, Shavuot is the day that Israel received the Law on Mount Sinai. We should not forget that the giving of the Law was not without problems. While Moses was on Sinai receiving the Law, the rest of Israel was at the bottom of Sinai worshipping the golden calf. Moses came down from the mountain, saw what was happening and called out, "whoever is for the Lord, come to me." The tribe of the Levites came to Moses, went throughout the camp of Israel, and killed three thousand men who were involved in that idolatrous worship. Three

thousand Jewish men were killed on Shavuot when the Law was given. Contrast that with the fact that when the Holy Spirit was given on Shavuot (Pentecost), three thousand Jewish people were made alive! What a powerful illustration of the principle that the letter (of the Law) kills, but the Spirit gives life (2 Cor. 3:6) is contained in the day of Shavuot.

Why were two loaves of bread waved, and not one? The two loaves of bread can be understood as symbols of the two groups of peoples that make up the Messianic Community. In Romans 11, Rabbi Paul gives us the analogy of an olive tree made up of the original branches, the Jewish people. Later, wild olive branches, the Gentiles, are grafted into the olive tree of salvation and blessing. It could be that the two loaves of bread waved by the High Priest at Shavuot represent the original branches, the Jewish people, and the wild branches, the Gentiles that are grafted into the Olive Tree. Each loaf is incomplete without the other. The Jewish loaf needs the Gentile loaf to be complete, and the Gentile loaf needs the Jewish loaf to be complete. Why is this offering made with leaven, a symbol for sin? The bread represents the Messianic Community, which is made up of sinful men and women. We struggle with sin each day of our lives. We are not yet like Messiah Yeshua, the pure unleavened bread. One day when He appears, we will be like Him, and will have complete victory over the presence and power of sin. But until that day, each one of us still wrestles with sin.

These first four yearly holidays are connected. They take place in the spring. They are symbolic of events connected to the first coming of Yeshua. They were all fulfilled on their specific day in the calendar. For example, Passover was a prediction of the death of the Messiah, and Yeshua actually died on Passover, in fulfillment of Passover. We will see a similar pattern with the three fall holidays which take place after the summer. If the pattern holds true, they too should be fulfilled on their specific day (although no one except God knows the exact day or year).

THE SUMMER

After the four spring holidays comes the summer, when the crops are ripening. Each day brings the crops closer and closer to the fall harvest. The summer seems to be symbolic of the past two thousand years of history. The Body of Messiah started in Israel among the Jewish people, but since the first century it has been spreading to all the nations of the world. For two thousand years the Good News has been spreading to all the nations on earth. The harvest of humanity is getting ready to be reaped.

THE FEAST OF TRUMPETS

Just as the four spring holidays are connected, so are the final three holidays. They take place in the fall. They are connected to Messiah's second coming. They all take place in the seventh month, the month of completion. If the pattern holds true for the fall holidays as it did for the spring holidays, they too will be fulfilled on their own day. The fall holidays will bring to completion God's plan to redeem humanity. The first fall holiday is the Feast of Trumpets. It takes place on the first day of the seventh month, which is the month of Tishri. Among the Jewish people, it is better known as "Rosh HaShana" - the Jewish "New Year." But it is not really the Biblical New Year, since this holiday falls on the first day of the seventh month. Why then is it called the Jewish New Year?

The reason can be traced to the time when the Jewish people were exiled to Babylon. That took place around 586 BC, in the reign of Nebuchadnezzar. The Babylonian new year took place in the fall, and while in exile there, we adopted parts of the Babylonian calendar, including their new year. According to the Bible, the true "Jewish New Year" takes place during the spring at Passover time. The Lord clearly stated this to Moses in Exodus 12:2 when He said, "This month shall be the beginning of months for you; it is to be the first month of the year to you." On the first day of the seventh month we are told to rest and blow the shofar, a special trumpet made from a ram's horn. The shofar was blown in ancient Israel for various reasons: If there was danger, the shofar was blown. If important information was being proclaimed, the shofar was blown. If the king was coming to visit our town, the shofar would be blown. We blow the shofar on this day because we are announcing the return of King Messiah to planet Earth.

Throughout the New Testament Yeshua's return is accompanied by the blowing of the shofar. "Behold, I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall be changed in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound and the dead will be raised" (1 Cor. 15:51-52). Rabbi Paul inform the Thessalonians that "the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Messiah shall rise first" (1 Thes. 4:16). In the book of Revelation, with the sounding of the seventh trumpet, Messiah Yeshua returns to Earth. The shofar is designed to wake you up and get you ready for the Second Coming of Messiah and the other events connected with the seventh month. (For additional reasons why we blow the shofar, see the section at the end: Twelve Reasons We Blow the Shofar).

YOM KIPPUR THE DAY OF ATONEMENT

Ten days later Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, takes place. This was the one day when the High Priest was allowed to enter into the most holy place in the Temple, sprinkle blood on the ark of the covenant, and atone for the sins of Israel. This is a very solemn day, when Jewish people fast and pray and ask for forgiveness. The rabbis teach that we have ten days from the beginning of the Feast of Trumpets to the close of Yom Kippur, to repent. According to this tradition, if you do not repent during those ten days, God will blot your name out of the book of life, and sometime during the coming year you will die.

This is a day for judgment, atonement and cleansing. Prophetically, it looks forward to a future day of judgment and cleansing immediately following Yeshua's return. That judgment is further described in the twenty-fifth chapter of the book of Matthew. Yeshua tells us that after He returns, He will establish His throne and judge all the nations. Those nations and individuals who turned to God will be allowed to enter into His kingdom. Those nations who have not repented will be judged and blotted out of life in the Kingdom. It makes sense that this judgment will occur on the very day of some future Yom Kippur.

SUKKOT

Finally, we come to the last of the seven yearly holidays, the Feast of Sukkot - the Feast of Tabernacles, or Booths. It is the seventh holiday and it falls in the seventh month. With this holiday God will complete His plan to redeem humanity. Sukkot

takes place on the fifteenth day of Tishri and lasts for eight days. For the third and last time the Jewish people went up to Jerusalem to celebrate this final harvest festival. We built booths, decorated them with branches and the fruits of the harvest, and lived in them for the duration of the holiday. We also took willow, palm and myrtle branches, waved them in the air, prayed and rejoiced with them.

These temporary booths, which go up and come down one week later, remind us of the Exodus from Egypt and our forty years of wandering in the wilderness. They remind us that life in this world is temporary. We are pilgrims on this earth, wanderers with no permanent dwelling place. Prophetically, Sukkot looks forward to a greater Exodus to come. It looks forward to the final harvest of humanity. It looks forward to the eternal dwelling places that Messiah Yeshua has prepared for us. At the end of this age, God will gather the fruit of redeemed humanity into His kingdom. This is the goal of God's efforts in human history, leading to the eternal kingdom that awaits redeemed humanity.

CONCLUSION

God has a master plan to redeem humanity that is revealed in the Jewish holidays. To reach the goal to which the holidays point, you must start at the beginning of God's calendar. You must cease from your own works and enter into the Sabbath rest that the Messiah alone provides. You must believe that Yeshua is the Passover Lamb who died for your sins, and that He is the unleavened bread that was victorious over sin. You must know that He is the fulfillment of the Feast of First Fruits, the One who was raised from the dead. In fulfillment of Shavuot (the Feast of Weeks) you must receive His Spirit and become part of the Messianic Community. Then you can look forward to His return, and so partake of the Feast of Trumpets. As part of Yom Kippur, you need to know that when He returns to planet Earth, judgment will take place. Those who believe in Him won't be condemned, but have already passed out of judgment and into life. Then at the very end, you will be welcomed into that glorious and eternal kingdom that awaits redeemed humanity. Then the redeemed will reign with Him forever and ever, which is the fulfillment of the Feast of Sukkot. Yeshua is the fulfillment of these Jewish holidays.

TWELVE REASONS WE BLOW THE SHOFAR

1. When we hear the shofar we are to remember God's Kingship. In ancient Israel the new king's reign was announced with the shofar (1 Kings 1:34). When we blow the shofar we remember that Yeshua is King of Kings and Lord of Lords and we are to be obedient subjects.

2. When we hear the shofar we are to remember to be God's worshippers. God seeks those who will worship Him in spirit and in truth. The shofar is used in worship and in fact heads the list of instruments in Psalm 150 which are used to worship God. "Praise Him with the shofar."

3. When we hear the shofar we are to remember our need to repent. The shofar signaled the approach of danger. We are in danger without repentance. "Blow a shofar in Zion and sound an alarm on My holy mountain... consecrate a fast, proclaim a solemn assembly. Return to Me with all your heart, and with fasting, weeping and mourning, and rend your heart and not your garments" (Joel 2:1, 12-13).

4. When we hear the shofar we are to remember the faithfulness of the Patriarch. The shofar is made from a ram's horn. It reminds us of the "Akedah," the binding and Abraham's intended sacrifice of Isaac. Because of this act of faith, God promised to bless the Jewish people and give us victory over our enemies. The shofar is a reminder of our covenant with God because of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The Jewish people are beloved by God for the sake of the Patriarchs.

5. When we hear the shofar we are to remember the binding of Messiah Yeshua, our ultimate Akedah. Abraham prophesied that God would provide for Himself the Lamb for the burnt offering (Genesis 22:8). Messiah Yeshua was offered up as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world on that same spot two thousand years later.

6. When we hear the shofar we are to remember the shofar that accompanied the revelation of the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai, and that all Scripture is divinely inspired by God.

7. When we hear the shofar we are to remember the words of the prophets. I set watchmen over you saying, "listen to the sound of the shofar" (Jeremiah 6:17). Prophets are like a shofar which warn of danger. Israel was judged for ignoring the prophets. There is even greater judgement if we ignore Messiah Yeshua, Israel's greatest prophet.

8. When we hear the shofar we are to remember the battle alarm for war. "Near is the great day of the Lord, near and coming very quickly... a day of shofar and battle cry" (Zephaniah 1:14-16). Messiah will return and fight during the greatest battle of all time, the battle of Armageddon. We are in the middle of a battle that has been raging for the soul of humanity. Satan and his fallen angels are fighting for people to share their destiny. Messiah Yeshua is fighting for people to share His eternal destiny.

9. When we hear the shofar we are to remember the end of all warfare. The shofar was blown at the end of battle (2 Samuel 2:28, 18:16). The shofar is a reminder that our final victory is ahead. When King Messiah returns He will end all wars, battles, and injustice.

10. When we hear the shofar we are to remember our resurrection that will take place at Messiah's return when the shofar blows (1 Corinthians 15:52, 1 Thessalonians 4:16).

11. When we hear the shofar we are to be reminded of the Jewish people's restoration to the Land of Israel. Messiah Yeshua will gather all of Israel's exiles. "You will be gathered up one by one, O sons of Israel. It will come about also in that day that a great shofar will be blown" (Isaiah 27:13).

12. When we sound the shofar we are asking God to remember us. The sounding of the shofar is like a prayer that ascends to God's throne saying, "O Lord, may the sound of our shofar ascend before Your throne. Remember Your covenants, forgive us, save us, and deliver us."