



Prayer and Worship (Part 2): The Jewish Festivals

HPRS50I5/60I5

Session Outline



- Introduction to the Jewish festivals
- The High Holy Days: *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*
- The Pilgrimage Festivals: *Sukkot*, *Pesach* and *Shavuot*

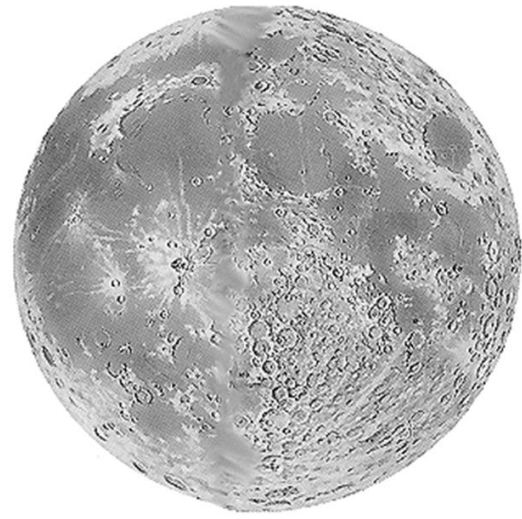
Introduction to the Jewish Festivals

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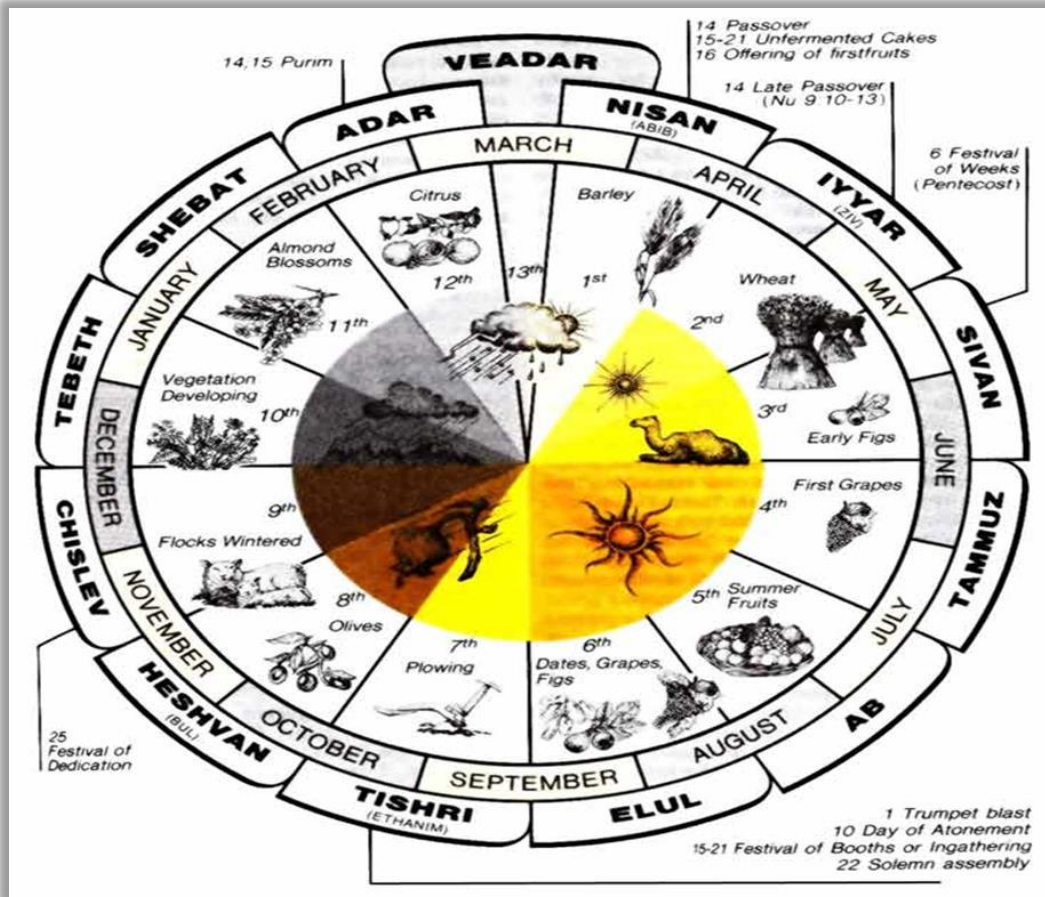
- The festivals designed to call to mind God's activity in nature and/or history.
- Historical events not just commemorated but recreated and re-lived.
- Emphasis on the festivals as 'sacred time', distinct from regular time.

The Jewish Calendar

- A lunar calendar based on a twelve-month year.
- Each month begins with a New Moon (*Rosh Khodesh*).
- Ritual calendar forces believers to think in a deliberate manner about the religious festivals. Creates sacred time distinct from ordinary time.



The Jewish Calendar



The Festivals as ‘Sacred Time’

‘Rejoice during your festival, you and your sons and your daughters, your male and female slaves, as well as the Levites, the strangers, the orphans, and the widows resident in your towns’ (Deut. 16:14-15).

‘...rejoicing on a festival is a *mitzvah*. For it was taught, Rabbi Eliezer said: A person has nothing else to do on a festival, only either to eat and drink or to sit and study. Rabbi Yehoshua said: Divide half of [the day] for eating and drinking and half of it to the house of study’ (*B. Tal. Pesachim* 68b).

The Major Festivals

- 5 major festivals, all of which are biblically-mandated: *Rosh Hashanah*; *Yom Kippur*; *Sukkot*; *Pesach*; *Shavuot*.
- Apart from *Yom Kippur*, each major festival is a *yom tov* (literally, ‘a good day’).
- As well as the prohibition against work, a *yom tov* characterized by: ceremonial meals; special prayers and synagogue rituals; ceremonies and customs related to the subject of the festival.

The Pilgrimage Festivals

- Sukkot, Pesach and Shavuot known as the 'Pilgrimage Festivals'.
- In ancient times, Jews would make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem on these occasions in order to bring offerings to the temple.
- 'Three times a year all your males shall appear before the LORD your God at the place that he will choose: at the festival of unleavened bread, at the festival of weeks, and at the festival of booths. They shall not appear before the LORD empty-handed' (Deut. 16:16).

The Pilgrimage Festivals

- Originally agricultural in nature:
 - ❖ Pesach (barley harvest)
 - ❖ Shavuot (wheat harvest)
 - ❖ Sukkot (ingathering of crops such as grapes and other fruits)
- These festivals also commemorate three different aspects of the Exodus (this association becomes more pronounced after 70 CE).

The High Holy Days

- The three days of **Rosh Hashanah** and **Yom Kippur** called the 'High Holy Days' or the 'Days of Awe'.
- Considerably different character to the Pilgrimage Festivals, particularly Yom Kippur.
- Solemn rather than joyous occasions.

The Minor Festivals

- All other festivals and fasts in Judaism are ‘minor’ as they are not commanded in the Torah.
- Some of these festivals are modern creations, e.g. Israel’s Independence Day, Jerusalem Reunification Day, Holocaust Remembrance Day.
- Others have more ancient origins, especially *Purim* and *Hanukkah*.

Rosh Hashanah

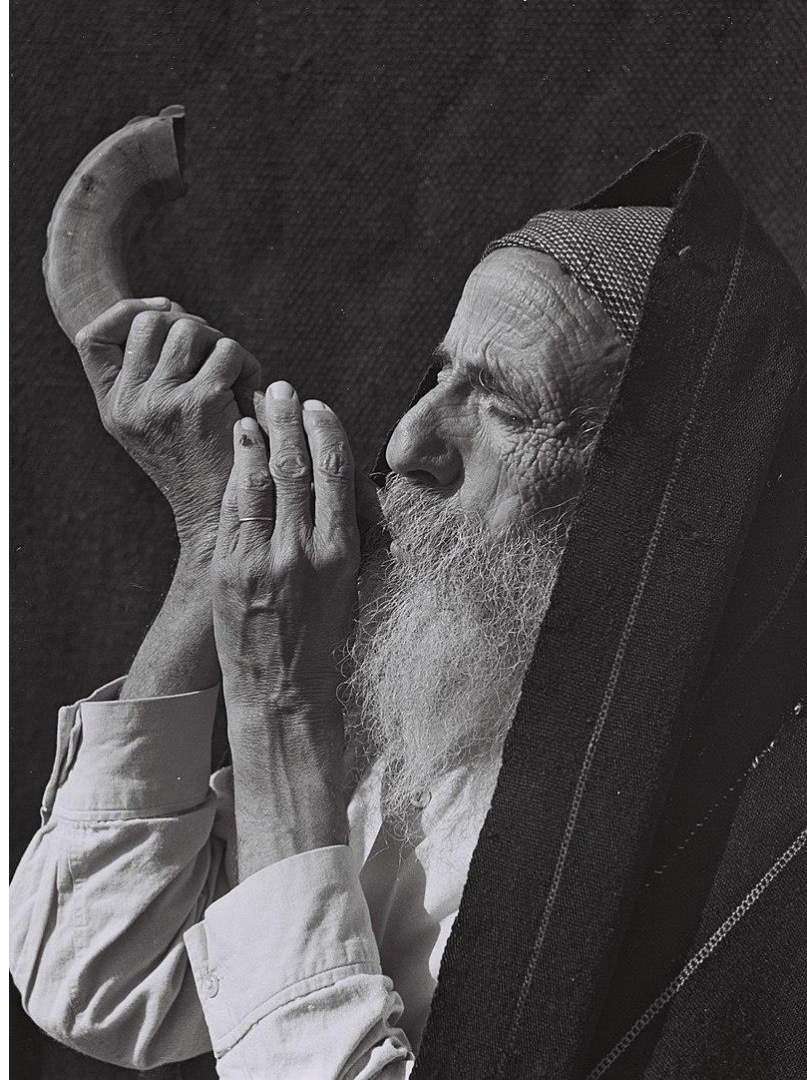
- The Jewish New Year festival (literally, ‘head of the year’).
- Torah commands a festival that is to be a memorial with trumpet blasts (Lev. 23:24; Num. 29:I).
- Humanity said by the rabbis to stand in judgement before God who reviews each person’s deeds of the previous year.
- Also celebrated as the anniversary of the creation of humankind.

Rosh Hashanah: The Biblical Mandate

‘The LORD spoke to Moses saying, “Speak to the people of Israel saying: In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall observe a day of complete rest, **a holy convocation commemorated with trumpet blasts**”’ (Lev. 23:23-24).

- Observed for 2 days, marking the beginning of the **Ten Days of Penitence**.
- Customary to dip the *challah* (braided) bread and certain fruits in honey as a symbol for a sweet new year.
- The shofar blown a total of 100x on each day.





The *Tashlikh* Ceremony



Yom Kippur (The Day of Atonement)

- The culmination of the Ten Days of Penitence.
- The holiest day in the Jewish calendar.
- *Shabbat Shabbaton* ('Sabbath of Sabbaths').
- The observance of Yom Kippur prescribed in the Torah (Lev. 16:27-35; 23:27-32).

Yom Kippur: The Biblical Mandate

‘This shall be a statute to you for ever: In the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall deny yourselves, and shall do no work, neither the citizen nor the alien who resides among you. **For on this day atonement shall be made for you**, to cleanse you; from all your sins you shall be clean before the LORD’ (Lev. 16:29-30).

Yom Kippur in Rabbinic Literature

- Known simply as 'The Day' in the Talmud (*Yoma* 14b).
- The Mishnah gives details of the complex temple services held on this day.
- The 'scapegoat' a striking feature of the temple ceremony.



Yom Kippur and Self-Denial



- The Torah commands that Jews 'deny themselves' on Yom Kippur.
- No sexual intercourse, wearing leather shoes, using cosmetics and lotions, washing the body (except for fingers and eyes), and, chiefly, eating and drinking.

The *Yom Kippur* Fast

The fast serves several purposes:

1. The rabbis stress that Yom Kippur enables human beings to atone for sins against God – a symbol of sacrifice that underlines sincerity of remorse.
2. A display of self-discipline and a sign that the individual can control his/her appetite in all things.
3. Helps the individual to focus on the spiritual rather than the material.
4. Promotes compassion by giving a knowledge of what it means to go hungry, creating an awareness of the need to alleviate suffering in the world.

Yom Kippur Services

- 5 services held over the course of the day.
- Focus on atonement throughout.
- *Kol Nidrei* ('All Vows')
- *Ne'ilah* ('Closing')



Sukkot (Festival of Booths)

- Literally, 'huts' or 'tabernacles'.
- Comes 4 days after Yom Kippur.
- Essentially an autumn harvest festival in which Jews are reminded of their dependence on God.
- Biblical roots of Sukkot found in Lev. 23:33-44, where Jews are commanded to commemorate God's protection of the Israelites during their 40yr sojourn in the desert.

Sukkot: The Biblical Mandate

‘The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: “Speak to the people of Israel, saying: On the fifteenth day of this seventh month, and lasting seven days, there shall be the festival of booths to the LORD...**You shall live in booths for seven days**; all that are citizens in Israel shall live in booths, so that your generations may know that I made the people of Israel live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt”’ (Lev. 23:33-44).



On the basis of the biblical passage, Jews obliged to dwell in a *sukkah*, a temporary booth, throughout the festival. This is so as to recall the journey of the ancient Israelites through the desert on the way to the Promised Land.



- Sukkot also one of the Pilgrimage Festivals.
- Retains its significance as a harvest festival.
- A distinctive feature of the festival is the ritual of holding in the hand four plants. These four plants understood to be symbols of God's provision.
- 'On the first day you shall take the fruit of majestic trees, branches of palm trees, boughs of leafy trees, and willows of the brook; and you shall rejoice before the LORD your God for seven days' (Lev. 23:40).

Pesach (Passover)

- One of the best known Jewish festivals, celebrated between 15-22 *Nisan*.
- Commemorates one of the central events in Jewish sacred history: the liberation of the Jews from slavery in Egypt.
- 10 plagues (Exod. 7-12). The last plague: the death of all first-born sons (11:4-8; 12:29-32).



Waters Turn to Blood
Exodus 7:14-25



Amphibians (Frogs)
Exodus 7:26-8:11



Gnats (Lice)
Exodus 8:12-15



Flies
Exodus 8:16-28



Disease on Livestock
Exodus 9:1-7

The Ten Plagues of Egypt



Unhealable Boils
Exodus 9:8-12



Hail and Fire
Exodus 9:13-35



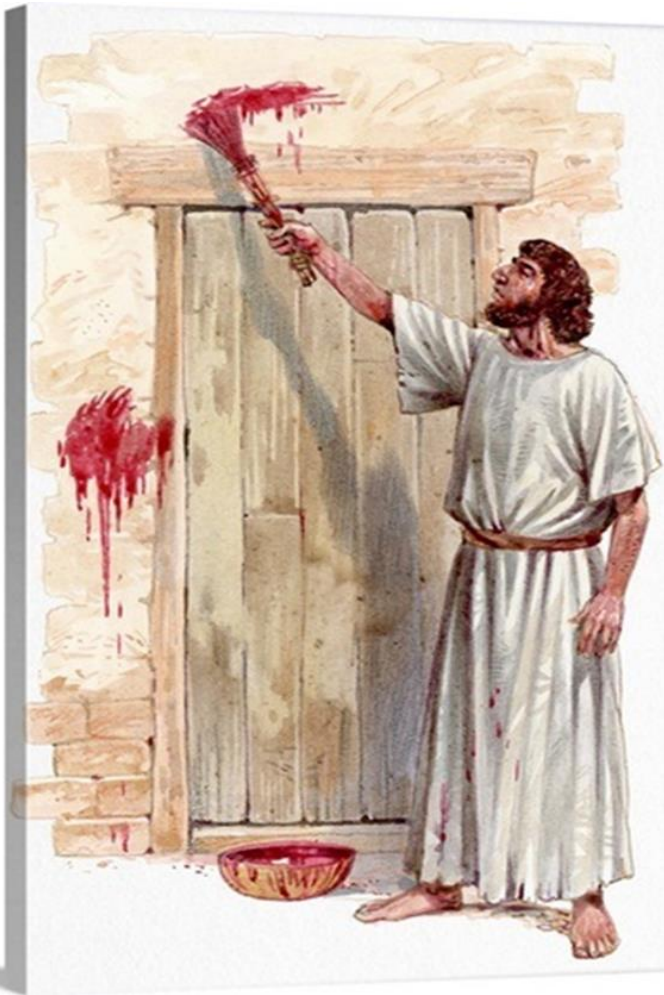
Locusts
Exodus 10:1-20



Darkness
Exodus 10:21-29



Death of First-Born
Exodus 11:1-12:36



- Every Israelite family instructed to sacrifice and eat a lamb before leaving Egypt (Exod. 12:3-6).
 - The Israelites instructed to mark their doorways with the blood of the lamb (Exod. 12:13, 21-22).
- When God saw the blood on the doors, he 'passed over' (Exod. 12: 13, 23, 27).
- The Torah commands Israelites to sacrifice a lamb every year to commemorate this event (Exod. 12: 25-27; Deut. 16:1-8).

Pesach: The Biblical Mandate

‘When you come to the land that the LORD will give you, as he has promised, you shall keep this observance. And when your children ask you, “What do you mean by this observance?” you shall say, “It is the passover sacrifice to the LORD, for he passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt, when he struck down the Egyptians but spared our houses”’ (Exod. 12:26-27).

Pesach as One of the Pilgrimage Festivals

- Pesach also marks the start of the barley harvest in Israel.
- The festival also called *Hag ha-Matzot* (“The Festival of Unleavened Bread”) – refers to the unleavened bread (*matzah*) baked by the Israelites on their departure from Egypt (see Exod. 12:34).
- Israelites commanded to avoid eating leavened bread during future Pesach celebrations (Exod. 13:3; see also 12:17-20).
- Jews continue to avoid eating of all forms of *chametz* (leavened foods) during Passover.

The Search for *Chametz*





The first night of Pesach celebrated with a ceremonial meal known as the *Seder*. The meal involves a retelling of the Israelites' liberation from slavery in Egypt, during which time the participants partake in symbolic foods. This is done to fulfil the biblical command for Jews to relate the story of the Exodus to their children (Exod. 13:8).

The Symbolic Foods of the Passover Seder

3 **Matzot**: the middle matzah represents the ‘bread of affliction’. The larger part broken is called the *afikomen* (‘dessert’) and takes the place of the Passover lamb.

Four cups of wine: symbolizing the four expressions of redemption in Exod. 6:6-7.

Lamb shankbone (*Zeroa*): again representing the Passover Lamb formerly sacrificed in the Temple (Exod. 12).

Charoset: a paste of apple, walnuts, dates etc. recalling the bricks and mortar used in slavery in Egypt.

Roasted egg (*Beitzah*): representing the burnt offering made in the temple before the Passover Lamb was sacrificed.

Bitter Herbs (*Maror* i.e. horseradish): representing the bitterness of slavery in Egypt (see Exod. 12:8).

Chazeret (*romaine lettuce*): also representing bitter herbs.

Kapras (*parsley or celery*): representing the hyssop used to paint the doors with the blood of the lamb.

Salt water: representing the tears shed by the Israelites in slavery.

Shavuot (Festival of Weeks)

- From the 2nd day of Pesach (the day of the *Omer* offering), the Torah instructs to count seven weeks before the first fruits of the wheat harvest are offered in the temple, giving the name *Shavuot* ('weeks').
- The only major festival mandated solely on agricultural basis: 'You shall count until the day after the seventh sabbath, fifty days; then you shall present an offering of new grain to the LORD' (Lev. 23:16).

The Historical Significance of Shavuot



- ❖ Thanks to the early rabbis, the festival developed a more historical association.
- ❖ The date of Shavuot (6-7 *Sivan*) said to coincide with the anniversary of the giving of the Torah to Moses on Mount Sinai (see, for example *Shabbat* 86b).
- ❖ Shavuot thus dedicated to the idea of Torah study and Jewish education.
- ❖ *Tikkun Leil Shavuot*