

Jewish Customs and Practices

Teacher Background

The Feast of Trumpets

The Feast of Trumpets (Rosh Hashanah) was celebrated at the beginning of the month Tishri. As Tishri is the seventh month of the Biblical calendar, it the Sabbath as a special and holy time to seek God. The previous month of Elul is the time of preparation just as Friday is the Day of Preparation for Shabbat. This season is a time of reflection, contemplation and putting things in order and getting right our relationship with God. Rosh Hashanah marks the new year of the Jewish calendar. It recalls God's creation of the world. It is both a joyous and a solemn holiday. The ram's horn (shofar) is blown ritually to serve as the beginning of ten days of repentance which culminates in Yom Kippur. Read Leviticus 23:23-25.

Shabbat

The fourth of the Ten Commandments is "Remember the Sabbath Day and Keep it Holy" (Exodus 20:8). Observant Jews do not perform any work on the Sabbath, which is spent in prayer and religious study. The Hebrews call the Sabbath "Shabbat". Shabbat is a day devoted to rest, reflection, prayer and Torah study. The tradition of lighting candles to begin and end the Sabbath started in a very practical way. Scripture says, "You shall not kindle a fire in any of your dwellings on the Sabbath day" (Exodus 35:3). In ancient times, the only form of light available at night was an oil lamp or candle. In order to have the supply of oil burn longer into the Sabbath, the lamps were lit at the very last moment before the Sabbath began – at or before the beginning of sundown. Once they burned out, they could not be relit until after the Sabbath was over. The Romans ridiculed the Jews for wasting away a seventh of their lives in idleness. The Sabbath also interfered with the institution of slavery. The master was not in complete control of his slave; for one day at least the slave was subject to God's will and not to the will of his master. **Read Exodus 20:1, 8-11.**

The Feast of Tabernacles

The Feast of Tabernacles in Bible Times was a week's celebration of the harvest when the Jews lived in temporary shelters of branches to remember God's care for the Hebrews during their journey from Egypt to Canaan. The festival is called Succot in Hebrew and is a commemoration of the wandering of the Israelites in the wilderness before they received the Torah. It is also a final harvest festival before the winter rains, commemorating the booths in which the Israelites resided during their 40 years in the wilderness. It is an eight-day holiday. It is customary to build a structure called a Succah as a symbol of the types of structures the Israelites lived in while in the desert.

As The Feast of Tabernacles approached, the entire Jewish nation started making preparations. Work crews were sent to repair roads and bridges for the thousands of pilgrims coming to Jerusalem. During the festival many Jews eat (and sleep, as well) in the booths or huts, which are built in the five days between Yom Kippur and this festival. The Feast of Tabernacles is by far the most festive and joyous of occasions. History records that four huge candelabra were constructed, lit and attended by young men ascending ladders periodically with pitchers of oil to keep them burning. The light from these lamps illuminated the whole city and around them danced distinguished men with torches in their hands, singing hymns and songs of praise. **Read Leviticus 23:33-43**

Yom Kippur

This is the holiest day of the Jewish calendar. It is considered by Jews to be the day in which every individual is judged by God and thus it is a solemn day marked by fasting, prayer and repentance. Also called Day of Atonement. Yom Kippur is a time to atone for sin. While fasting is not explicitly

mentioned, the Bible ordains for this day, "You shall afflict your souls" (Lev. 16:31; 23:27-32; Num. 29:7) and from early times the rabbis interpreted this to mean fasting. Part of the "affliction of the soul" included five statutory rules of mortification. These were abstention from: food and drink, marital relations, wearing leather shoes, using cosmetics and lotions, and washing any part of the body other than the fingers and eyes. The pleasure of such bodily comforts is seen as a prime source of opposing the "affliction of one's soul." In Biblical times, rending one's garments and putting on sackcloth and ashes were further signs of distress, accompanying abstention from food (Jonah 3:6; Ezek. 9:5). In other cases the fasting is clearly implied (Josh. 7:5-13; Jer. 6:26; Lam. 2:10).

The high priest was entirely responsible for the Day of Atonement. He began preparing for this day a week early. He stayed in the high priest chamber in the temple court and studied the laws of the Day of Atonement. It was very important the priest not make a mistake. An error could cost him his life. The high priest spoke a word this day that was unspeakable all other times. During the services he voiced the Holy name of God, YHWH or Yahweh ten times during the ceremony. When the people heard the Holy Name they fell on the ground in reverence. Read Leviticus 23:26-32

Passover

An eight-day festival commemorating the freeing of the Israelites from Egyptian bondage, and their exodus from Egypt. A ritual feast on the first two nights of this holiday, called a Seder, includes the recounting of the Passover story. The dinner celebration is called a Seder. The Passover Seder is a meal with special foods, practices, and Scripture readings that commemorate the liberation from Egyptian slavery, in accordance with God's instructions (Lev. 23:1,4, Exod. 12:14,24-27).

The name of the festival, Pesach in Hebrew, passing over or protection, is derived from the instructions given to Moses by God (Ex. 6:6-8). Passover is the time of beginnings for Israel. This festival ushers in the coming of spring on the Jewish calendar. It is celebrated on the fourteenth day of Abib (the first month of the Jewish religious calendar, later called Nisan). Each of the three pilgrimage festivals Passover, Pentecost and the Feast of Tabernacles has an agricultural basis as well as an historical significance. Many different things are celebrated during Passover. A few of these include: the end of the rainy season and the beginning of the growing season, the new lambing time and the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt during Passover. **Read Exodus 12:1-49.**

Shavuot

Shavuot, the Feast of the Weeks, is the Jewish holiday celebrating the harvest season in Israel. Shavuot, which means "weeks", refers to the timing of the festival which is held exactly 7 weeks after Passover. Shavuot also commemorates the anniversary of the giving of the Ten Commandments to Moses and the Israelites at Mount Sinai.

Shavuot is known also as Yom Habikkurim, or 'the Day of the First Fruits', because it is the time the farmers of Israel would bring their first harvest to Jerusalem as a token of thanksgiving. The farmers of Israel would begin their spring harvests with the barley crop at Passover. The harvest continued for seven weeks as the other crops and fruits began to ripen. As each fruit ripened, the first of each type would not be eaten but instead the farmer would tie a ribbon around the branch. This ribbon signified that these fruits were Bikkurim, or the first fruits.

At Shavuot, the farmers would gather the Bikkurim into baskets and bring them to the city of Jerusalem where they would be eaten in the holy city. The farmers living close to Jerusalem would bring fresh fruits, while those who had to travel a long distance carried dried raisins and figs. This joyful occasion was celebrated with the music of fifes, timbres, and drums. As the pilgrims approached the city walls they were greeted by the inhabitants of the city. **Read Leviticus 23:15-22.**