

## ANNUAL JEWISH FESTIVALS

**Passover** (Ex.23:16; Lev.23:33-43) - Each spring (March/April) in the first month of the agricultural Jewish year (*Nisan*), this joyful celebration is held to remember God's miraculous rescue of Israel from slavery in Egypt. On the first Passover, each Israelite family sacrificed a lamb and painted its blood on the doorposts of their home to protect them from the Angel of Death, who killed the first-born children and animals in every home in Egypt that did not have the lamb's blood painted over its door. That night the Israelites ate a special dinner of lamb and unleavened bread, together with other foods prescribed by God. The celebration is and always has been a reenactment of that pivotal occasion in Israel's history and is centered on the family meal at which the story of God liberating the Israelites from slavery in Egypt is told. [Today, the few remaining Samaritans still sacrifice Passover lambs in the old way. Jews have not done so since the Temple was destroyed in 70 AD.]

**Unleavened Bread** (Ex.23:19; Lev.23:9-14, 33-43) - This week-long festival (March/April) begins the day after Passover and continues for 7 days. During this time, all bread must be unleavened to remember the haste with which the Israelites left Egypt. [No time for bread to rise.] Over time, Passover and the festival of Unleavened Bread began to be observed as a single, long holiday.

**First Fruits/Harvest (a/k/a *Shavu'ot*)** (Ex.23: 16; Lev.23:9-14, 15-21; Deut. 26:1-11)- Judaism's spring holidays occurred during the first month of the year (*Nisan*), which was based on the agricultural cycle. The concept of "first fruits" derives from the principle that the first-born of man and beast belonged to God and were devoted to Him. So too, were the first grains to ripen each season; hence, they were to be brought as an offering to God. In practice, the celebration of first fruits marked the beginning of spring. The first fruits of the barley harvest were celebrated on the 2<sup>nd</sup> day of Passover. No barley could be sold or consumed until the "first fruits" were offered, together with a sacrifice and thanks to God. [Barley was the first grain to ripen in Israel; wheat ripened later.]

Over time, Jewish observance of this festival has varied, but in early times, it involved a major ritual where the priest met the worshippers at the city gate and began a praise service with Hallel psalms and dance as the worshippers went

up to the Temple. The priest waved barley sheaves in the air, acknowledging God's provision and His sovereignty over the earth.

**Pentecost/First Fruits/Feast of Weeks-** Pentecost (June) also was a first fruits festival, which occurred 7 weeks/50 days after Passover. It celebrated the wheat harvest and thanked the Lord for these later first fruits. 7 lambs were sacrificed in this single day festival to thank God for His provision.

Later, Pentecost also became a celebration of God's gift of the Law to Moses since it was believed that God gave the Law on Sinai 50 days after Passover. (Sadducees and Pharisees dated this festival differently.)

**Trumpets (a/k/a *Rosh HaShanah*)-** (Lev.23:23-25; Num.29:1)- On the 1<sup>st</sup> day of the 7<sup>th</sup> month of the Jewish year (September/October- *Tishri*), the ram's horn was sounded. Although the Jewish year officially began in spring (*Nisan*) with the barley harvest, over time, the fall festivals became so significant that the 1<sup>st</sup> *shabbat* of the fall holidays was considered the spiritual new year and the festival name was changed to *Rosh HaShanah* (Head of the Year) from *Yom Teruah* (Day of Sounding/Festival of Trumpets).

The day is one of repentance when people take stock of their spiritual condition and begin a 10-day period of repentance that culminates with *Yom Kippur*. No work is done on that day. [Some have expanded the time of spiritual preparation to 40 days, including the entire preceding month, *Elul*, plus *Rosh HaShanah* and the next 10 days through *Yom Kippur*.]

**Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*)** (Lev.16; 23:26-32)- This feast falls on the 10<sup>th</sup> day of the 7<sup>th</sup> month (*Tishri*). It is the most holy day of the Jewish year- a day of repentance, self-denial and fasting for all Jews. No work can be done. (September/October).

Before the fall of the Temple, on each *Yom Kippur*, the High Priest made the required annual sacrifices for his sins and for those of the people. Among other sacrifices, the High Priest took 2 goats. 1, called *Chatat*. was sacrificed symbolically covering the sins of Israel. The other goat, called '*Az'azel*/scapegoat, was set free in the wilderness symbolically taking away the sins of the nation.

This was the only day any human could enter the Holy of Holies. Only the High Priest could go into the Holy of Holies to sprinkle the blood of atonement. This ritual reminded Israel of its sins and their need for forgiveness.

**Shelters/Booths/Tabernacles/Ingathering (a/k/a *Sukkot*)** (Ex.23:16; Lev.23:33-43) - This is the last of 3 major festivals occurring during the first 19 days of *Tishri* (late September/October). It occurs 5 days after *Yom Kippur*, on the 15<sup>th</sup> day of the 7<sup>th</sup> month, and it lasts for 7 days, with a convocation on the 8<sup>th</sup> day. During the festival, no work is to be done (although, except on days 1 and 8, the requirement of no work is not as stringent as on *Yom Kippur*.)

Originally, the festival celebrated the fall fruit tree harvest, especially grapes and olives. Later, *Sukkot* also became a remembrance of God's protection of Israel during their Wilderness wanderings after the Exodus. During this festival, 14 lambs (twice 7) and 70 bullocks were offered daily. Originally, Israelites camped in makeshift shelters ("lean-tos") in the Tabernacle courtyard. Later, anywhere in Jerusalem sufficed. Today, some camp in their yards or on the balconies of their apartments. (Actually, Israelites lived in tents in the Wilderness, but at harvest time they lived in booths in the fields.)

### **OTHER FESTIVALS ESTABLISHED LATER**

2 other festivals not contained in the Law were established later, largely as a matter of Jewish nationalism, like Independence Day. They arose out of post-exilic events. Both continue to be observed and loved by Jews today.

**Purim** (*Esther* 9)- (March/April) The name means "lots/dice," which refers to the day the Persians were to be allowed to slaughter all the Jews. The festival commemorates the intervention of Queen Esther which delivered the Jews from this wicked plot. (c. 450 BC) It is a festival of joy and merriment which generally lasts 1-day festival, but in ancient walled city, like Jerusalem, it lasted 2 days.

**Dedication/Hannukah-** (*1 and 2 Maccabees*)- (December) This annual festival, which falls roughly around Christmastime and celebrates the retaking and cleansing of the Temple by Judas Maccabee after it had been desecrated by the evil Antiochus Epiphanes. (167 BC) The festival lasts 8 days, the number of days the lamps/menorah in the Holy Place miraculously remained lit.