

Jewish High Holy Days
Genesis 21:1-21
September 16, 2007

This past week marked the beginning of sacred seasons in the religious traditions of Judaism and Islam. Jews marked the beginning of a month full of four significant festivals, starting with Rosh Hashanah. Muslims marked the beginning of the month of Ramadan, a season of fasting. Next week we will consider the observance of Ramadan; today we look at the Jewish High Holy Days.

In the Jewish calendar, the year is 5,768. This number represents the number of years since creation, calculated by adding up the ages of people listed in the Bible back to the time of creation. When the Hebrew Scriptures offer genealogical information, it often goes something like this: Adam had lived 130 years when he became the father of Seth; after he became the father of Seth, he lived 800 years and had other sons and daughters; all the days that Adam lived were 930 years; and he died (Gen. 5:3-5). Checking this number would be a great exercise for our math wizards! However, this does not necessarily mean that the universe has existed for only 5,700 years as we understand years. Most Jews will readily acknowledge that the first six “days” of creation described in Genesis are not 24-hour days as we know them. Nor are the years people lived necessarily based upon our 365 day calendar.

The Jewish calendar is lunisolar. The months are in sync with the phases of the moon and the years are in accordance with the circuit of the sun. A solar year is longer than a lunar year by about 11 days. The festivals are also fixed by both the moon and by the agricultural seasons. Thus, some adjustments are made on a regular basis so that the spring festival of Passover will always occur in the spring.

The first month of the year is called Nisan and falls in the season of spring. However, the New Year festival falls in the seventh month, known as Tishri. As the seventh month in the year, it is a sabbatical month, a month full of festivals and holy days, a month for spiritual renewal.

The New Year festival is called Rosh Hashanah and falls on the new moon. The holy day is marked by the blowing of a ram’s horn, the shofar. The horn blasts symbolize the need to awaken from spiritual slumber and return to God. This year our Jewish neighbors began Rosh Hashanah last Wednesday evening.

Jews commonly greet one another during this period with the blessing, “May you be written and sealed [in the Divine Book of Life] for a

good year.” On Rosh Hashanah, it is traditional to dip apples in honey and to pray for a year of sweet renewal. It is also an old custom among Jews to buy new clothes for the New Year. This is one way in which the theme of newness is dramatically expressed.

Rosh Hashanah is the first of what are known as Ten Days of Awe or Ten Days of Repentance. This sacred time includes intense self-examination and a turning away from misdeeds toward renewal of a holy life-path. Jews offer restitution to victims of their misdeeds. They offer forgiveness to those who have harmed them. They lift prayers seeking God’s forgiveness for whatever they cannot correct.

Rosh Hashanah includes the reading of two powerful and painful passages of Torah. Torah literally means “instruction,” and is used to refer to the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, also known as the Five Books of Moses. We heard one of the passages this morning. Abraham and Sarah send forth Abraham’s second wife, Hagar, and their son, Ishmael, from the family into the wilderness where they almost die of thirst. At the last moment, they are saved by the appearance of a wellspring, the “Well of the Living One Who Sees Me.”

The second story read on Rosh Hashanah is the 22nd chapter of Genesis, in which God calls on Abraham to make of his and Sarah’s son Isaac an offering to God. Abraham responds by taking Isaac to a mountaintop where he prepares him for ritual sacrifice. At the last moment, God’s messenger intervenes, and Abraham sacrifices a ram instead. He names the place, “the Lord Sees,” and future generations call it “The Mount Where the Lord is Seen.”

Today this site is known as the Temple Mount in the old city of Jerusalem, which includes places sacred to all three religions that trace their ancestry to Abraham. The only remains of the second Jewish temple are there, known as the Western or Wailing Wall. The Dome of the Rock is an Islam shrine built upon the rock traditionally thought to be the place where Abraham was called to sacrifice Isaac. The Muslims have also built the Aqsa mosque on the Temple Mount. Nearby these sites, Christians have constructed the Church of the Holy Sepulchre upon the traditional site of Jesus’ execution, burial, and resurrection.

These stories and their setting are especially poignant in a generation when the traditional offspring of Abraham and Sarah through Isaac, the Jewish people, and the traditional offspring of Abraham and Hagar through Ishmael, the Arab people, are in deep conflict with one another. In this sacred season for both religions, we would hope that they could respect one another’s sacred rituals; however, that does not necessarily happen.

The tenth day of the month of Tishri is Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. It consists of 26 hours of prayer and fasting in repentance and forgiveness. The traditional biblical readings include prophetic passages from Isaiah 57:14 to 58:14 in which God calls upon the people to fulfill the fast not merely by refraining from food but by feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, housing the homeless and freeing prisoners. It is a day to affirm the commitment to choose life.

The liturgy of Yom Kippur begins a little before sunset on the tenth day and, following a night of pause, continues from early the next morning through sunset of that day. This Day of Awe focuses on self-examination, repentance, and the need for God-centeredness. In ancient times the High Priest selected a goat and symbolically placed on the animal all the sins and guilt of the people and then drove it out into the wilderness – the “scapegoat.” That ritual is no longer practiced. Instead the emphasis is on repentance, prayer, giving charity, and new beginnings. It is understood that the prayers and ritual of Yom Kippur only atone for sins between the individual and God, not for sins between one person and another. Therefore the days before Yom Kippur are devoted to seeking personal forgiveness from or reconciliation with members of one’s family and community.

The book of the prophet Jonah is read on this day. Like Jonah, the worshipers undergo an inner process of death and rebirth. Recently, some congregations, recognizing the need for conscious reconciliation between the children of Abraham’s two families, have included the reading of the passage in Genesis 25:9-18 in which Isaac and Ishmael are reunited in burying their father Abraham, and reconcile their lives thereafter.

This holy day ends with a final burst of joy at the possibility of new beginnings and the sense of divine forgiveness. A final blast of the shofar is sounded, this time a triumphant blast proclaiming one fellowship under One God. At the close of worship friends and family gather for a festive meal that symbolizes the social solidarity of the community.

The Ten Days of Awe or Repentance have themes similar to our Christian season of Lent. Lent is a springtime of the spirit. It is meant to be a time of self-examination, when we recognize how we have strayed from God and make a commitment to return to God through intentional spiritual practices. It is a time of beginning again and renewing our relationship with God. From the time of the early church, it has been a season for the preparation of new Christians, culminating with their baptism on Easter. At their baptism they put on a new white robe, symbolizing their new life in Christ. I appreciate the Jewish emphasis on making restitution for our

mistakes and offering forgiveness to those who have wronged us. These are similar to the twelve step process in which amends are made for offenses to others. These are practices about which we Christians might be more intentional. Addressing the wrongs of the past enables us to focus our energies on new beginnings. We share the common call of God to turn our lives in more just, peaceful, and holy directions.

At the full moon of Tishri, on the fifteenth day, begins the seven-day harvest festival of Sukkoth. Jews build, eat, and may even sleep in huts with leafy and leaky roofs – vulnerable houses in which they experience the shelter of God’s grace. The openness of the hut to the sky symbolizes the fragility of all earthly constructions and the dependence of all creatures upon our Creator.

Traditionally, the prayers and blessings of the festival sought the prosperity for all the “seventy nations” of the world. On each day of the festival, Jews have welcomed both mystical guests – seven emanations and aspects of God represented by seven of the leading men and women of the Bible – and flesh-and-blood guests into the Sukkah.

Finally, on the 23rd and 24th days of the month, as the moon wanes, comes the double festival: Shi’mini Atzeret, the “Eighth Day of Completion,” and Simchat Torah, “Joy of the Sacred Wisdom.” On Simchat Torah, the very last passage of the Five Books of Moses, recounting Moses’ death, is read. Then at once the beginning of the Torah, the story of the Creation of the world is read. In some congregations, the entire Torah Scroll is unrolled and held aloft in a great circle, so that the last passages and the first stand side by side.

The four festivals of Tishri fulfill two spirals of sacred time: the yearly spiral of the Torah reading and the spiral of moving from death to rebirth. Having completed the reading of the Torah throughout the year, they return once again to its beginning. But spiritually they do not begin at the same place, for they have spent the sabbatical month reflecting on, repenting for, and renewing the meaning of the year just past. And at the moment when they lose the highest, deepest spiritual guide, Moses, they move to the radiance of renewal, for God is constantly re-creating the world.

Harvard theologian Harvey Cox married a Jewish woman and each of them participates in the religious rituals and observances of the other. Cox has written a book about his experience entitled, *Common Prayers* (Houghton Mifflin, 2001). He observes, “The first things a Christian notices that Judaism is that it is not about creed, it is about calendar. What binds

Jews is not a confessional statement like the Apostle's Creed. It is the sounding of the Shofar, the lighting of the menorah. It is the annual return of Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and Passover." Each act and gesture of ritual is part of a vast organic web of meaning and significance.

In growing in our understanding and respect of Judaism, we deepen our appreciation of the roots of our Christian faith. We recognize our differences and our rich similarities. We celebrate the One God revealed to us in different ways.

Resources

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Fishbane, Michael A. *Judaism: Revelation and Traditions*. Harper & Row, San Francisco, 1987.

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