

THE FEAST OF TABERNACLES - SUKKOT

Teaching Text: Lev. 23:33-43

Additional Texts: Numbers 29:12-34; Deuteronomy 16: 13-17; Nehemiah 8:15-18; Zechariah 14:16-19; John 7 & 8.

Historical and Thematic focus of the Feast: The Feast of Tabernacles (Feast of Ingathering or Booths) is a celebration of thanksgiving for the final ingathering or harvest from the fields, orchards, and vineyard. This celebration takes place on the fifteenth through the twenty first day of the seventh month Tishri (September/October). Tabernacles is one of the three major harvest feasts which Adonai required all Jewish males to celebrate in Jerusalem for a special encounter with and visitation from Adonai. Adonai *commanded* that the observance of this feast be a celebration of *JOY*.

This was a holiday of rejoicing to be *celebrated by building a 'booth'* which was to be their temporary home during these seven days of the feast. Living in this temporal dwelling was to remind them of their 'total' dependence upon Adonai during the forty year wilderness journey, of His protection and provision. The 'sukkah' (booth) also had a prophetic element of teaching which points toward the *Messianic Kingdom* and reminds us that we are merely pilgrims (strangers) on this earth.

Traditional Observance:

Within modern Jewish community there are two distinct observance connected with the Feast of Tabernacles.

i) ***Building of the Sukkah*** – The day after Yom Kippur it is common to begin building the sukkah or booth. This is to be a temporary residence where the family can visit, dine and sleep throughout the Feast of Tabernacles. According to tradition the roof is to be made of vegetative materials (preferably palm branches) so that the stars can be seen at night giving it the sense of its temporary nature. Once construction is completed the inside of the booth is usually decorated with flowers, fruit (including pomegranates and grape clusters), nuts gourds, pictures and tapestries.

The act of 'living' in the booth during the Feast of Tabernacles is to be a reminder of the forty years which Israel spent in the wilderness and the temporal nature of daily life on earth. Through this week the participants are reminded that Adonai is our 'source' and that there is another 'home' waiting to receive us for eternity. (Hebrews 11:10, 16; 13:14)

ii) ***Blessing of the Lulav*** – Lulav is a generic term, describing a three-sectioned holder with a single palm branch in the center, two willow branches on the left, and three myrtle branches on the right.¹ The Lulav is combined with the etrog (citron) to fulfill the biblical directive of Leviticus 23:40. This directive is fulfilled during morning prayers when a ritual involving holding and later waving the Lulav and etrog while speaking forth a special blessing.

¹ David B. Syme. *The Jewish Home: A Guide for Jewish Living*. (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc., 1989) 51.

A RABBINIC GEM FOR SUKKOT

According to the Rabbis' the 'Four Species' have a symbolic meaning which relates to four different types of people within the nation of Israel.

"The product of goodly trees" [the etrog] standing for [some men in] Israel: even as the etrog has aroma and edible fruit, so Israel have in their midst men who have knowledge of Torah and also have good deeds.

"Branches of palm trees" also stands for [some men in] Israel: as the palm tree has edible but no aroma, so Israel have in their midst men who have a knowledge of Torah but have not good deeds.

"Boughs of leafy trees." also stands for [some men in] Israel: as the myrtle tree has aroma but has not edible fruit, so Israel have in their midst men who have good deeds but have not Torah.

"Willows of the brook" also stands for [some men in] Israel: even as the willow has neither edible fruit nor aroma, so Israel have in their midst men in whom there is neither knowledge of Torah nor good deeds.

The Holy One says: In order to make it impossible for Israel to be destroyed, let all of them be bound together as plants are bound into a cluster, so that the righteous among them will atone for the others. Hence Moses charged Israel: "Take for your own sake on the first day [a cluster] [Leviticus 23:40]." (Pesikta Rabbati 51:2)

- i) What implications of Jewish thought come through this *Rabbinic Gem*? (Genesis 18:26-32; Jeremiah 5:1; Ezekiel 14:12-20)
- ii) How would biblical based thinking interpret and explain this *Rabbinic Gem* without doing 'violence' to Scripture? (Matthew 5:13; James 2:17)

KEY BIBLICAL EVENTS WHICH TOOK PLACE DURING THIS FEAST:

- The work on the 'tabernacle' began on the Feast of Tabernacles (Exodus 25:8)
- Solomon's Temple was dedicated during the Feast of Tabernacles (I Kings 8:27)
- The Water Gate meeting and the response to the reading of the Law. (Nehemiah 8).
- Yeshua was born on the first day of the Feast of Tabernacles and circumcised on the eighth day ²(John 1:14).

² A.T. Robertson. *A Harmony of the Gospels* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1950) 267.

YESHUA ILLUSTRATES THE ‘SIGNIFICANCE’ OF THE FEAST:

The Apostle John highlights Yeshua’s encounter and explanations of the rituals of the Feast of Tabernacles.

The Water Libation Ceremony: John 7:37-39

The Water Libation Ceremony was a ritual which thanked Adonai for the rain of the past season and requested adequate rains for the upcoming growing year. This ceremony was performed each day of the Feast of Tabernacles during the days of the Second Temple. “Each day of the festival the people came with their palms and willows to the Temple; with them they formed a kind of a screen or roof and marched around the great altar. At the same time a priest took a golden pitcher which held three logs – that is, about two pints [1.136 liters] – and went down to the Pool of Siloam and filled it with water. It was carried back through the Water Gate while the people recited Isaiah 12:3. “*With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.*” The water was carried to the Temple altar and poured out as an offering to Adonai. While this was done *The Hallel* – that is, Psalms 113-118 – was sung to the accompaniment of flutes by the Levite choir. ...the worshipper shouted and waved their palms toward the altar.”³

The account which we read in John 7:37-39 took place during this ceremony on the last day of the Feast when this ritual is brought to its climax by marching around the altar seven times. (It is believed that the seven circuits point back to the taking of Jericho.) It is then that Yeshua stood up and declared that **HE** is the only source that could quench their thirst. The Apostle John informs the reader that Yeshua is referring to the future outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

Within the context of the Water Libation Ceremony the rain represents the Holy Spirit. The prophetic message of the ceremony looks toward the greatest outpouring of the Holy Spirit that the earth will ever experience will occur during the Millennium Kingdom (Talmud, Sukkot 55). Scripture teaches that no rain was a sign of judgement and that the curse of Adonai on the land as well as on the people (Zechariah 14:16-19).

The Illumination of the Temple Ceremony: John 8:12

This ceremony was observed on the evening of the first day of the Feast of Tabernacles. “It took place in the Court of the Women. The court was surrounded with deep galleries, erected to hold the spectators. In the center four great candelabra were prepared. When the dark came the four great candelabra were lit and it was said, they sent such a blaze of light throughout Jerusalem that every courtyard was lit up with their brilliance. Then all night long, until the cock-crow the next morning, the greatest and wisest and the holiest men in Israel danced before the Lord and sang psalms of joy and praise while the people watched.”⁴

It was within this context that Yeshua made His claim to be the “*Light of the World*”. In light of the Scripture references given below what was Yeshua’s true claim that caused a stir amongst the listeners? (Job 29:3; Psalm 27:1; Isaiah 60:19; Micah 7:8 – According

³ William Barclay, *The Gospel of John, Volume I: Chapters 1-7*. The Daily Study Bible (Burlington, ON: Welch Publishing Company, Inc., 1975) 249.

⁴ _____, *The Gospel of John, Volume II: Chapters 8-21*. The Daily Study Bible (Burlington, ON: Welch Publishing Company, Inc., 1975) 11.

to the Jewish religious thinking/understanding He was making a direct claim of Messiahship, implying even deity)

THE MYSTERY OF THE GOSPEL:

The Apostle Paul is given a revelation of the ‘Mystery of the Gospel’ which was at the heart of his calling. This mystery was embedded within the written Torah, foreshadowed in the sacrificial instructions concerning the Feast of Tabernacles of Numbers 29. If you would count the number of bullocks sacrificed during this feast it comes to a total number of seventy. The Rabbis believed that, “The number of bullock, totaling seventy altogether, corresponded to the seventy nations of the world, and they were intended as an atonement for all mankind.”⁵ Every year the Rabbis pray for the salvation of the nations.

The greatest thrust of evangelism will occur when the 144,000 Jews of Revelation seven proclaim the Word during the Tribulation period. When this chapter is read with the Feast of Tabernacles in mind, especially the Water Libation Ceremony, there is an awesome similarity that cannot be merely brushed away. (Revelation 7:9 – waving of palm branches has a ‘tabernacles’ flavour) Take the time to allow the students to reflect upon this concept and bring out its implied meaning. Could this be a foreshadowing of the final ingathering of ‘souls’?

MUSING MOMENT:

When we consider the ‘Feast of Tabernacles’ explain why we could realistically sum up the ideals that it teaches with the single word; Rest?

WHAT DOES THE WORD ‘REST’ MEAN?

Rest means to cease working, exerting oneself, etc., so as to refresh oneself. To cease from effort or activity for a time.⁶ Freedom from activity or labour. To cease from action or motion: refrain from labour or exertion.⁷

How would you explain the sense of ‘*rest*’ in the following Scriptures and their relationship to the Feast of Tabernacles?

Numbers 14:19-23; Matthew 6:33; 11:28-30; Acts 3:19; Galatians 3:10-14; Hebrews 3:7-4:13; Revelation 20:1-6; 21:1-4.

Not a single man/woman will enjoy Adonai’s rest until we learn to walk with Him in unquestioned trust and obedience. This rest is available to us when we allow Him to fully dwell in our midst as Lord and Master of our soul. Then we will enter into ALL that Adonai has promised and the fullness of His covenants will become a reality.

⁵ J. H. Hertz, ed. *Pentateuch & Haftorahs*, 2d ed. (London, Eng: Soncino Press, 1960) 698.

⁶ Sidney I. Landau, ed. *Funk & Wagnalls Standard Desk Dictionary*: 1983 Edition. (Lippincott & Crowell Publishers, 1980) 568.

⁷ Frederick C. Mish, ed. *Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary: Tenth Edition*. (Markham, ON: Thomas Allen & Son Limited, 1993) 998.