

Rosh Hashanah

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Today is *Rosh Hashanah*, which means “the head of the year.” You won’t find it by that name in the Bible though, but you will find it called *Yom T’ruah* (Day of Blowing) in Leviticus 23:23-25. ”Blowing what you ask? *Shofarim* or trumpets of course!

I am going to pause now to put on this white garment called a *kittel*; my reason for putting this on will be made plain toward the end of my message. The *kittel* is a traditional Jewish garment that is worn by the groom at his wedding, at several of the High Holy Days, in some traditions during Passover *seders*, and by a man at the end of his days when he is lowered into the ground. Its special character is that it is plain and not ornate, so that the man who wears it cannot be distinguished according to his wealth or worldly status. It is an equalizer of men.

Now I will proceed.

Rosh Hashanah or *Yom T’ruah* has several themes that it has accrued over the centuries, derived merely from tradition. Its biblical theme of blowing trumpets has to be understood from its Scriptural context because the only thing Leviticus 23 tells us about it is this:

“Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, “Speak to the children of Israel, saying: 'In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall have a sabbath-rest, a memorial of blowing of trumpets, a holy convocation. 'You shall do no customary work on it; and you shall offer an offering made by fire to the LORD.'””

That’s it! Rest, blow trumpets, and offer a sacrifice to the Lord. On all the biblical holy days, sacrifices in the Tabernacle and later in the Temple were very important, yet we cannot do them today. The Scripture doesn’t tell us why trumpets were to be blown, but we can take an educated guess because ten days later came *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement, when a goat was sacrificed to atone for the sins of the community of Israel.

It is fascinating that, over the centuries, the biblical theme of blowing trumpets has had so many other themes added to it, and that the day’s name that caught on in the Jewish Community was Rosh HaShannah. Some of these added themes are the anniversary of the creation of the world, and the day that books of our spiritual account are opened in heaven for God’s judgment.

There are many traditions that have been attached to Rosh HaShannah such as:

1. We wish each other *l’Shannah Tovah* (To a good year!) or “May you be written in the Book of Life for a good year!”
2. We celebrate with sweet foods like apples dipped in honey, and honey cakes, symbolic of our desire for a sweet year. Other traditional foods are pomegranates and carrots.

3. We reshape our *challah* bread during this season from the traditionally braided *challah* to the round spiral *challah* with added honey and raisins.
4. We celebrate *Tashlich* – tossing bread or stones into a large body of water to symbolize the casting away of our sins. We’re going to do that this afternoon.
5. We blow the *shofar* to alert us of our need to repent of our sins.
6. We read about the binding of Isaac in *Bereshit*, the Book of Genesis.

Now let me return to the biblical meaning of today – *Yom T’ruah*. The ancients of Israel noticed that trumpets were sounded ten days before the atoning sacrifice for Israel on *Yom Kippur* and concluded, probably correctly, that the days in between should serve as a time of spiritual preparation – a time of searching for and repenting of sin in oneself because the *Yom Kippur* sacrifice was of no value if it was not accompanied by repentance.

The leaders of Israel were not exempt from needing to repent and, in fact, tradition has it that the High Priest was isolated during this time so that he might search his soul, repent of sin, and perhaps be able to enter the Holy of Holies and come back out alive. But unlike the High Priest of old, we have no Temple in which to sacrifice, so how should we respond to *Yom T’ruah*? One possibility is to forget it. The problem is though, that 2 Timothy 3:16-17 teaches us:

“All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.”

Well, if we can’t fulfill the Scripture as commanded and can’t ignore it either, what are we to do? The Jews who lived immediately after the Temple’s destruction in 70 AD had to answer the same question. Those who believed in Yeshua had an answer to it because they were not without a sacrifice for sin; their sacrifice was Yeshua as it is for us. Those who did not believe in Yeshua, the forerunners of Rabbinical Judaism, had no such answer so they began to teach that God really didn’t want animals to be sacrificed; what God wanted were substitutes such as keeping the 613 *mitzvoth*, giving *tz’dakah* (charity), and performing good deeds. Even so, both groups of Jews continued to use the period from *Yom T’ruah* to *Yom Kippur* as a time of reflection and personal repentance. And so it is with us.

It happens that on this *Yom T’ruah*, we of Ohev are just coming out of a period of prayer, fasting and repentance to rid our congregation of unclean spirits we perceived had been attacking us. So far so good, for we have already seen recoveries from sickness, and a thirst among some of us to return to a life of intercessory prayer. And I have been looking forward to addressing you this *Yom T’ruah* with a message of victory, and thanksgiving, and with a light heart. But God stopped me and directed me to tell you that what we began several weeks ago as a prayer project is not yet done.

Please understand that when I say I received direction from God I mean just that, so you should consider what follows in this message to be a Word of prophecy that I believe God wants you to

hear and take to heart. And because it is offered as a Word of prophecy, it has to be discerned by the elders and by each of you for its truth; I was unable to submit it to the elders ahead of time because I received it just yesterday morning, but I did share it with a pastor with whom I had lunch later in the day and who knows much of the history of this congregation.

I told him I did not want to deliver this message tomorrow on Rosh Hashanah because it contained admonishments to the congregation; I told him that we typically have visitors in our midst on Rosh Hashanah and we would dearly like them to visit us again. I also told him that I was more sure of the accuracy of my message than I was of the timing of delivering it, and I was concerned that my flesh could be leading me astray; perhaps I should delay delivering my message until another day.

We talked over several Scriptures including the one where all but two of the leaders of Israel that Moses sent to search out Canaan, acting out of fear, gave Moses a report of there being giants in the land in the hope of persuading him to play it safe and not enter the land of promise. And we recounted how only Joshua and Caleb, themselves leaders of Israel, spoke the truth through eyes of faith instead of fear, and how God rewarded them for their faithfulness. The pastor told me he thought there was little chance that my flesh would cause me to miss-hear the timing of my message because I was already aware of the danger and was agonizing over it.

So here I am, standing before you, to tell you that there is a “strongman” spirit alive and well in this congregation that has been here, causing trouble among the leaders and members, since the days of its first rabbi and founder. It is a spirit of idolatry to Rabbinical Judaism that manifests itself by urging us to give more credibility to Jewish traditions and forms than those traditions and forms deserve. It is not a matter of what particular Jewish traditions we choose to keep; it is our attitude of being driven to keep tradition or else we are not Jewish or not Jewish enough. The reason that this Spirit is a “strongman,” is that it is a controlling spirit that controls by lies and fear.

- Lies that Jewish tradition is more important than it really is;
- Lies that how Jewish we are perceived to be, by the wider Jewish community, is more important than it really is;
- Fear that if we don’t measure up to a certain standard or expression of Jewishness, we will not succeed in keeping our children within the Messianic Jewish faith, and we will not be able to attract Jewish people to Yeshua.
- And over-arching those fears is another – fear that if we are not Jewish enough, we will be personally rejected by Jewish friends, Jewish colleagues, and Jewish people in the wider Jewish community.

Notice that the lies I listed included considering Jewish tradition “more important than it really is,” but I did not say that it is unimportant. In my experience, statements like the one I just made that assign weight to a thing are often miss-heard as statements declaring absolutes, like: “Rudolph does not hold Jewish tradition in as high esteem as I do, so he must be trashing it.”

Using an expression of one of our past presidents, “Let me make myself perfectly clear!” I am a Jew through and through, I appreciate Jewish tradition, and I live a more traditional than average Jewish life. Not only do I believe that Jewish tradition belongs in a Messianic Jewish congregation, but you are witnesses that when I came to Ohev I brought a number of Jewish traditions into our Shabbat service and our congregational life that were not previously here. I believe God planted many wise practices among the Jewish people, and that they show up in our traditions. What we ought to do is prayerfully discern them, and adopt them as we consider them proper and helpful to the life of our Messianic community. What we ought not to do is be driven to copy the Jewish community to the extent that we are only willing to disregard those of its traditions that directly contradict New Covenant Scripture.

Why you might ask? It is because Messianic Judaism is fundamentally different than Rabbinical Judaism.

First of all, Rabbinical Judaism rejects Yeshua and the New Testament. It is still looking for the Messiah to come, whereas we, on the other hand, consider the entire Bible to be inspired, and our faith and hope is in Yeshua.

Second, Rabbinical Judaism bases its beliefs on Old Covenant Scripture and Rabbinical writings, chief of which is the *Talmud*. In stark contrast, our beliefs are based upon Scripture alone, both the Old and New Testaments.

Third, Rabbinical Judaism bases its practices and traditions on a body of rabbinical law called *halacha*, and the rabbis who contribute to making *halacha* are viewed as having authority to interpret *Torah* for Judaism broadly. We, on the other hand, are not constrained to obey rabbinical *halacha*, and we reject the authority of the rabbis over us unless, as individuals, we live in a Rabbinical community. We do, however, selectively borrow from *Talmud* and other Jewish sources, those ideas and practices which we judge and discern are meaningful, useful, inspiring, and godly, and we then make them OUR Jewish tradition.

Finally, Rabbinical Judaism seeks no input from the *Ruach Hakodesh*. We, on the other hand, seek continuous guidance from the Holy Spirit for interpreting and adapting Scripture, for our daily guidance, and especially for making the important decisions in our lives. We, like the Rabbinical community, believe in obeying *Torah*. However, our reliance on the Holy Spirit for day-to-day and moment-by-moment guidance is foundationally different from Rabbinical Judaism’s reliance on rule-keeping.

Mark 3:25-27 teaches us:

“And if a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself, and is divided, he cannot stand, but has an end. No one can enter a strong man’s house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man. And then he will plunder his house.”

Leaders and members of Ohev, I am calling on each of you to go to prayer and discern whether the prophetic Word I am bringing you today is true. All congregations have to cleanse themselves from time to time, and our job of ridding ourselves of spirits that are strangling us will not be completed until we get the strong man out of our house. Now no idolatrous spirit would be here if some of us were not keeping it here, so each of us must perform self-examination to see if we are harboring any. If we find any, no matter how comfortable we are with them, we have to let them go.

Now here is a word of warning; Ephesians 6:12 reminds us:

“For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.”

In other words we are not to use this message to justify going on witch hunts – searching out traditional Jewish practices in our midst. We are not against traditional Jewish practices, and we are not against those of us that adhere to traditional practices; that is why I am wearing this *kittel* in full view – to make the point that I can look and act as Jewish as I want so long as I am not in bondage.

Look. See? I am free to wear the *kittel*, and now look – I am also free to remove it.

And see this *kippah* I am wearing? Look! I am free to remove it. But no, there are reasons why I believe I should wear it.

And later this afternoon I will stand by the river and like many of you throw bread into the running water – a rabbinical practice of great symbolic significance to me. Yet I will drive to the river in a car – a practice forbidden by rabbinical *halacha*.

I love Jewish practices, but I am not in bondage to them. They are exceedingly meaningful in reinforcing and expressing our covenantal identity with the Jewish people – our people. Although, in order to make certain points, this message emphasized our differences, we have – to be sure – many things in common.

So let’s use this time from the blowing of the *shofar* today to the last trumpet of *Yom Kippur* to pray for God to reveal strongholds in each of our lives, whatever they may be, and however entrenched they may be, so that we can repent and be set free. And in all of this let us give glory to the One who is the source of all freedom, Yeshua.

But first, let’s do the most Jewish of all things. LET’S GO TO THE PARK AND EAT!