

Rosh HaShanah

Why does the Jewish community call *Yom Teruah* “Rosh HaShanah”? I thought the Biblical New Year began in the Spring.

For many people in the independent Messianic movement, Exodus 12:2 settles the matter: “This month shall be the beginning of months for you; it is to be the first month of the year to you,” speaking of the month of Aviv (Exodus 13:4, NASU). Thus it is said that the worldwide Jewish Synagogue has been in error for millennia about designating the festival commanded in Leviticus 23:23-25 and Numbers 29:1-6 as “*Rosh HaShanah*,” and remembering the first of Tishri as the Civil New Year:

“Again the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Speak to the sons of Israel, saying, ‘In the seventh month on the first of the month you shall have a rest, a reminder by blowing *of trumpets*, a holy convocation. You shall not do any laborious work, but you shall present an offering by fire to the LORD’” (Leviticus 23:23-25, NASU).

“Now in the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall also have a holy convocation; you shall do no laborious work. It will be to you a day for blowing trumpets. You shall offer a burnt offering as a soothing aroma to the LORD: one bull, one ram, *and seven male lambs one year old without defect*; also their grain offering, fine flour mixed with oil: three-tenths *of an ephah* for the bull, two-tenths for the ram, and one-tenth for each of the seven lambs. *Offer one male goat for a sin offering, to make atonement for you, besides the burnt offering of the new moon and its grain offering, and the continual burnt offering and its grain offering, and their drink offerings, according to their ordinance, for a soothing aroma, an offering by fire to the LORD*” (Numbers 29:1-6, NASU).

Those dismissing the Jewish custom of celebrating *Rosh HaShanah* at this time note that there is no reference to any kind of new year in either passage. All it speaks of is a *zikron teruah* (זִכְרוֹן תְּרוּעָה) or “a memorial (of) blowing” occurring in the seventh month. They feel justified at referring to this appointed time exclusively as *Yom Teruah* (יּוֹם תְּרוּעָה), and then criticizing anyone who follows the *halachic* lead of the Synagogue.

The issue regarding *Rosh HaShanah* (רֵאשׁ הַשָּׁנָה) would not be an issue at all (along with many others) if it were not for the large numbers of non-Jewish Messianic Believers which have swelled the Messianic movement over the past 10-12 years. These are people who often misunderstand Jewish tradition, and then have been thrust into leadership with often very little preparation. Respectfully, rather than investigate a Jewish tradition in a sensitive manner with an attempt to understand it, many just dismiss it without any adequate understanding of how it came to be. This often follows with harsh attitudes and disdain for things that are just classified as “vain traditions of men,” sometimes without any strong factual basis. Such is clearly the case with *Rosh HaShanah*—as little, if any attempt, has been made to carefully weigh all of the opinions. It is, unfortunately, difficult for many non-Jewish Messianics in the independent Messianic movement to realize that the Jewish people have been given the scepter of leadership (Genesis 49:10), that they possess the oracles of God or the explanations on how the Torah is to be followed (Romans 3:2; 9:4), and that Yeshua Himself directed us to follow the lead of the Pharisees in matters of Torah application (Matthew 23:2-3). And the Pharisaism of the Apostle Paul is often not even realized (Acts 23:6). These factors, however, when properly considered, should make us wonder why the independent Messianic movement does not follow a style of Torah observance more like its Messianic Jewish counterpart and the mainline Conservative and/or Reform Synagogue.

The argument against *Rosh HaShanah* that is commonly made, to paraphrase what is often said, is that “The Rabbis were deceived by a blast from Babylon. The Civil New Year is based on Babylonian practices, and is now a misunderstanding present among Judah. We must leave such Babylonianism at the door.”

Most would be unaware of the fact that saying *Rosh HaShanah* was picked up by the Jewish exiles in Babylon is actually quite dangerous, not knowing the school of Biblical scholarship that supports it. The Messianic Torah teachers of today are largely not equipped with knowing anything about German Higher Criticism and the considerable damage it has caused to Jewish and Christian Biblical Studies over the past two centuries. *If they actually did know about it*, then the rhetoric we are witnessing against *Rosh HaShanah* would not be able to pass. The critical tradition advocates that the Torah was not at all written by Moses or scribes under his direction, but instead was written entirely **after** the Babylonian exile. The Torah is believed to be a compiled document of a series of disparate witnesses that they attribute to the J writer or Yahwist, the E writer or Elohist, the Priestly writer, and the Deuteronomist.¹

The sources that make up the Pentateuch in this schema can be determined by the usage of certain Divine names such as YHWH or Elohim, cultic material that would relate to the priests of Israel, and then the Book of Deuteronomy as a “pious fraud” written during the time of the Josianic reforms (cf. 2 Kings 22-23). In this case, information from Leviticus 23:23-25 and Numbers 29:1-6 would be viewed as originating from the Priestly writer, set against information from Exodus coming from J and/or E, and then the earliest data in D which would have said nothing of a *Yom Teruah* or *Rosh HaShanah* (cf. Deuteronomy 16:1-17). Yet if Moses is the principal writer of the Torah, as affirmed by both Yeshua and His Disciples (Mark 12:26; Luke 24:27; John 1:45; 5:46; Romans 10:5; 2 Corinthians 3:15), then some theological synthesis needs to take place between these so-called disparate witnesses within the Torah.

How does this all relate to hastily judging the Synagogue’s observance of *Rosh HaShanah* as the Civil New Year? Messianic teachers who dismiss *Rosh HaShanah* as a legitimate observance are often forced to turn to literature that is affected by the JEDP documentary hypothesis—while in gross ignorance not even realizing it! Many would, for example, turn to a short quote in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* on “Rosh Ha-Shanah,” which says in “the post-Exilic period...the Babylonian influences had become particularly pronounced.” There you have it, *Rosh HaShanah* was picked up in Babylon, right? Unfortunately, many such teachers would exclude the surrounding sentences from their quotation, perhaps disregarding some of the information provided as just theological gobbledegook:

“In the critical view, the Pentateuchal legislation in which the festival appears belongs to the Priestly Code (P) and, therefore, **to the post-Exilic period, when the Babylonian influences had become particularly pronounced**. The older critical views consider the whole institution to be post-Exilic, pointing out, for instance, that there is no reference to it in the lists of the feasts of Deuteronomy (16:1-17).”²

Here, the view is that the festival codified in Leviticus 23:23-25 and Numbers 29:1-6—*regardless of what one calls it*—is a part of P, a source for the Torah that was compiled after the Babylonian exile. The belief that *Rosh HaShanah* was, in fact, something that the Jewish exiles picked up in Babylon is actually rooted in a theological tradition that denies any Mosaic involvement with the composition of the Torah—and more than anything else also severely denies the Torah’s historicity and reliability, **treating the Torah as little more than Ancient Israel’s mythology**.

While various non-Jewish Messianics might (foolishly) be willing to quote such critical scholars to refute what they perceive to be the errant Jewish practice of *Rosh HaShanah*, what else do those same scholars tell us the Jewish exiles “picked up” in Babylon? Well, they tell us that things such as the Flood of Genesis 6-8 and the Creation accounts of Genesis 1-3 are Ancient Israel’s redactions of the Epic of Gilgamesh, the Enuma Elish, and Atrahasis—adaptations of pagan mythology into its own Scriptures! A poignant example would be the *Jewish Study Bible’s* liberal comments on Genesis 6: “The flood narrative that ensues, [is] a characteristically Israelite adaptation of a well-known and widespread Mesopotamian story.”³

Rather than considering the thoughts of those who believe that the early parts of the Bible—and consequently *all* of the instruction seen in Leviticus 23—are Ancient Israel’s mythology, we need to consider the Jewish theological justification for what *Rosh HaShanah* actually is.

¹ Consult the entries for the composition of the Pentateuchal books: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, in *A Survey of the Tanach for the Practical Messianic* for more details, and Umberto Cassuto, *The Documentary Hypothesis and the Composition of the Pentateuch* (Jerusalem and New York: Shalem Press, 2006) for a Jewish refutation of it.

² Louis Jacobs, “Rosh Ha-Shanah,” in *EJ*.

³ Jon D. Levenson, “Genesis,” in Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 21.

The Rabbinical argument in favor of *Rosh HaShanah* being the Civil New Year is how *Rosh HaShanah* is connected to the later holiday of *Yom Kippur*, occurring ten days later. *Yom Kippur* is the Day of Atonement, and consequently also the eschatological time of humanity's final judgment. The Civil New Year is celebrated on *Rosh HaShanah*, ten days previously, because it is believed that the judgment of humanity will likely take place during the same time of year as the creation of humanity. After the instruction of *Aviv* being the first of the year (Exodus 13:4), some conflicting information does—at least on the surface—appear in Exodus:

“Also you shall observe the Feast of the Harvest of the first fruits of your labors from what you sow in the field; also the Feast of the Ingathering at the end of the year when you gather in the fruit of your labors from the field” (Exodus 23:16, NASU).

“You shall celebrate the Feast of Weeks, that is, the first fruits of the wheat harvest, and the Feast of Ingathering at the turn of the year” (Exodus 34:22, NASU).

These verses speak of the commemoration of *Sukkot* “at the end of the year” or *b'tzet ha'shanah* (הַשָּׁנָה בְּצֵאתָ), and keeping *Shavuot* “at the turn of the year” or *tiqumat ha'shanah* (תִּקְוַת הַשָּׁנָה). This represents some kind of changing of the year in the Fall, and not in the Spring, and one in the later Spring. Do the contradictions between Exodus 13:4, and later Exodus 23:16 and 34:22, appear because one set of commandments comes from P, and another comes from J and/or E, with D saying nothing on the matter? Or if all of these commandments came from Moses, have those criticizing *Rosh HaShanah* missed something and drawn some inappropriate conclusions?

Also to be considered is Ezekiel 40:1, when the Prophet is shown his visions from God: “In the twenty-fifth year of our exile, at the beginning of the year, on the tenth of the month, in the fourteenth year after the city was taken, on that same day the hand of the LORD was upon me and He brought me there” (NASU). All interpreters are agreed that this vision was shown ten days after “the beginning of the year” or what the text clearly indicates as *b'Rosh HaShanah* (בְּרֹאשׁ הַשָּׁנָה). **Either this was on the 10th of Aviv, a date with no particular significance, or this was on the 10th of Tishri, Yom Kippur (Leviticus 23:27).** The latter is the traditional view (b.*Arachin* 12a), and Ezekiel being shown his vision on *Yom Kippur* fits much more in line with the promise of restoration from exile.

It is very true that the first of Aviv/Nisan designates some kind of new year in the Spring, but it is equally true that there are different witnesses in the Tanach that point to a new year at a later time such as in the Fall. To act as though the Sages, Rabbis, and Jewish people have somehow been blind to all of this for millennia—and now it is time for us to correct them—is at the very least not a very constructive attitude. It is one that is not open to learning why the Synagogue has designated the first of Tishri as *Rosh HaShanah*. In fact, the Mishnah indicates the view that there are four new years to be reckoned with as seen in the cycles of Scripture, as the tractate *Rosh HaShanah* begins by saying,

“There are four new years: (1) the first day of Nisan is the new year for kings and festivals; (2) the first day of Elul is the new year for tithing cattle. R. Eleazar and R. Simeon say, ‘It is on the first day of Tishre.’ (3) The first day of Tishre is the new year for the reckoning of years, for Sabbatical years, and for Jubilees, for planting [trees] and for vegetables; (4) for the first day of Shebat is the new year for trees, in accord with the opinion of the House of Shammai. The House of Hillel say, ‘On the fifteenth of that month [is the new year for trees]’ (m.*Rosh HaShanah* 1:1).⁴

It is quite surprising for Messianics to see that there are no recorded statements in the Apostolic Scriptures about either Yeshua or His Apostles observing *Yom Teruah/Rosh HaShanah*. This lack of data does not mean that they did not know about it, or that they did not keep it. But what it does mean is that we have to read between the lines regarding how they would observe this day were they living among us today. The closest that we can actually get is Paul's defense before Festus in Acts 25:8, where he says “I have committed no offense either against the Law of the Jews or against the temple or against Caesar.” Considering the broad categories listed here by Luke, *ton nomon tōn Ioudaiōn* (τὸν νόμον τῶν Ἰουδαίων) or “the Law of the Jews” would be best considered as involving *both* the Written Torah and whatever significant customs went along with it normative to Paul's Pharisaism (cf. Acts 22:3).

⁴ Neusner, *Mishnah*, 299.

What this all points us to is that we must see how this sacred day was followed in the Second Temple period. In fact, what we see is that it was observed as *Rosh HaShanah*,⁵ something which has been carried on faithfully in today's Synagogue. To find out what some of those significant customs were, that the Apostle Paul would not have committed an offense against as part of "the Law of the Jews," the Messianic community can start reading at Mishnah *Rosh HaShanah* 1:2: "at the New Year all who enter the world pass before Him like troops, since it is said, *He who fashions the hearts of them all, who considers all their works* (Ps. 33:15)."⁶ **It is not at all inappropriate for the Messianic movement to celebrate *Rosh HaShanah* along with the worldwide Jewish community.**

In the Synagogue today, *Rosh HaShanah* is considered to be a very serious occasion calling people to *Yom Kippur*, occurring ten days later. J.H. Hertz indicates, "unlike the New Year celebrations of many ancient and modern nations, the Jewish New Year is not a time of revelry, but an occasion of the deepest religious import."⁷ He further goes on to say how the *shofar* (שׁוֹפָר) is blown, and what it is intended to call the people for:

"The sound of the Shofar, consisting, as handed down by Tradition, of three distinctive Shofar-notes—tekiah, shevarim, teruah—has been looked upon from time immemorial as a call to contrition and penitence, as a reminder of the Shofar-sound of Sinai; and the Day of Memorial, the beginning of the Ten Days of Repentance (עֲשֶׂרֶת יָמֵי תְשׁוּבָה), which culminate in the Day of Atonement, as a time of self-examination and humble petition for forgiveness."⁸

Rosh HaShanah being a call to self-examination, prayer, and repentance is to be contrasted against the new year celebrations of the Ancient Near East (ANE), involving great pomp and circumstance:

"New Year's festivals in the ancient Near East included a number of similar elements—processions of the king and the deities, intricate sacrifices, prayers, rites of purification and cleansing of the temple, and celebrations to commemorate the overcoming of chaos and restoration of order. In the Ugaritic literature, the myth of the death and resurrection of Baal, as a fertility god, celebrating his triumph over Mot and the building of his palace, has been connected to the autumn New Year festivities in Canaan. In Egyptian New Year rituals at the temple of Edfu, the statue of the god Horus was removed from his temple and exposed to the rays of the sun to reunite his body with his soul. The Babylonian *akitu* festival, which became the most important religious and political celebration in Mesopotamian history, also involved complex and elaborate rituals..." (EDB).⁹

The Synagogue's commemoration of *Rosh HaShanah* in the Fall **by no means** parallels the kinds of contemporary celebrations that would have taken place in the ANE. *Rosh HaShanah* is to be a very contemplative time of reflection as one prepares for *Yom Kippur*. When sacrifices were offered in the Temple, they were done in accordance with specific instructions delivered by God through Moses, and not P. It is not a time when one pops open a bottle of champagne and celebrates the coming of another year.

Yet when we consider some of the ANE new year practices and compare them to many of the *Yom Teruah* commemorations that occur in some of today's Messianic congregations—is there more commonality between the revelry and partying of Canaan, Egypt, and Mesopotamia and such assemblies, or the prayer and piety of the Synagogue? Which style of commemoration would be more likely to encourage greater holiness among God's people? Which is a *miqra-qodesh* (מִקְרָא־קֹדֶשׁ) or "holy convocation" (Numbers 29:1)?

Based on some of the customs that have arisen in the past decade or so regarding the various "*Yom Teruah*" commemorations seen in the independent Messianic movement—a return to the Jewish practice of *Rosh HaShanah* should be in order. *Rosh HaShanah* was not just "picked up" in Babylon by the Jewish exiles, unless of course we are prepared to believe that most of the Torah, save the "pious fraud" of Deuteronomy, also came from Babylon. But what has happened more than anything else, is that the reverent day that *Rosh HaShanah* is in the Synagogue has been almost entirely forgotten by many Messianics. And as it has been observed in both the Synagogue and Church of today, getting a rabbi or pastor to encourage reverence for God in the people is probably the most difficult thing such a leader has to do.

Some of the things that we will be encouraging and working for in the years ahead, so that *Yom Teruah/Rosh HaShanah* can return to being the holy time that it is in the Synagogue, include:

⁵ "Rosh Hashanah," in Jacob Neusner and William Scott Green, eds., *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 536.

⁶ Neusner, *Mishnah*, 299.

⁷ J.H. Hertz, ed., *Pentateuch & Haftorahs* (London: Soncino Press, 1960), 522.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Julie Bidmead, "New Year," in David Noel Freedman, ed., *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 963.

- Only blowing the *shofar* at the designated times on *Rosh HaShanah* (and/or *Yom Kippur*), as opposed to indiscriminately blowing it not just any time on only these two dates, but any time throughout the year. The sound of the *shofar* is to be a sacred sound that has lost much of its significance over the past 10-12 years as it is blown far too frequently in the Messianic movement, becoming quite a common sound akin to “a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal” (1 Corinthians 13:1).
- Restoring the silver trumpets to being the Tabernacle/Temple vessels that they are, to be used only for the purpose of service in the Levitical priesthood no different than the Ark of the Covenant. These are vessels that are not used in the traditional Synagogue, but are used in various independent Messianic assemblies, contrary to standing *halachah*.
- Letting *Rosh HaShanah* be a very sacred and sober time of being called to the Ten Days of Awe toward *Yom Kippur*, where Believers are called to personal and corporate repentance, and intercessory prayer for our Messianic faith community, Israel and the Jewish people, and the salvation of the world.

The fruits of dismissing the Jewish traditions associated with *Rosh HaShanah*, as brought on by many of today’s “*Yom Teruah*” commemorations in the independent Messianic movement, do speak for themselves. No stability of any kind has been brought to our faith community by summarily disregarding our Jewish spiritual heritage in this area, and non-Jewish Believers going along have not performed their job well of provoking our Jewish brethren to jealousy for faith in the Messiah (Romans 11:11). If anything, new and unnecessary barriers have been placed between the Messianic movement and the Jewish Synagogue that need not be there. And worse enough, Christians who know a few things about *Rosh HaShanah* and the important themes associated with it have not exactly been interested in the Messianic movement, either, as a result of what has been allowed to transpire.

As many begin to see that they have been hoodwinked into thinking that *Rosh HaShanah* was something that “Judah picked up in Babylon,” we will no doubt begin to see a return to a Messianic style of orthopraxy not that unlike the Conservative or Reform Synagogue in the next 10-12 years. The independent Messianic movement will basically parallel the practices of its Messianic Jewish counterpart. *Yom Teruah/Rosh HaShanah* can again be a time of serious spiritual reflection, as we are called into a specific season where we can “work out [our] salvation with fear and trembling” (Philippians 2:12)—turning to Yeshua for our salvation and any deliverance or unfinished spiritual business that is required.¹⁰

¹⁰ For a further summary of the traditions commonly associated with *Rosh HaShanah*, consult Eisenberg, *JPS Guide to Jewish Traditions*, pp 184-204.