

There are two special Shabbat during the Fest of Unleavened Bread – April 16th and April 23rd

For the next two Shabbats, the regular weekly Torah portions are suspended and passages concerning Passover are usually read, along with the Song of Songs, one of the most beautiful and misunderstood books of the Bible. Next Shabbat, I will give you my annual teaching about this book – called Megilla Shir HaShirim (scroll of the Song of Songs).

Today, I want to talk to you about the meaning of the Festival of First Fruits, which begins the fifty day countdown to Shavuot (Pentecost). I also want to outline the sequence of events after the Seder, when our Messiah was: arrested, put on trial, beaten, crucified, buried and resurrected after three days. His arrest, trial, beating, crucifixion and burial all occurred on the 15th of Nissan. This is also when the fifty day countdown to Shavuot starts. The Messiah spent the 16th, 17th and 18th of Nissan in the grave and rose early in the morning on the 19th of Nissan. It always falls on the same Hebrew date, but on different Gregorian dates.

Let me clear up some of the possible confusion with this sequence of events. He did not rise on the third day (18th of Nissan), but after three days (19th of Nissan). Once the early church began to distance itself from their Jewish brethren, they wanted to sever any connection between the Resurrection of the Messiah and the Passover. At first, the resurrection was celebrated in conjunction with Passover, but as part of their abandonment of the Sabbath, the Gentile church set up Easter Sunday as day when the resurrection is celebrated, even though they had no scriptural mandate to do so.

They established four special days in their celebration of the sequence of events surrounding of Messiah's death, burial and resurrection. They call it Holy Week and it includes the following: First there is Maundy Thursday (or Holy Thursday), where they believe Messiah mandated the L-rd' Table during the Passover Seder, which they call the Last Supper. Second, there is Good Friday where they believe Messiah was arrested, tried, crucified and buried. Next is Easter Saturday which, according to their chronology, was the only actual 24 hour period when Messiah was in the grave.

Lastly, there is Easter Sunday, where they believe He arose at dawn and began a whole series of special appearances to the Apostles and other believers. To get the three days and nights in the grave, they wrongly believe that Jewish people consider a part of a day the same as a full day. But even with the best of possible motives, according to their chronology, Messiah spent only one and a half days in the tomb, instead of the three days and nights which the Scriptures teach.

Messiah said that He would spend three days and three nights in the tomb and that He would resurrect after three days. He spent the 16th, 17th and 18th of Nissan in the grave, while His Spirit descended into the great remand centre of G-d. After His resurrection, He took all the blessed dead with Him to Heaven, where they are now all sleeping under the altar, as they wait for the resurrection from the dead and the Day of Judgment.

No one is rewarded or punished until the day of Judgment, Messiah just provided alternate sleeping arrangements for the righteous dead. The full identity of this special group of people will not be revealed until the day of Judgment. Rewards and punishments will only happen after the final resurrection of the dead, when all the nations and generations of mankind stand before the Messiah and their true spiritual identity is revealed.

Sunday is never considered a particularly important day in the Scriptures and the Sabbath is the only Day of the L-rd which the Scriptures recognize. I find the gentile celebration of what they call Holy Week to be quite interesting, even if it is not biblically accurate. Should we go and demonstrate in front of the churches on Easter Sunday. Confrontation and condemnation are not good vehicles to share the truth with. I Timothy 5:22 warns us not to participate in the sins of others, but to keep our own selves pure. You have got to pick your battles so that you do not become continually grumpy and contentious, always looking for a fight.

A lot of silliness and strange traditions have grown up among the Gentile churches, but the rabbinic, Talmudic synagogues are no better. We are called to never add to or take away from what the Scriptures teach and we need lots of wisdom and patience and stubborn meekness, to help deceived believers escape from the snares they have fallen into so that they can walk the bumpy straight and narrow. They will discover the truth, either in this life or on the Day of Judgment where there will be so many cosmic expressions of “oops”.

I will speak up and speak out with firm gentleness and great patience. At this season of the year, we need to shine and be salty and begin a dialogue about what the Scriptures actually teach. Arguments are always wrong, even if you are right. We need to build the house of our faith with gold, silver and precious stones and not let our spirituality become choked with wood, hay and stubble. Even when I share my faith, I never want to be pulled into arguments and debates, where the big guns are pulled out and truth becomes the first victim.

Easter bunnies, Easter eggs, Easter bonnets and Easter lilies have got nothing to do with what the Scriptures teach about the events around our Messiah's sacrifice upon the cross and they can become distractions to pull us away from the teachings of Scripture. Be wary, be vigilant. Pray for opportunities to dialogue and share what the Scriptures actually teach. I am going to celebrate the resurrection on the 19th of Nissan, which is after three days. This year that falls on Wednesday, April 20th and it is then that I can truly say with full conviction: “He is risen, He is risen indeed”.

Now let us get back to the Festival of First Fruits and why it is ignored and replaced by a second Seder among most Talmudic Jews. The Talmud records that there were up to 72 different groups of Jews, all claiming to be the only true version of Judaism and along with doing much fighting among themselves, they were all vying for converts, both from among the other competing versions of Judaism and from the nations which surrounded them and among whom so many dispersed Jews lived.

There were two main groups of Jews in the Sanhedrin, the organization which exercised control over Jews, both in the Holy Land among the nations. The richest and most powerful group were the hereditary priests who were members of the Sadducee faction in the Sanhedrin. They maintained a strict code of ritual and moral purity and stressed a rigid adherence to the temple rituals, of which they considered themselves the guardians. They were not so much concerned with theology as they were with conformity and obedience.

They collected the tithes, maintained the temple and had become quite rich and more than a little arrogant. They considered First Fruits to be the most important festival because that is when most people journeyed to Jerusalem to pay their tithes. At sundown on the 15th of Nissan, the temple was lit up, orchestras and choirs made it a really big show and they had Yeshua removed from the cross and buried, so that His situation did not distract people during the Sadducees' most important festival of the year.

They generally had more control in the Sanhedrin than any other group, but they were not well liked by the common people or by their main competitors, The Pharisees. The Pharisees studied the Bible along with the many growing collections of the laws they were coming up with to control every aspect of a Jew's life. They prized scholarship and the performance of signs and miracles to prove that someone spoke for G-d and should be listened to. Both the Sadducees and most of the Pharisees were hostile to Yeshua and to His radical teachings.

They tried to prevent civil unrest or anything that would cause trouble with the Romans and put the people and the temple at risk. The Sadducees controlled the temple and all of its rituals and even with the Roman tax on offerings, they were becoming some of the richest and most influential people in the empire. Both the Sadducees and the Pharisees were troubled by the increasing number of fanatics who claimed to be the Messiah and who wanted to lead them in a battle to defeat the Romans. They knew this would destroy their nation.

A few times, some fanatical groups managed to take control of the temple and the Romans had to come and help dislodge them. This would cause much blood to be shed in the temple and a long cleansing process interrupted the lucrative rituals where people from all over the Roman empire and parts of the Ancient Middle East, outside of the empire, paid their tithes. Theologically the Sadducees were quite conservative, except they did not believe in the resurrection of the dead, or in the existence of angels. The Sadducees held most of the power and there was a great deal of hostility between the two groups.

After the destruction of the second temple, the surviving priests lost their leadership to the rabbis among the Pharisees and while they were allowed to say certain blessings, they were no longer leaders of the community. Gradually, the Pharisees gained control over the remnants of Judaism and their Talmud became their source of authority, which all Jews were required to adhere to. By the fifth century, they had gained control over most of Judaism. They suppressed any who disagreed with them. Talmudic rituals replaced temple ceremonies and the rabbis, not the priests, became the primary source of religious authority in Judaism.

There are still many competing schools of Talmudic Judaism, each led by a "Rebbe" or religious leader whose opinions and rulings are still considered on par with both the Scriptures and the Talmud. At sometime, in the lead up to modern orthodox Judaism, a second Seder was introduced to replace the temple rituals around First Fruits and once the fifty day countdown to Shavuot is completed, Shavuot is sometimes also referred to as First Fruits. First Fruits begins the countdown, Shavuot ends it.

In Israel, before the great dispersion, there were three main harvests: the first was the Barley Harvest, which was taken in around Passover. The second was the first wheat harvest, which occurred in and around the festival of Shavuot. A second grain harvest was taken in along with the fruit which also ripened in the early fall, in and around the Fall Feasts and Sukkoth.

It was after these three annual harvests that the people gathered their agricultural tithes and brought them to the temple at Jerusalem. Jerusalem had a steady population of around 160,000, but during the pilgrimage festivals (First Fruits, Pentecost and Sukkoth), the city's population swelled to over a million. Besides the temple, the next biggest industry was running inns which offered people both a place to sleep and some food. The Upper Room was such a place and the apostles intended to both hold the Seder there and to sleep there. Three times a year, Jerusalem became crowded.

During the winter, people lived on the grain they had harvested and stored during the Fall. With the barley harvest, they could eat fresh grain and begin to replenish their stored supplies. For us, we understand that the first disciples were the First Fruits of Messiah's ministry and they both became the model for believers to follow and put together a Messianic commentary on the Torah, which we call the New Testament.

As we celebrate the countdown to Shavuot, we also celebrate the countdown to the coming Kingdom. Everything that is essential for the Kingdom to come has been accomplished and we are only waiting for prophecies to be fulfilled before the Messiah returns. How we live our lives should also be a countdown to the Kingdom. While most world events are just birth pains for the coming Kingdom, we should not grow weary of waiting for the Kingdom, which shall come as surely as the sun rises and sets every day. What are you waiting for? Are you exercising patience, or are you allowing yourself to be caught up the foolish cosmic guessing game, where prophecy which has already been fulfilled, is being scrutinized as silly people develop all kinds of time lines to prove that the Kingdom is seconds away from coming.

Throughout history, believers have believed that the kingdom would come in their lifetime and since the early 1800's the modern guessing game intensified. When the Messiah returns, those of us who are still living will be snatched out our carnal bodies, so that we can be given our new, redeemed bodies in which we will live forever. Those who have already passed on and who are sleeping in the dust with the fathers (and mothers), will rise first, along with all the nations and generations of mankind. Believers will then be snatched out of their bodies in what the Bible calls the second resurrection. Rapture is to the living what resurrection is to the dead. Do not let yourself get caught up in all the myths and false teachings that have infected so many believers, when it comes to what they believe about the End Times and the end of the world. Messiah is not a cosmic yo-yo who comes back several times. He comes once.

The Festival of First Fruits begins the annual fifty day countdown to Shavuot and there are at least two ways of observing this period of time. Most Talmudic Jews and many Messianic Jew believe that counting the Omer (the fifty day period) means that we should say special prayers every day as we give the number of each day until Shavuot. Others, like me, believe that you should calculate when the fifty days are over and not treat each day of the countdown as a special day. The UMJC (Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations), one of the organizations to which our shul belongs, holds an annual prayer campaign and a fund raiser, where each day you set some money aside and then send the collected money to the UMJC.

First Fruits is actually the third festival of the new festival cycle. Passover is the first and Unleavened Bread is the second. I find it strange that the week of Unleavened Bread is now often called the week of Passover and Shavuot is often referred to as First Fruits, when it is actually the end of the fifty day countdown from First Fruits.

First Fruits is our annual celebration of the end of a long, cold winter, and the beginning of the annual harvest cycle where the L-RD blesses our soil and causes it to be fertile and once again provide us with food to eat. In Israel, the winter ends in mid January and at the Festival of Tu B'shevat (the 15th of the month of Shevat), trees are planted and it is celebrated as the new year for the trees. The first set of crops is also planted, so that by First Fruits, the first of our annual harvests can be collected as we wander through one more year on our way to our Father's Home in Glory. Barley ripens before wheat, so this festival period is sometimes called the Barley Harvest.

It is a good time to ask yourself at least two questions. First, what are you planting in your life and what harvest will this yield? Every year, farmers have to deal with the weeds that will try and choke out their crops and during some years they have to contend with droughts where nothing much grows in their fields. As believers in the Messiah, we are called to cultivate the fruit of the Spirit so that we may harvest righteousness. We are also called to weed out the unfruitful works of the flesh, so that our righteousness does not become choked or withered.

Some years, our lives will experience a spiritual drought, where nothing much seems to be happening in our lives. When this happens, the Bible functions as our reserve storehouse, where we can always find good things to eat until the drought is over. When a spiritual drought occurs, G-d has not abandoned us and we have to learn to live through times of difficulty and tribulation, if we want to survive until the times of spiritual abundance enrich our lives once again.

When I was in ministry in Quebec, there were often times of great trial and I experienced some pretty severe tribulations. Some charismatic Anglican friends of mine phoned with a prophecy G-d had given them to pass on to me: "I am not leaving you alone, I am teaching you to trust me alone". Who are you learning to trust when you feel alone? Do you think that G-d has forsaken you, or do you hunker down, dive into the Word and wait for the good times to come back? They always will, because He has said that He will never leave us or abandon us (Heb. 13:5) and in my ministry, I always remind myself that you have to survive if you want to thrive.

David lived through some horrific and amazing trials, but he never forgot that the L-RD was still his shepherd and even when it seemed that things could not get any worse, YHVH's rod and staff still comforted him. A shepherd uses the rod to beat off anything that would attack the flock and he used his staff to pull the sheep out of any difficult place they stumbled into. G-d will do the same for us because in our Messiah, we are able to rise up and accomplish all and any tasks He which sets for us (Phil. 4:13).

As we celebrate the Feast of First Fruits, let us rejoice that in a very true sense, we are the first fruits of the Gospel because we have let the Messiah into our lives. Every day and every year, we have to keep counting down until the Kingdom arrives. And we have to sow the fruit of the Spirit and weed out the works of the flesh, so that we can reap solid spirituality and not get choked out by the carnal cares, fears and pleasures of this temporary life.

Life is never boring in the Messiah and we are in a generational conflict with the enemy, the world and even our own flesh. But spiritual victory is possible and can be ours when we learn to sow in the Spirit, according to His Word.

The festival cycle is our constant, annual reminder that YHVH will provide for all of our needs and are reminders that His Kingdom is coming. We need to learn to live every day preparing for it and not get distracted by this fading, darkening world. The only constant in our lives is that change is inevitable. I once had a poster which said: "Change is Inevitable, Growth is Optional". How well are you exercising this option in your life? How well are we exercising it in the life of our shul? Pray for the peace of Jerusalem. Pray for peace in the Ukraine. Pray that willing people from all nations forsake their darkness and come to the light of the Torah and the Gospel. Walking with the Messiah according to His Word, is the only life worth living. May you have a blessed First Fruits as we countdown to Shavuot.