



Mosaic Religion and the Religious Mosaic **An Approach to the Jewish Community for Christian Seminarians**

Script 19: The Jewish Calendar and Holidays Part 2

In Part 1 of “The Jewish Calendar and Holidays,” we reviewed the basic structure of the Jewish calendar and holidays that come in the spring and summer months. In this episode, we will cover the very busy fall holiday season, the two minor Jewish holidays of Hanukkah and Purim and other celebrations that bring us back to Nissan, the first month of the Jewish calendar.

The seven weeks of consolation which run through the Jewish month of Elul lead us to Rosh Hashanah, marking the beginning of the new Jewish year. Rosh Hashanah, the first and second days of the month of Tishrei, is a time for celebration, yet it also begins the Ten Days of Repentance. We take this time to contemplate what we did wrong over the past year, apologizing to those we have wronged and committing to do better in the coming year. All of this culminates on the tenth day of Tishrei--Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. It is arguably the holiest day of the Jewish calendar, a day spent in the synagogue, and a major fast day.

Five days later we begin the third of the three pilgrimage festivals with the holiday of Sukkot, the Festival of Booths or Tabernacles. We take up agrarian symbols—palm branches, branches of myrtle and willow, and citrons—and build booths. These fragile, temporary structures remind us of the fragility of life and our dependence on God. They also recall the Israelites’ wandering in the wilderness after the Exodus, and the booths farmers built for themselves out in the fields during the fall harvest. During the seven days of the festival, we welcome guests into our booths. Following the somber mood of Yom Kippur, Sukkot is the time for great joy.

On the eighth day of Sukkot is Shemini Atzeret, the Eighth Day of Solemn Assembly. It includes a prayer for rain as it begins the rainy season in Israel. We will continue to pray for rain until the end of that rainy season at Passover. We are in synch with the natural order rather than asking God to act outside of the Divine-ordered world.

The day after Shemini Atzeret is Simchat Torah. During this festival, worshipers joyously take out all the scrolls from the Ark, march and dance with them around the synagogue or temple, and have a quasi-wedding celebration with the *Torah*. This holiday not only marks

the conclusion of the reading of the Torah, but the beginning of the *Torah* reading cycle as well, indicating that the practice of engaging with the *Torah* is never complete.

The month following Tishrei is Heshvan. This month is also known as Mar Heshvan, or bitter Heshvan, so named because it is the only month on the Jewish calendar with no holidays outside of the weekly Shabbat celebration. Christian seminarians may appreciate that, for Jewish clergy, Heshvan often comes as a welcome period of rest and recovery after the full holiday schedule of the month of Tishrei.

Hanukah comes next on the calendar spanning the end of the month of Kislev on the 25th day of Kislev, through the second day of the following month of Tevet. Hanukah is not the Jewish Christmas and predates it as it celebrates the rededication of the Temple after taking it back in battle with the Assyrian Greeks. While Hanukkah is considered a minor Jewish holiday, its proximity to Christmas has raised the profile of the holiday and its customs and rituals, especially in the hearts and minds of Jewish children.

The month following Tevet is Shevat, best known for the holiday of Tu B'Shevat--the 15th day of the month. Tu B'Shevat is the birthday or the new year of the trees. Yes, it does sound odd to celebrate trees in the midst of winter, but this is the time when the first almond blossoms are ready to bloom in the Land of Israel. We celebrate Tu B'Shevat with different fruits and the holiday has become a time to engender greater awareness for ecological concerns and our role as stewards of God's created world.

The 12th month on the Jewish calendar is the month of Adar. The 14th of Adar is the holiday of Purim when we chant the Book of Esther, telling our story of deliverance from mass destruction by the evil Haman in the fifth century BCE.¹ The holiday is a time of great frivolity, dressing in costume, and being rather raucous.

This is also the time in which, during a Jewish leap year, we add an extra month. There is a second month of Adar added known as *Adar Sheni*. When there is a second month of Adar, Purim is celebrated in Second Adar.

After Purim we are ready to begin our preparation for Passover again. We do an extra cleaning of our homes, and ready ourselves for the coming spring, celebrating our freedom and entering the first month of the year to begin another cycle of holidays, the cycle of nature, and the cycle of life.

A final note. We would be remiss not to mention Jewish celebrations that occur on a regular basis throughout the year. Foremost among them is Shabbat, the Jewish Sabbath that occurs every Friday night at sundown thru sundown on Saturday evening. For further information on Shabbat, please watch the episode "Shabbat" in the "Mosaic Religion and the Religious Mosaic" series.

¹ BCE: Before the Common Era, the abbreviation used by Jews and many Christians instead of BC.

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