

Yom Teruah

How the Day of Shouting Became Rosh HaShanah

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On the 1st day of the Seventh month (Tishrei) the Torah commands us to observe the holy day of Yom Teruah which means “Day of Shouting” (Lev 23:23-25; Nu 29:1-6). Yom Teruah is a day of rest on which work is forbidden. One of the unique things about Yom Teruah is that the Torah does not say what the purpose of this holy day is. The Torah gives at least one reason for all the other holy days and two reasons for some. The Feast of Matzot (Unleavened Bread) commemorates the Exodus from Egypt but it is also a celebration of the beginning of the barley harvest (Exodus 23:15; Lev 23:4–14). The Feast of Shavuot (Weeks) is a celebration of the wheat harvest (Ex 23:16; 34:22). Yom Ha-Kippurim is a national day of atonement as described in great detail in Leviticus 16. Finally the Feast of Sukkot (Booths) commemorates the wandering of the Israelites in the desert but it is also a celebration of the ingathering of agricultural produce (Ex 23:16). In contrast to all these Torah festivals, Yom Teruah has no clear purpose other than that we are commended to rest on this day.

The name of Yom Teruah may provide a clue as to its purpose. Teruah literally means to make a loud noise. This word can describe the noise made by a trumpet but it also describes the noise made by a large gathering of people shouting in unison (Nu 10:5–6). For example,

“And it shall come to pass when the ram’s horn makes a long blast, when you hear the sound of the shofar, the entire nation will shout a great shout, and the wall of the city shall fall in its place, and the people shall go up as one man against it.” (Joshua 6:5)

In this verse the word “shout” appears twice, once as the verb form of Teruah and a second time as the noun form of Teruah. Although this verse mentions the sound of the shofar (ram’s horn), the two instances of Teruah both refer to the shouting in unison of the Israelites which was followed by the fall of the walls of Jericho.

While the Torah does not explicitly tell us the purpose of Yom Teruah its name may indicate that it is intended as a day of public prayer. The verb form of Teruah often refers to the noise made by a gathering of the faithful calling out to the Almighty in unison. For example:

“Clap hands, all nations, shout to God, with a singing voice!” (Ps 47:2)

“Shout to God, all the earth!” (Ps 66:1)

“Sing to God, our strength, shout to the God of Jacob!” (Ps 81:2)

“Shout to YHVH, all the earth!” (Ps 100:1)

In Lev 23:24, Yom Teruah is also referred to as Zichron Teruah. The word Zichron is sometimes translated as “memorial” but this Hebrew word also has the meaning of “mentioning” often in reference to speaking the name of YHVH (e.g. Ex 3:15; Isa 12:4; ; 26:13; Ps 45:18). The day of Zichron Teruah, the “Mentioning Shout”, may refer to a day of gathering in public prayer in which the crowd of the faithful shouts the name of YHVH in unison.

Today few people remember the biblical name of Yom Teruah and instead it is widely known as “Rosh Hashanah” which literally means “head of the year” and hence also “New Years”. The transformation of Yom Teruah (Day of Shouting) into Rosh Hashanah (New Years) is the result of pagan Babylonian influence upon the Jewish nation. The first stage in the transformation was the adoption of the Babylonian month names. In the Torah the months are numbered as First Month, Second Month, Third Month, etc (Leviticus 23; Numbers 28). During their sojourn in Babylonia our ancestors began to use the pagan Babylonian month names, a fact readily admitted in the Talmud:

“The names of the months came up with them from Babylonia.” (Jerusalem Talmud, Rosh Hashanah 1:2 56d)

The pagan nature of the Babylonian month names is epitomized by the fourth month known as Tammuz. In the Babylonian religion Tammuz was the god of grain whose annual death and resurrection brought fertility to the world. In the book of Ezekiel, the prophet described a journey to Jerusalem in which he saw the Jewish women sitting in the Temple “weeping over Tammuz” (Ezekiel 8:14). The reason they were

weeping over Tammuz is that according to Babylonian mythology Tammuz had been slain but had not yet been resurrected. In ancient Babylonia the time for weeping over Tammuz was the early summer, when the rains cease throughout the Middle East and green vegetation is burnt by the unrelenting sun. To this day the Fourth Month in the rabbinical calendar is known as the month of Tammuz and it is still a time for weeping and mourning.

Some of the Babylonian month names found their way into the later books of the Tanakh, but they always appear alongside the Torah month names. For example, Esther 3:7 says: *"In the First Month, which is the month of Nissan, in the twelfth year of King Achashverosh."* This verse starts off by giving the Torah name for the month ("First Month") and then translates this month into its pagan equivalent ("which is the month of Nissan"). By the time of Esther all the Jews lived within the boundaries of the Persian Empire and the Persians had adopted the Babylonian calendar for the civil administration of their Empire. At first the Jews used these Babylonian month names alongside the Torah month names but over time the Torah month names fell into disuse.

As the Jewish People became more comfortable with the Babylonian month names they became more susceptible to other Babylonian influences. This is similar to the way the American Jewish observance of Channukah has been influenced by Christmas. This influence began with the seemingly harmless custom of giving gifts on Channukah. Until the Jews arrived in America this custom was unknown and it is still a rarity in Israel where Channukah does not need to compete with Christmas for the hearts and minds of the Jewish youth. Once Channukah took on this relatively trivial aspect of Christmas it became ripe for more significant influences. Today many Jews have established the custom of setting up a "Channukah bush" as a Jewish alternative to the Christmas tree. These Jews did not want to adopt Christmas outright so they "Judaized" the Christmas tree and incorporated into Channukah. This example shows how easy it is to be influenced by the practices of a foreign religion, especially when there is some similarity to begin with. The fact that Channukah often falls out around the same time as Christmas made facilitated the American Jews in incorporating elements of Christmas into their observance of Channukah.

Just as the Jews of America have been influenced by Christmas the ancient Rabbis were influenced by the pagan Babylonian religion. Although many Jews returned to Judea when the Exile officially ended in 516 BCE, the forebears of the Rabbis remained behind in Babylonia where rabbinical Judaism gradually took shape. Many of the earliest known Rabbis such as Hillel I were born and educated in Babylonia. Indeed Babylonia remained the heartland of Rabbinical Judaism until the fall of the Gaonate in the 11th Century CE. The Babylonian Talmud abounds with the influences of Babylonian paganism. Indeed, pagan deities even appear in the Talmud recycled as genuine angels and demons.¹

One field of Babylonian religious influence was in the observance of Yom Teruah as a New Years celebration. From very early times the Babylonians had a lunar-solar calendar very similar to the biblical calendar. The result was that Yom Teruah often fell out on the same day as the Babylonian New Years festival known as "Akitu". Akitu fell out on the 1st day of Tishrei which coincided with Yom Teruah on the 1st day of the Seventh Month. The fact that the Jews had started calling the Seventh Month by the Babylonian name Tishrei paved the way for turning Yom Teruah into a Jewish Akitu. At the same time the Rabbis did not want to adopt Akitu outright so they Judaized it by changing the name of Yom Teruah (Day of Shouting) to Rosh Hashanah (New Years). The fact that the Torah did not give a reason for Yom Teruah no doubt made it easier for the Rabbis to proclaim it the Jewish New Years.

It may seem bizarre to celebrate Yom Teruah as New Years considering that it falls out on the first day of the Seventh Month, but in the context of the Babylonian culture this was perfectly natural. The Babylonians actually celebrated Akitu, New Years, twice every year, once on the first of Tishrei and again six months later on the first of Nissan. The first Babylonian Akitu celebration coincided with Yom Teruah and the second Akitu coincided with the actual New Years in the Torah on the first day of the First Month. While the Rabbis proclaimed Yom Teruah to be New Years they readily admitted that the 1st day of the "First Month" in the Torah was, as its name implied, also a New Years. They could hardly deny this based on Exodus 12:2 which says: *"This month shall be for you the beginning of months; it is first of the months of the year."*

The context of this verse speaks about the celebration of the Feast of Unleavened Bread which falls out in the First Month. In light of this verse the Rabbis could not deny that the first day of the First Month was a biblical New Years. But in the cultural context of Babylonia where Akitu was celebrated as New Years

twice a year, it made perfect sense that Yom Teruah could be a second New Years even though it was in the Seventh Month.

In contrast to Babylonian paganism, the Torah does not say or imply that Yom Teruah has anything to do with New Years. On the contrary, the Feast of Sukkot (Booths) which takes place exactly two weeks after Yom Teruah is referred to in one verse as “the going out of the year” (Ex 23:16). No one would ever call January 15 in the modern Western calendar “the going out of the year” and the Torah would not describe Sukkot in this manner if it intended Yom Teruah to be celebrated as a New Years.

Some modern Rabbis have argued that Yom Teruah is actually referred to as Rosh Hashanah in Ezekiel 40:1 which describes a vision that the prophet had, “At the beginning of the year (Rosh Hashanah) on the tenth of the month”. The fact that Ezekiel 40:1 refers to the tenth day of the month proves that in this context Rosh Hashanah could not mean “New Years”. Instead it must retain its literal sense of “the head of the year” referring to the First Month in the Torah calendar. Therefore, the 10th day of Rosh Hashanah in Ezekiel 40:1 must refer to the 10th day of the First Month.

Yom Teruah is mentioned in the following biblical passages:

Lev 23:23-25 "And YHVH spoke unto Moses saying, Speak to the Children of Israel saying, In the Seventh month on the first of the month will be a day of rest (Shabbaton) for you, a Remembrance Shouting, a holy convocation. You shall do no work and you will bring a fire sacrifice to YHVH."

Nu 29:1-6 "And in the Seventh month on the first of the month will be a holy convocation for you; you shall do no work, it will be a Day of Shouting for you. [List of Sacrifices for Yom Teruah]."

Yom Teruah FAQ

Q: What about Leviticus 25:9?

A: Some people have argued that Yom Teruah should be considered New Years because it is the beginning of the Sabbatical year. However, the Torah does not say that Yom Teruah is the beginning of the Sabbatical year and all indications are that the Sabbatical year begins on the 1st day of the First Month. The Torah does say the following:

“And you shall pass a shofar of blasting in the Seventh Month on the tenth of the month; on the Day of Atonement you shall pass a shofar throughout all your land.” (Lev 25:9)

This verse is saying that a shofar should be used to announce the arrival of the Jubilee year, the 50th year in the Sabbatical system. It does not say that the Jubilee begins on the Day of Atonement only that the impending arrival of the Jubilee year is announced on the Day of Atonement. Indeed the shofar may be passed through the land on Yom Kippur of the 49th year, six months before the beginning of the coming Jubilee year. This interpretation is supported by the immediate context in Leviticus 25. Verse 8 says to count forty nine years, verse 9 says to pass the shofar throughout the land, and verse 10 says to proclaim the 50th year as the Jubilee. This shows that the shofar announcing the coming Jubilee in verse 9 is passed through the land before the Jubilee is actually proclaimed in verse 10.

Q: Isn't the Seventh Month the beginning of the agricultural cycle?

A: In the Torah the middle of the Seventh Month is actually the end of the agriculture cycle, specifically of the grain cycle. In the Land of Israel, grains are planted in Autumn and harvested in Spring. The new agricultural cycle would not actually begin until the plowing of the fields. This would not take place until the first light rains which moisten the ground enough to be broken by iron and wooden plows. In the Land of Israel this could be as early as the middle of the Seventh Month but is usually in the Eighth Month or later. By the above logic the Eighth Month should be considered the beginning of the year, not the Seventh Month.

1 Zvi Cahn, The Rise of the Karaite Sect, New York 1937, pages 98–101. Cahn's central thesis is that the refusal of rabbinical leaders to repudiate the deep-rooted Babylonian paganism that had infiltrated Babylonian Judaism led to the rise of the Karaite back-to-the-Bible movement in the early Middle Ages. In this context Cahn gives a detailed list of various pagan influences in rabbinical Judaism.