

24 Tishri 5774 (18/10/14) **Simchat Torah: Isru Chag and Bereshit** J. M. Terrett

One of the titles of this final celebration of the Fall Festivals for 5775 is Isru Chag, which loosely translated means "binding up the Festival".

Here is a quote from Jewish Treats:

In recognition of the challenge of transitioning from a religious festival to everyday life, a semi-holiday known as Isru Chag follows each of the three pilgrimage festivals (Passover, Shavuot and Sukkot.) Translated literally as "bind the festival," the term Isru Chag comes from Psalms 118:27, which reads "Bind the festival offering with boughs to the corners of the altar."

This day brings us to the end of the festival cycle for another year and we do indeed face the challenge of what we are going to do to make sure that both the joys and the challenges of the festivals will enrich our lives over the long winter months which are preparing to turn our fair land into yet another winter wonderland.

One of the biggest challenges for us as Messianic Jewish and Gentile believers is to balance our observance of the festivals with our commitment to walking with the Messiah according to the mandate of the Scriptures. We borrow freely from both Jewish and Gentile sources without being limited or even guided by either because our double challenge with our festival observance is make them both meaningful and relevant.

We have just come through an amazing series of special celebrations and we want to bind them up and make sure that the coming months until Passover are filled with His Word, with prayer and praises as we make His Word the place where both our house is founded and our shining light draws its fuel.

It is also the time when on this special Isru Chag, we roll our Torah scroll back to the beginning and initiate another annual pilgrimage through the Torah, which is both our spiritual antiviral program and our source of spiritual sustenance – our full meal deal (Shulchan Orech – which usually refers to the Passover Meal, but which means a full table).

This morning we are going to accomplish three things as we prepare for our annual Torah promenade.

(I) First we are going to introduce our Torah Scroll as it is rolled back to the beginning.

(II) Next we are going to introduce our annual Torah reading cycle.

(III) Finally we are going to read the first and final passages from the Bible as a reminder that we need to be studying this amazing book from one end to the other so that none of what it teaches escapes our grasp as we travel through the new year.

Then we will have our annual chocolate rush before we adjourn to our Nosh downstairs.

Please stand as we take out the scroll and place it on the front table.

Nearly 150 years ago, a small Jewish community in the Ukraine commissioned a Torah Scroll which became its chief treasure as it struggled against poverty, hunger, sickness and persecution – the usual challenges which faced Jewish communities in what was once called the Pale of settlement – the only place in Russian territory where Jews were allowed to live.

The community survived the First World War, even when it was likely overrun by the German push into the Ukraine before the Russian surrender in 1917. They then had to endure the horror and bloodshed of the Russian Revolution which took even more lives and caused even more damage than the first World War. Next, they had to survive the Stalinist purges and the famines which his failed five year plans created, but they had the Torah and feasted on it when they had very little food to nourish their bodies.

In 1939, Germany and Russia invaded Poland and it looked like the Ukraine was going to be spared another massive onslaught of German troops, but this was only delayed until 1941, when the Nazis smashed into Russia and overran the Ukraine. Jewish communities were dissolved and were forced to resettle in various Ghettos and the community to which our Torah scroll belonged, ended up in the Warsaw Ghetto.

The story of this huge ghetto is a story of both cruelty and heroism, but by the time the ghetto was liquidated in May of 1943, none of the community to whom our scroll belonged were left alive. Their scroll had been confiscated and was placed in a warehouse, either to be destroyed or placed in a museum once the war was over.

Once Warsaw was liberated, the victorious allies found many such warehouses and turned the scroll over the Jewish community and there are scholars who are still working today to repair the confiscated Torah scrolls and to make them available to Jewish communities around the world and that is how we came to possess our Warsaw Ghetto Memorial Torah Scroll.

Several years ago, a young lady, Ava Simmons, was diagnosed with terminal brain cancer and left a legacy which we used to purchase the scroll with from a Torah clearing house out of New York. Its full name is the Ava Simmons Warsaw Ghetto memorial Torah Scroll and we are continuing its proud history of making sure that future generations of believers, both Jew and Gentile continue to study the Torah.

Simchat Torah is when we rewind the scroll and begin our annual pilgrimage through this wonderful document for one more year. Lets look at the Torah reading document which our friend Dr. Jeffrey Feinberg has so carefully prepared for us. There are copies available on the back table and I want to briefly introduce it to you.

It is broken into five columns and has six sections. Lets look at the sections first.

Each of the five books has one section where they are divided into portions (called parashiot in Hebrew) which are read each Sabbath in Synagogues around the world. There are 54 parashiot divided over the year and which include 12 special Sabbaths where the normal readings are suspended for special holiday readings. This coming cycle, the portions are doubled five times and during a leap year, they may be doubled seven times to make sure that the cycle is completed by Rosh Hashanah (Jewish New year).

The sixth section gives the special holiday readings, beginning with Chanukah and ending with Simchat Torah and the Rosh Chodesh (new moon) readings. This section also specifies when the regular readings are replaced by special readings. It takes some time to get used to the reading cycle, but it is a rewarding adventure which keeps us in the Word, daily, weekly, monthly and yearly, and beyond that year by year until the return of our Messiah.

Lets look at the five columns. The first column gives the name of each book and each portion in Hebrew characters. The second column gives their Hebrew name in transliterated English. The third column gives the English translation of the Hebrew name for each portion. The fourth column lists the verses for the weekly Torah portion and pairs each passage with both a passage from the prophets and a passage from the New Testament. The fifth column gives the secular date when each Sabbath reading or special reading is to occur, with a little box so you can check them off as you go through them.

It is a precise and concise, intricate guide to reading the Torah through annually and I commend it to you.

Just before we perform our annual Torah promenade (Hakafot), let us read from the first and last verses in the Torah. We will need four people to hold the Tallit over each reader.

Here are the readings:

Chatan Bereshit (Groom of the Beginning):	Genesis 1:1-5	(Hebrew)
Chatan Torah (Groom of the Ending)	Deut. 33:9-12	(Italian)
Chazak Chazak (Be strong, be strong)	Joshua 1:1-9	(French)
Brit Chadashah (New Testament)	John 1:1-4	(German)

Other passages: Malachi 4:1-6 (English); Matthew 1:1-6 (Greek); Rev. 22:17-21 (English).

Let us line up behind the scroll as we prepare to dance it around the sanctuary seven times.

As we put it away, let us sing v'zot ha Torah. (Shehecheyanu, Eyn Kelohaynu, Aaronic Benediction) Let the munchkins advance and devour the treats!