

ISRAEL'S SECOND GREATEST FESTIVAL

Of all the feasts and festivals of Israel, one you are “least likely to know” is one that Rabbinical tradition puts in the “top two” of importance for Israel, only surpassed by Yom Kippur. Some Rabbinical traditions even put this festival as *more important* than Yom Kippur!

The feast is clearly not a Biblically ordained feast. But it does, like Purim and others, carry Biblical meaning and is connected with Biblical accounts, as we shall see.

The festival, in Hebrew called *Tu b'Av*, is like our “fourth of July,” and known more by a date on the calendar than a name. The 15th of *Av* is the full moon of the Hebrew month *Av* (our July/August) and is the date of this little known but highly important holiday.

IS IT IN THE BIBLE?

Do we find this holiday in the Bible? Would a *maybe, maybe not* answer suffice? In Leviticus 6:12-13 the Jews are given the instruction that **the fire upon the altar shall be burning in it; it shall not be put out: and the priest shall burn wood on it every morning**. From this we know that a continual supply of firewood was needed for the Tabernacle, and later the Temple. In Nehemiah 10:34, Nehemiah records that the leadership **cast the lots among the priests, the Levites, and the people, for the wood offering, to bring it into the house of our God, after the houses of our fathers, at times appointed year by year, to burn upon the altar of the LORD our God, as it is written in the law**.

But what does wood for the burning of the altar have to do with this holiday? By the the Maccabean era it was recorded in Jewish sources that the 15th day of *Av* was the day of bringing the wood offering for the priests. And the sources make this a day of celebration, with fasting and other matters of sorrow prohibited. The day of festivities became known as the *Feast of Wood*, or of *wood carrying*.

Josephus mentions the holiday, saying,

Now the next day was the festival of Xylophory; upon which the custom was for every one to bring wood for the altar (that there might never be a want of fuel for that fire which was unquenchable and always burning).¹*

So the feast is not *Biblically ordained*, but *woodburning* on the altar is ordained, the *bringing of the wood* is Biblically mentioned (Neh. 10:34), and the 15th of *Av* is historically the day in which this took place, as a celebration.

One more possible reference to the holiday is John 5:1, which simply mentions **a feast of the Jews** in which Jesus **went up to Jerusalem**. By comparing chronology, this feast was likely either Purim or *Tu b'Av*.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE TRADITIONS OF THIS HOLIDAY?

According to *Chabad.org*, several traditional events are connected to the holiday.

1. The dying of the generation of the exodus ceased.
2. The tribes of Israel were permitted to intermarry.
3. The excommunicated tribe of Benjamin was permitted to re-enter the Jewish community.
4. The last king of the northern Kingdom of Israel re-opened the roads to Jerusalem, after 200 years of prohibiting travel.
5. The dead from the Bar Kokhba rebellion were allowed to be buried.

*Xylophory means “wood carrying.”

¹ Flavius Josephus and William Whiston, *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1987), 625.

6. The ceremonial “breaking of the axe” took place in Jerusalem.²

But perhaps the biggest tradition of the holiday is the celebration that causes this day to be the “Valentine’s Day” among the Jewish faithful. On this day, Jewish maidens in Jerusalem would go to the vineyards, dressed in beautiful linen gowns, and “dance the night away.” The young men would go and select a bride for themselves. The ladies would always wear a borrowed gown, regardless of financial ability, so that the poor were not left out.

According to the Jewish Talmud, there were three categories of maidens:

- *What would the beautiful ones among them say? "Look for beauty, for a woman is for beauty."*
- *What would those of prestigious lineage say? "Look for family, for a woman is for children."*
- *What would the ugly ones say? "Make your acquisition for the sake of Heaven, as long as you decorate us with jewels" (Talmud, Taanit 31a).³*

This is a joyous occasion, but how did it become connected with the celebration of the bringing of the wood? There is a simple, Jewish answer: *tradition!* But the tradition has merit! Orthodox Judaism considers Yom Kippur to be the day of Israel’s betrothal to God, God and Israel entering covenant together. But if there is a betrothal, when is the wedding?

THE CONNECTION OF MARRIAGE, THE MESSIAH, AND THE 15TH OF AV

To answer the question of the wedding date, we need to back up and consider the Jewish significance of the full moon. The new moon marks the beginning of the month. This is always a day of holiness and sacrifice. The full moon is a day of “fullness,” a day of rising out of the darkness. It is not always joyful, but it is always a climax. For the Jewish people, no place is more important than Jerusalem and no building more important than the Temple. It was on the 9th day of Av that the first and second Temples were destroyed. But just a few days later, at the full moon, the Jewish people were accustomed to bringing the wood, destroying the axe, and celebrating their relationship with God. In rabbinical tradition, then, the 15th of Av moved from the celebration of firewood for the Temple to a celebration of the ultimate marriage that God will have with His people, Israel. Thus, the 15th of Av became the time to celebrate *love*, but especially God’s love for Israel. It was a day to celebrate *marriage*, the ultimate “new beginning” in the life of any family.

This makes Tu b’Av to be in the top two feasts of the year. One (Yom Kippur) remembering the betrothal, and the other remembering the future wedding.

Naftali Silberberg expresses this idea beautifully, saying,

The result of this estrangement will be the grandest wedding of all times, the coming of Moshiach which will usher in an era of eternal marital bliss. It is this ultimate marriage that we celebrate on the 15th of Av. This day, a mere six days after Tisha b’Av, symbolizes our rebound; the reconciliation that follows the estrangement of Tisha b’Av.⁴

Sadly, the church has robbed Israel of her status as “the bride of Christ,” using poor exegetical practice along with a penchant for replacement theology. If we would allow Israel her rightful role as the bride, we too might rejoice in Tu b’Av.

² *The Day of the Breaking of the Axe.* https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/53683/jewish/The-Day-of-the-Breaking-of-the-Ax.htm. Accessed October 5, 2022.

³ *The Dancing of the Maidens.* https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/53684/jewish/The-Dancing-Maidens-of-Jerusalem.htm. Accessed October 5, 2022.

⁴ *Of Holidays and Weddings.* https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/717175/jewish/Of-Holidays-and-Weddings.htm. Accessed October 5, 2022.