

Hebrew Rituals & Ceremonies

Practiced Throughout The Year—An Overview

Blowing the Shofar

IT IS BIBLICAL TO BLOW THE SHOFAR at the beginning of worship services on the Shabbat (the Sabbath) and on the feasts of YHVH (Num 10:10; Ps 81:3). It is our belief that YHVH hears the shofar blast when his people gather as he has commanded them to worship him. We also believe that it sends a signal to the demonic forces (Eph 6:12) to depart at once, should they be lurking about. Scripture shows us in numerous places that the shofar was not only a praise and worship instrument, but was sounded as an alarm to muster Israel's military forces when the enemy approaches. It is also an offensive weapon that when blown sends terror through the enemy's ranks. With all these things in mind it is with pleasure and joy that we blow the shofar often throughout our praise and worship services and whenever else we deem doing so to be advantageous.

Reciting the Shema

It is customary to recite the *Shema* at all occasions where groups of Messianic Believers are gathered together for religious purposes. The *Shema* (which is the Hebrew word meaning *to hear and to do*) is taken from Deuteronomy 6:4–9 and Leviticus 19:18 and is a declaration of faith to YHVH Elohim in the presence of witnesses stating that all that YHVH has commanded us to do in his instructions in righteousness (the Torah) we will not only hear, but we will do. Yeshua the Messiah referenced the *Shema* in Mark 12:30 when he stated that the entire Torah-law was summed up in the words of the *Shema* and *V'ahavta*.

The B'rakhah (Blessing)

According to Jewish tradition based on Genesis 14:18–20 and the example of Yeshua in the Apostolic Scriptures, we are to bless YHVH *before* partaking of a meal (Mark 8:7), and according to YHVH's Torah instructions, his people are to thank him for the food *after* a meal is completed (Deut 8:10). The B'rakhah is a traditional Jewish blessing which is recited or sung before a meal involving the blessing and breaking of the bread of fellowship followed by the blessing of and the drinking of the fruit of the vine. Singing this prayer is another way to honor or worship our Creator—the one who lovingly provides for all our needs.

Erev Shabbat—Welcoming the Shabbat

The term *Erev Shabbat* means “Evening of the Sabbath” (or sometimes is called *Kabbalat Shabbat* or “Reception of the Sabbath”) and refers to Friday evening, which in biblical reckoning is the beginning of the Sabbath. Though not a biblical injunction, many Messianic Believers have chosen to incorporate this Jewish tradition into a weekly observance in their homes each Friday evening at the beginning of the Shabbat. The purpose of this tradition is to celebrate the arrival of the Shabbat rest and the laying aside of the all the cares and concerns of the previous six days (the work week) and to enter into the Shabbat of Elohim with peace and joy.

Traditionally, the lady of the house prepares a nice dinner with compliments of linens and china. The family members dress to match. She starts by lighting two candles and says a blessing followed by a prayer. The purpose of the candlelight is to emphasize the idea of separation between the profane (the six-day work week) and the holy (the Shabbat) and that with Shabbat's arrival spiritual life and light come into our lives. The father pronounces blessings upon his wife and children often including the Priestly Blessing (or Aaronic Benediction) of Numbers 6:24–27. After this the family does the B'rakhah with the bread and wine (See explanation of the B'rakhah above). The bread that is used is a traditional Jewish sweet bread called *challah*. The family members share this delicious tasting bread as a reminder of the sweetness of the Shabbat. After this it is not uncommon for the family to sing several traditional Shabbat songs or to recite some Hebrew liturgy pertaining to the Shabbat to emphasize the joy and holiness of the occasion.

The Havdalah Service—Farewell to Shabbat

This is a candle lighting ceremony marking the end of the Shabbat. Again this is a non-biblical Jewish tradition, but one that many Messianics find to be an enjoyable and meaningful experience.

As the Shabbat is welcomed in with joy at the Erev Shabbat meal, so the Shabbat is ended with remorse but with the longing expectation of its arrival once again in six days. This ritual involves lighting a special braided candle (representing our joining together in fellowship with other Believers and with Yeshua) pouring a cup of wine to overflowing (signifying the overflowing joy the Sabbath brings) and then extinguishing the candle of the Sabbath in the wine. Participants dip their finger into the wine and place a spot of wine in their pocket or behind their ear symbolic of taking a bit of the Shabbat sweetness with them into the coming week. Also a special spice box containing cinnamon and cloves is circulated for all to sniff. This again signifies the sweetness of the Shabbat. Several prayers are recited and some traditional songs are sung.

Mikveh—Ritual Immersion

The term *mikveh* means “gathering of waters,” which is a description of a place *where* ritual water immersion (*tevilah*) occurs. For those coming from a Christian background, baptism is something that occurs at the beginning of a Believer’s spiritual walk and involves baptism (immersion) in water for the remission of sins (Acts 2:38; 22:16; Rom 6:3–6; 1 Cor 15:29; Gal 3:27; Eph 4:5; Col 2:12; 1 Pet 3:21). Yet the Apostle Paul talks of *baptisms* (plural) in Hebrews 6:2. In biblical Hebraic thought, immersion for the remission of sins is but one of many such ritual immersions.

Indeed, in the Apostolic Scriptures we not only read about baptism for the remission of sins, but the baptism of repentance of John the Baptist (Yochanon the Immerser) (Acts 1:5; 10:37; 13:24; 19:4); baptism (immersion) of the Holy Spirit (Ruach HaKodesh) (Luke 3:16; Acts 1:5; 8:16; 11:16); baptism with fire (Matt 3:11; Luke 3:16). We see here four specific types of immersions spoken of in the Apostolic Scriptures.

The concept of ritual immersion for a variety of reasons stems from commands in the Torah relating to ceremonial washings signifying spiritual and physical cleansing (Lev 14:1–4, 7, 9; Exod 19:10; Lev 8:6; 15:5, 8, 10–13, 16–18, 21; 16:4).

The prophet Ezekiel speaks of YHVH sprinkling his people to cleanse them from their impurities, which is a picture of the new spiritual life of which immersion is a type (Ezek 36:25).

For Christians returning to the Hebrew roots of their faith, or for long-term Messianic Believers, a ritual immersion (*tevilah*) at a nearby river (gathering of waters or *mikveh*) is an excellent ceremony to do. For some it may be their initial immersion for the remission of sins and confession of faith in Yeshua the Messiah. Some may want to be spiritually cleansed from some personal sin. Others having come out of church-system, having returned to the purer biblical truths of first-century Book of Acts faith, and having left behind many non-biblical and even some pagan traditions may feel the need to be ritually cleansed. For some, immersion is something done several times in the year (for example, at the beginning of the biblical year in the spring during the season of Passover and again just prior to the fall appointed times). This can signify spiritual cleansing or washing one’s spiritual robes in preparation to meet YHVH at his commanded *moedim* (divine appointments).

Whatever the reason, we encourage all to participate in a *mikveh* ceremony. It can be a time of great personal significance and spiritual renewal.

