

JEWISH GUILT and the High Holy Days

by Aaron Abramson

“What special day do we celebrate next?” said a little girl to her father as she climbed into his lap. “Well, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and Sukkot come just after summer,” he replied. By her unmoved expression he gathered that she was not terribly impressed. This was no surprise since she had only been four years old at last year’s services. Still, he had hoped that she would show a spark of interest, have some memory of the fall festivals. Was her lack of interest due to the relatively small Jewish community in their town? Or perhaps he’d not been intentional enough to balance his non-Jewish spouse’s inexperience with Jewish traditions. Whatever the case, one thing was certain: he was feeling stirrings of guilt. “Well,” he began, “Rosh Hashanah is . . . ,” but before he could finish, she had wriggled out of his lap and run out of the living room.

He was
pierced for our
transgressions,
he was crushed
for our
iniquities . . .

As autumn approaches, Jewish people typically reflect upon our accomplishments, attitudes and behavior throughout the past year. Many take a personal inventory, examining their hearts in preparation for the High Holy Days. Orthodox Jews around the world awake in the early morning hours to recite *slichot*, prayers of repentance. The High Holy Days interrupt our busy lives and challenge us to identify, confess and seek God’s forgiveness for our sin.

Many Jewish believers in Y’shua find themselves wondering, “What (if any) impact does guilt have in the lives of followers of Y’shua? In light of His coming, how do we approach these special occasions that focus on sin and guilt?”

These questions have both theological and practical implications.

What the Bible Says about Guilt

Many biblical texts provide perspective on guilt. In the Tanach, the Hebrew term חַטָּא (‘*šm*) or “guilt” is used in several ways. It can refer to a person’s condition or standing before God: “to be in a state of guilt,” “to bear iniquity” or to “become guilty.”¹ Physical and emotional distress often accompany this condition, as the Psalmist so aptly described in Psalm 38.

In Leviticus 4-5 the verb refers to the moral/legal standing of individuals (4:27; 5:2-5,17), leaders (4:22) and the people of Israel as a community (4:13).

(Continued on page 2)

(Continued from page 1)

The noun form, אָשָׁמָה (*‘āšām*) may denote an offense, trespass, or fault but, its most common usage, found primarily in Leviticus and Numbers, is paired with a guilty person’s attempt to absolve wrongdoing by making restitution. This is referred to as a “guilt offering.”²

In the Torah, guilt is often associated with specific sins such as carelessly swearing an oath (Leviticus 5:4) or the misappropriation of property (Leviticus 6:4). But guilt can also refer to more general wrongdoing (2 Chronicles 19:10).

The Scriptures also give us a helpful look at how people deal with guilt, beginning with Adam and Eve. They attempted to deal with their personal shame by covering themselves, and to deal with God by trying to avoid His presence (Genesis 3:6-8). This became the typical human response to guilt—try to “make it go away” without facing the only One who really can make it go away.

Adam, when confronted by God, invented a form of denial known as blame shifting. “The woman *you* gave me, *she* gave me the fruit!” Eve followed his example by blaming the serpent. Each was truthful in declaring that others were guilty. The problem was in their attempts to use other people’s guilt to cover their own.

Genesis 3 is also instructive because, in addition to showing the first human response to guilt, it shows God’s response (Genesis 3:14-24). First comes the cursing of the serpent, who had tempted the woman. Next comes the promise of the one (the Messiah) who will suffer but ultimately triumph over the serpent. This promise (Genesis 3:15) foreshadows God’s permanent solution to sin and guilt. Then comes the curse upon the man and woman, as individuals, as a couple and as

a race. Next God provides the temporary covering, tunics made of animal skins. We learn that the shedding of blood was necessary to cover the guilty parties properly. And finally we see the expulsion from the garden, which was a punishment as well as an act of grace. The possibility that Adam and Eve might live forever in a fallen state would have prolonged the punishment beyond what God intended.

The Talmud teaches, “He who denies his guilt, doubles his guilt.” God’s response to Adam and Eve made it impossible for them to remain in denial, as did their new life in the fallen creation.

Whereas Genesis shows us Adam’s and Eve’s inappropriate responses to guilt, we also have Scriptural examples of the appropriate response.

Psalms 51 gives us the ideal response to personal guilt: repentance. King David acknowledges his guilt before God. He also acknowledges that he cannot blot out his own sin, but that only God can deal with it and restore him. David asks God to affect the change that will enable him to once again give God the glory that is due Him, in his (David’s) own life and in the lives of his subjects. He also acknowledges that going through the motions of sacrifice is no substitute for a broken spirit and a contrite heart; in other words, there is no magic button. True repentance is necessary. It is also instructive to read in 2 Samuel 12 that God sent Nathan to confront David concerning his guilt. Psalm 51 was not written as David’s spontaneous response to his sin; it came after someone pointed out his guilt to him. If the king known as “a man after God’s own heart” needed outside help to admit his guilt, it shouldn’t surprise us if we do, too.

God knows that when left to our own devices concerning sin, we tend to deny or shift blame. We are not naturally repentant creatures. In His grace, He gave us days and ways that remind us to repent; He gave us holy days, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. The period between the two, the “Days of Awe,” should elicit a sense of awe as each person reflects upon God’s holiness as a ruler by which their own behavior over the past year must be evaluated.

According to the Mishnah everyone stands before God in judgment on Rosh Hashanah (Rosh Hashanah 1:2). The sound of the *shofar* is intended to awaken the listeners from their “slumber,” and to alert them to the coming judgment (Maimonides, *Yad*, Laws of Repentance 3:4). Each person is to examine his own heart, to acknowledge any guilt before the Lord, and to repent.

In the Hebrew Bible, the people of Israel were commanded to offer various burnt offerings and grain offerings along with a goat as a sin offering. The desire to be purified is a thread throughout the Days of Awe and leads us to the most holy day of the year, Yom Kippur.

The people of Israel were commanded to afflict their souls and do no regular labor on the tenth of *Tisbre*, the appointed Day of Atonement. The High Priest alone was responsible for the offering of expiatory sacrifices on behalf of his family, the priests, and the people of Israel (Leviticus 16:33). One goat was killed as a sin offering and its blood was sprinkled upon the mercy seat in the Holy of Holies by the High Priest. This sacrifice was accompanied by another mysterious offering called the *Azazel*, or scapegoat. The High Priest would lay his hands upon the *Azazel* and confess the sins of Israel. This confession is remembered today in the *Ashamnu* (“We are guilty”), and the

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PRINTED IN THE U.S.A. ©2006



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FALL 2006, VOLUME 9:3

PUBLISHED QUARTERLY

Vidui (confession) that is part of traditional Rosh Hashanah liturgy. The *Azazel* was then sent out into the wilderness to die, symbolically taking away the transgressions and guilt of Israel.

All these offerings point us to another lamb, alluded to in Isaiah chapter 53.

“He took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed . . . like a lamb led to the slaughter, as a sheep before her shearers . . . the Lord will make his life a guilt offering.” (Isaiah 53:4,5,7,10)

The imagery is unmistakable. Y'shua, the Lamb of God, was offered as a flawless sacrifice. The writer of Hebrews elaborated on the fact that Y'shua, as both our sacrifice and our High Priest, has established a new covenant through His blood. He ushers us into the Most Holy Place and our hearts are sprinkled with His blood, “to cleanse us from a guilty conscience” (Hebrews 10:22).

Y'shua is God's permanent solution to the problem of our guilt. He is “the seed of woman” who crushed the serpent's head.

Dealing with Guilt Today

Maybe you heard the joke Woody Allen used to tell about his childhood experience with sports. He recalled how he'd stolen second base—and felt so guilty that he had to give it back.

“Jewish guilt” is normally associated with self-deprecation over what we've done or failed to do by way of duty to ourselves or others. We feel badly that we have disappointed those who matter to us. Jewish guilt is not necessarily concerned with God and sometimes not even with issues of morality. It becomes a parody because at times it seems like everywhere we turn, we are disappointing someone. So, like Woody

... the PUNISHMENT that brought us PEACE was upon him . . .

Allen, we joke about everything making us feel guilty, thus beating others to the punch.

Jewish guilt may be a stereotype, yet most of us have “been there” and “done that” when it comes to feeling guilty, Jewish style. But guilt really isn't a laughing matter.

Even though faith in our Messiah is the basis of a clean conscience, we still feel guilty when we believe we have done something wrong, or failed to do something right. Particularly at this time of year, as we reflect on questions regarding Jewish observance, relationships with family and a variety of other issues, we may experience little (or not so little) pangs of guilt.

Here are several examples that you may identify with, and if not, you can probably think of your own scenarios:

“Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are ideal times to discuss issues such as sin and atonement. I feel a little guilty that I haven't reached out to my unbelieving Jewish family with the gospel during this season.”

“I make so many concessions for my non-Jewish spouse's upbringing during Christian holidays, yet we don't seem to do much for the Jewish holidays. I don't want my children to miss out on their Jewish heritage.”

“The fact that my unbelieving family sees my belief in Y'shua as a burden and a source of tension is almost unbearable around holiday times.”

And of course there are many more issues that bring on varying degrees of guilt feelings.

When dealing with guilt, it is important to recognize the difference between *being* guilty and *feeling* guilty.

Guilt feelings can range from mild uneasiness to moderate feelings of remorse to severe self-condemnation. They stem from a variety of reasons. These reasons may or may not be a legitimate source of guilt. When the reasons are legitimate, we need to face our guilt. Through repentance (which sometimes includes restitution) we can enjoy the forgiveness we have through Y'shua. When the reasons are not legitimate, we need to understand them in order to dispel them before they prove harmful to us.

For example, we need to understand that our faith in Messiah causes a conflict of interests between us and those who don't yet know Him. As a result of that conflict, people sometimes “lay a guilt trip” on us (consciously or unconsciously) for attitudes or actions that they mistakenly believe are wrong. Our belief about Y'shua is bound to incur the displeasure of others, particularly if we are outspoken about it as He has asked us to be. That displeasure often leads to accusations of guilt leveled at the believer.

When we feel guilty, the best first response is to ask ourselves and God whether we have actually done something wrong.

The Bible gives us perspective in these matters. Also, elders and other spiritual leaders who know Y'shua can be good sources for reality checks. This is also true for other brothers and sisters in the Lord

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... like a
LAMB led to
the slaughter, as
a sheep before
her shearers ...

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with whom we are close and to whom we can be accountable. Our ultimate asset is the Holy Spirit, who guides us in all truth (John 16:13). God has equipped us with all these resources, and we need to bring them to bear whenever we feel guilty.

What happens if, on praying, reflecting, searching the Word and speaking to those in spiritual authority, we conclude that we have guilt feelings that are not based on actual wrongdoing?

If these feelings come from accusations made by others, we need to realize that it is possible for people to be disappointed or hurt when we do what is right, particularly when they don't know Y'shua. In that case, our response to their disappointment and hurt can be sadness, grief and compassion—but it should *not* be guilt. Believers who allow themselves to feel guilty over their faith end up feeling remorse over what is right and true, and may consequently find themselves turning to what is false.

One Jewish believer felt so guilty that he left ministry because his new life seemingly aggravated his mother's health. Ultimately he discontinued fellowship with other believers. Guilt feelings had virtually paralyzed him.

Sometimes our unwarranted guilt feelings seem to come from within. At such times we might be dealing with spiritual warfare

and we need to "suit up" in the armor of God (Ephesians 6:11ff). As the devil flees, so will feelings of unwarranted guilt. At other times, our own pride might lead us to believe that we are responsible for things that are beyond our control. In those times, we need to acknowledge our frailty and God's sovereignty. As we stop taking onto ourselves responsibility for things that only God can control, we will be liberated from those feelings of false guilt.

Then there are areas that are not so clear-cut—we may feel something akin to guilt that is nudging us to move in a certain direction. It doesn't mean that we have sinned as such, but we realize that we should not be content with things just as they are. For some Jewish believers, one example of this might be what part the holidays should have in their home life. Rather than succumbing to vague feelings of guilt, we can pray and plan to continue identifying as Jews who believe in Jesus and still care about their heritage and their people. In these areas we should seek wisdom and do our best to follow the guidance God provides. It won't be the same for everyone, because the New Testament teaches that in Y'shua we have liberty concerning various days (Romans 14:5).

When Guilt is Good

Guilty feelings are necessary and good when they let us know that we have truly done wrong. That is why the gospel begins with an understanding that all have sinned; the Good News makes no sense until we understand the bad news. And the bad news is shattering until we allow the good news to permeate our hearts.

We can appreciate this all the more when we hear from those who do not have the forgiveness we have in Y'shua.

Kent Hughes, in his commentary on Hebrews, speaks of this forgiveness in his comment on Hebrews 9:12-14. He recounts an interview on ABC's "Good Morning, America" with Albert Speer, Hitler's confidant and the technological genius behind the Nazi factories during World War II. Speer was one of 24 war

criminals tried in Nuremburg and admitted his guilt. He spent 20 years in Spandau prison. The interviewer referred to a passage in one of Speer's earlier writings: "You have said the guilt can never be forgiven or shouldn't be. Do you still feel that way?" The look on Speer's face was wrenching as he responded, "I served a sentence of 20 years, and I could say, 'I'm a free man, my conscience has been cleared by serving the whole time as punishment.' But I can't do that. I still carry the burden of what happened to millions of people during Hitler's lifetime, and I can't get rid of it." The interviewer pressed the point. "You really don't think you'll be able to clear it totally?" Speer shook his head. "I don't think it will be possible."

What a terrible reality unresolved guilt is for so many people. Without the blood of Messiah, it is impossible to cover the stain. But through Messiah, our guilt is not simply covered, but removed. It is not simply a matter of easing our consciences, but of complete restitution that He has made on our behalf. This liberation from guilt is revolutionary!

So if we have been liberated, what are we supposed to feel or do as the holidays approach and our people around the world are thinking of sin and atonement?

Do our thoughts of guilt simply disappear in light of Y'shua's sacrifice? Do we, as one Christian suggested to me, have no right to feel guilty since we've been pronounced righteous in our Messiah?

It is true that we have been pronounced legally innocent by the great judge. But repentance is still a great gift, and necessary if we want to walk worthy of our calling. Jesus told people to remember His body and blood during a Passover celebration, as a regular commemoration. It hardly seems possible that He would have given us this graphic reminder of His suffering and death on our behalf if He did not expect us to experience remorse for our sin. While we should not wallow in self-pity or condemnation over our sin, it is healthy for us to feel contrite on a regular

basis. That contrition leads to a joyous acknowledgment of God's forgiveness, and a sober realization that so great a sacrifice on our behalf ought to lead us to trust and obey our Messiah.

So as we enter into this holy season, let us enter boldly into His presence, examining feelings of guilt to see what lies beneath; either groundless accusations that should be dispelled, or feelings of dissatisfaction that should lead us to be more intentional in our identity as Jewish believers, or real sin from which we need to turn. We are told, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins, and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). Let us share this hope with our friends and families this New Year.

Notes

1. VanGeren, W., *Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis Vol.1* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997): p. 555
2. Whitaker, R., Brown, F., Driver, S., *The Abridged Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew-English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, (Princeton: 1906)

... the
Lord
will make
his life
a GUILT
OFFERING.

Isaiah 53:4,5,7,10

MUSHROOM BARLEY SOUP

If you are entertaining *ushpizin* for Sukkot (see p. 6) here is a tasty treat they're sure to love. This recipe debuted in Melissa Moskowitz's *Jews for Jesus Family Cookbook* and appeared with many other holiday offerings in David Brickner's *Christ in the Feast of Tabernacles*.

- 3-4 pounds beef flank or short ribs
- 14 cups water
- 1 large onion, peeled
- 1 stalk celery
- 1 tablespoon salt
- 1 ounce dried mushrooms, rinsed, dried, and cut in small pieces
- 1½ cups onion, diced
- 3 carrots, sliced ¼" thick
- ½ cup medium pearl barley
- ½ cup fresh parsley, chopped
- 2 teaspoons dried dill weed
- 1 cup milk
- ¼ cup flour

Rinse meat and put in a large pot. Add water and bring to a boil over high heat. Skim off foam and add onion, celery and salt. Return to a boil. Lower heat; simmer, covered, for 1 hour. Add dried mushrooms and simmer 30 minutes. Remove and discard onion and celery. Add diced onion, carrots, barley, parsley and dillweed. Simmer for 30 minutes. Remove meat to a plate. Mix milk with flour and stir into soup. Bring to a boil, reduce heat to moderately low and simmer 10 minutes, stirring occasionally. Remove meat from bones and cut into bite-sized pieces; discard fat and bones. Return meat to soup and cook 5 minutes more. Add salt and pepper to taste.

Makes 8 servings.

USHPIZIN

A film review by Yoel Ben David

“Ushpizin” is the Aramaic word for “guest.” It is also the title of a 2004 Israeli film, directed by Gidi Dar and written by Shuli Rand. Rand, who also starred in the film, won the Best Actor award from the Israeli Film Academy for the role of Moshe. On a side note, Shuli Rand is a Hassid in “real life” and Michal Bat Sheva Rand, the woman who plays his wife in the film is—his wife! This viewer would never have guessed that “Ushpizin” was her first film. Bat Sheva Rand’s debut is owing to the fact that as a Hassidic Jew, Shuli Rand is not permitted to touch any other woman.

The movie is set during the festival of Sukkot. Moshe, a Breslover Hassidic Jew, has been reformed from his past life as a “bad guy.” He lives and studies at a Yeshiva near the market in central Jerusalem. With barely enough money to provide for his wife and himself, he wonders how he can fulfill the obligations of Sukkot: building a *sukkah*, obtaining *arbat baminim* (the four species), and entertaining *ushpizin*. The money for the items comes to him miraculously. Then, two guests arrive: convicts (one a friend from Moshe’s past) who take advantage of the holiday to seek asylum. This situation creates tension between Moshe and his wife. As the tension rises, Moshe has to deal with feelings of anger and stress during a time when Jews are commanded to be joyful. Throughout, we see Moshe praying and bringing his struggles before God.

Part of the film’s appeal to me is very personal. For a time, I was a Hassidic Jew living in the very area where the story takes place. My wife and I lived in a tiny apartment and struggled to pay our rent at the end of each month, much like Moshe

and Michal. I loved seeing the place and people with which I was once so familiar.

Viewers who are unfamiliar with the Hassidic community will find that the film opens a porthole into a fascinating world. Some Jewish believers may be surprised by some of the concepts and attitudes the film reveals as typical of the Hassidic community. Despite the radical differences in lifestyle, I think most viewers will be able to identify with the film’s characters on a very human level.

We see the gritty realities of a man and a woman who rely on their belief in God for survival. We get a glimpse of how the ultra-Orthodox deal with stress, anger and trust in God, just as we all do.

The characters in the film challenge our misconceptions if we think that believers in Jesus hold a monopoly on trusting God. Many people of different religions have some understanding of God’s providence and various other aspects of His character. They experience legitimate feelings of joy and thanksgiving as they contemplate Him. Unfortunately, they do not know the truth of the Kingdom of God and cannot enter into it without Y’shua.

We also see something of how trust in God is commonly mixed with superstition in the Hassidic community. It seems paradoxical that a man who believes in God with all his heart would also believe that the near perfect *etrog* (the citrus fruit of the four species) that he purchases for 1,000 shekels, the equivalent of about \$250, will help his wife give birth to the son they have been trying to conceive. How are we to understand the way in which a wonderful

belief in God’s provision can be paired with this unbiblical, perhaps even pagan trust in fruit charms?

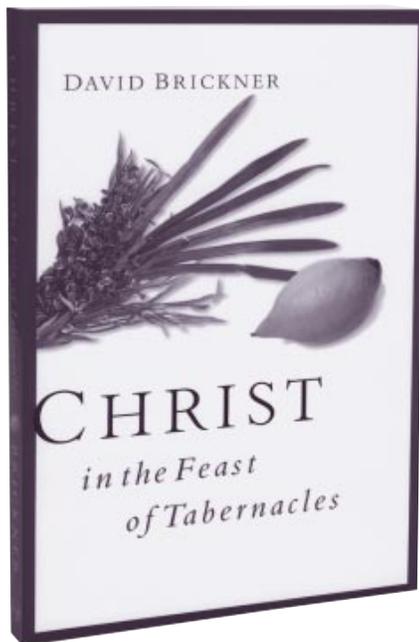
In Romans, Paul writes that our Jewish people “are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge.” Moshe Bellanga is one of these people; a man who loves God and tries hard to observe the Torah as he understands it. Sadly, while he may honor God with his lips, his heart is far from Him because he has received the precepts for loving and obeying God from the commandments of men (Isaiah 29:13).

We might ask ourselves if we have the reverse problem that Paul described: knowledge of God without zeal. Believing viewers may see Moshe’s zeal for holiness, and be led to strive for such zeal in their devotion towards Messiah.

I recommend the film not only because I found it entertaining and interesting (especially as Sukkot approaches) but because I think this film can inspire some of us to see the Hassidic community in a different light. It shows much that is good in this community that we may ordinarily see simply as those who are closed to the gospel or even those who would persecute us for our faith in Y’shua. As we look through their eyes and hear the heart of their prayers through the character of Moshe, may we be led to take the risk to prayerfully and faithfully tell them about Jesus. We may not be able to discuss matters of Talmud and we may feel at a loss in our knowledge of certain traditions—but we know Messiah and the words of the prophets; we know God personally. May we be zealous to pray and do what we can that others might know Him, too.

CHRIST IN THE FEAST OF TABERNACLES

A Book Review by Seth Richards



You probably know that the Feast of Tabernacles, or *Sukkot*, is the final of the three Harvest Festivals and concludes the High Holy Days. But did you know that the first Hanukkah was a belated *Sukkot* celebration and that the dedication of Solomon's Temple also occurred during the Feast of Tabernacles? Were you aware that of all the festivals given to Israel, the Feast of Tabernacles was the only one that God said all the nations will one day celebrate? Perhaps you were; I know that I was not. Unfortunately, this very important holiday has been given secondary status among many of us. David Brickner, in his new book *Christ in the Feast of Tabernacles*, thoughtfully describes the Feast (as the celebration came to be known), its immensely important themes and its relevance for today's believer.

I'm a college student and new at Jews for Jesus—a summer intern at the time of this writing. Frankly, I was a bit intimidated when assigned to review the new book by “the boss.” I quickly found the book to be clearly organized and understandable, making my task much less daunting. The book's clear presentation, however, belies its depth of thought and theologically-based content.

Christ in the Feast of Tabernacles offers the reader practical suggestions (mainly in the appendices) to apply what he or she may have learned. But providing application is secondary to exposing the Scriptures that speak of the festival. The particulars of the celebration are elucidated as well as the many instances of spiritual renewal that resulted from Israel's participation in the Feast. Brickner traces how the celebration has changed from Old Testament times to the time of Jesus' ministry and finally the time following the destruction of the Temple.

Brickner shows that God intended the Feast to remind us of His provision and presence. He outlines a variety of themes to consider in light of the Feast. These include (but are not limited to) the proper view of the Creator and the Creation, the linking of the people of Israel and the Land, and the proper attitudes of joy and reverence in worshipping God.

As the title indicates, Y'shua is a central thread in the book. Brickner shows how Jesus' actions during the Feast of Tabernacles (see John 7) used the familiar symbols of the day to point to Himself as

the fulfillment of Messianic prophecies. Brickner says, “The Messianic hope, the promise of the kingdom, is integrally linked to the Feast of Tabernacles” (p.127).

The book provides a practical appendix, including instructions to build your own *sukkah*. Also included is a worship guide with praise music, as well as a convenient chart of the seven feasts. There is also a mouth-watering selection of twelve recipes (including one of my personal favorites: *kreplach*) perhaps alone worth the price of the book (see p.158).

I've had a cursory knowledge of *Sukkot*, but have not taken part in constructing a *sukkah* since my elementary school days. Having read this book, I realize that the significance of the holiday is anything but elementary. In fact, I'm envisioning a *sukkah* full of Jewish students constructed on my college's main quad. I have already recommended the book to my parents and will encourage my friends to read it as well. *Christ in the Feast of Tabernacles* is already on my list of books to re-read.

Whether or not the reader plans to build a booth or cook the holiday recipes, whether or not she or he makes use of the liturgy, the book provides a basis for understanding the deeper significance of and connection between biblical events in both the Old and New Testaments. As a Jewish believer and a student of the Word, I found the book immensely encouraging and satisfying in that, above all, it depicts the love of our God who dwells amongst us and provides for us.

Holy Day Reminder

ROSH HASHANAH: Saturday-Sunday, September 23-24

YOM KIPPUR: Monday, October 2

SUKKOT: Saturday-Saturday, October 7-14

SIMCHAT TORAH: Sunday, October 15

(All holidays begin the previous evening.)

To see if Jews for Jesus is having a High Holy Day service near you go to:
<http://www.jewsforjesus.org/programs/highholydayservices>



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