

Feast of Firstfruits: He is Risen!

Greetings in the Risen Messiah!

Celebrating Yeshua's Resurrection in April?

Believers all over the world celebrated the resurrection of Yeshua (Jesus of Nazareth) last month at "Easter." A question needs to be addressed this month: "Was the resurrection of Yeshua always connected with 'Easter'?" The historical answer is a definite NO. Yeshua was raised from the dead during one of the feasts of the Lord outlined in the 23rd chapter of Leviticus. Just as our Lord died on the exact day of a Jewish feast (Passover), His resurrection occurred on another Jewish feast: the Feast of Firstfruits in Hebrew, *Yom HaBikkurim*, which occurs on the third day of the Passover festival. Yeshua rose again to become the firstfruits of the resurrection or final harvest of all mankind. I Corinthians 15:20 is a direct reference to the day of Firstfruits: "*But now Messiah is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.*"

Why the separation then? Why don't all believers today celebrate the Lord's resurrection during the Feast of Firstfruits at Passover time? The answer dates back to the year 325 A.D. Before this time, the resurrection was celebrated by the earliest believers in Yeshua during the Passover, since that was when He was sacrificed as the Lamb of God and the Redeemer of His People. The annual celebration of the resurrection was called the "Christian Passover." [Since the day of the week of the resurrection was a Sunday, the first day of the week, early believers decided to move their day of worship to Sunday.] In the second century, a debate arose over which Sunday to celebrate the resurrection. Most congregations held the festival on the Sunday closest to Passover. The churches in Asia Minor often observed the resurrection on the actual date of Passover, following the Jewish lunar calendar, even when it was not on a Sunday. When Constantine the Great became emperor of Rome and made Christianity the state religion, he made a decision that the resurrection must not be celebrated on the Jewish Passover since it was a "Christian duty to have nothing in common with the murderers of our Lord." (P.S.: Constantine's "lord" was not the same Lord we serve!) The Council of Nicea of 325 A.D. required the feast of the resurrection to be celebrated on the Sunday after the first full moon following the Spring equinox when Ishtar, an ancient goddess of spring was honored. This meant that the date of Easter would always fall between March 22nd and April 25th. Easter was celebrated this year on March 27th.

Because this year is a leap year in the Jewish calendar, an extra month is added. Therefore, Passover is very late, beginning at sundown on April 23rd. As we wrap the *afikoman* (part of the middle matzah) in a white "burial" cloth, hide it, and then resurrect it from its hiding place, we will proclaim Yeshua's resurrection from the dead at First Lutheran Church in Gainesville, FL on April 23rd, 2005. Blessed is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who brings forth BREAD FROM THE EARTH—Yeshua the Bread of Life, the Unleavened Bread of Sincerity and Truth! We rejoice that Christians all over the world have begun to celebrate the Lord's Passover once more as they embrace their Jewish roots. Truly the Messiah's words, "*Do this in remembrance of Me,*" (Luke 22:19) can only be **fully** understood when we realize that the **this** Yeshua was

talking about was the celebration of Passover. He was telling His disciples to not only do **this** in remembrance of when His Father delivered them from Egypt, but now also because He had delivered them from sin and death.

Resurrection in the Tenach

While we find little knowledge of the concept of resurrection from the dead among 21st century Jewish people, the Holy Scriptures are filled with examples of this core Hebraic concept. Chuck and Karen Cohen, in their wonderful resource book **Roots of Our Faith**, share many of these examples. There was the rapture-like translation from earth to heaven of Enoch (Genesis 5:24) and Elijah (2 Kings 2:11) and the faith of Abraham that God was able to raise his son Isaac from the dead (Genesis 22:5, Hebrews 11:19). In I Kings 17:21-22 we see the prophet Elijah raising a widow's son from the dead. In II Kings 4:32-35 the prophet Elisha also raised a dead boy to life. Especially powerful is the account of a dead man who was placed in the burial cave of Elisha. When his dead body touched the bones of Elisha, the man was resurrected from the dead:

"Then Elisha died, and they buried him. And the raiding bands from Moab invaded the land in the spring of the year. So it was, as they were burying a man, that suddenly they spied a band of raiders; and they put the man in the tomb of Elisha; and when the man was let down and touched the bones of Elisha, he revived and stood on his feet."
(II Kings 13:20-21)

The Book of Job also has numerous references to resurrection of the dead. In one instance Job says to his false friends, *"For I know that my Redeemer lives, and He shall stand at last on the earth; and after my skin is destroyed, this I know, that in my flesh I shall see God..."* Job 19:25-26. Job is saying in essence that when his earthly body is no more, there will yet be life for him beyond the grave—life in which he will have a personal encounter with God. The Psalms contain many references to resurrection as well. In Psalm 16:9-11 King David expresses the belief that even the grave cannot rob him of life:

"Therefore my heart is glad, and my glory rejoices; my flesh also will rest in hope: For You will not leave my soul in Sheol, nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption. You will show me the path of life; In your presence is fullness of joy; at Your right hand are pleasures forevermore." (See also Psalm 49:15; 71:20, 73:24.)

The prophets of Israel continue with the resurrection theme. Isaiah, for example, expresses complete faith in the resurrection of the dead in Chapter 26, verse 19— *"Your dead shall live; together with my dead body they shall arise. Awake and sing, you who dwell in dust; for your dew is like the dew of herbs, and the earth shall cast out the dead."* The prophet Daniel paints a powerful picture of a double resurrection, indicating that everyone will be raised from the dead, but not everyone will experience eternal life in the same place:

"And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, some to shame and everlasting contempt." The Jewish

prophet Hosea also spoke clearly of the resurrection from the dead: *"Come, and let us return to the Lord: for He has torn, but He will heal us, He has stricken, but He will bind us up. After two days He will revive us; On the third day He will raise us up, that we may live in His sight"* (Hosea 6:1-2).

One of the most famous resurrection passages in the Tenach is found in the book of the prophet Ezekiel, chapter 37. It is interesting to note that Ezekiel's vision of the dry bones is the haftarah reading for the Sabbath of Passover, connecting forever in the minds of the Jewish people the concept of resurrection from the dead and the Festival of Pesach (Passover). God told Ezekiel to prophesy to the dry bones and He would cause them to live again. Ezekiel did as He was commanded, the bones came alive and breath entered into the dead and they were resurrected. Then God said to Ezekiel: *"Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel."* The Lord goes on to say that He will open their graves, raise them up and bring them home to their our land. He promises to put His Spirit within them and cause them to live. God has indeed done this physically, (post Holocaust, nation of Israel) and is now doing the same thing spiritually (life from the dead through Yeshua Ha Mashiach).

Resurrection in Traditional Judaism

In his book, **The Resurrection of Jesus, a Jewish Perspective**, Pinchas Lapide, a traditional Orthodox Jew and New Testament theologian, gives the basis of Judaism's concept of life after death. In the author's own words, "If God is all just and all-merciful, then death in this world cannot be the final end." "All of Israel shares in the future world" is an ancient rabbinic saying. So too is "The righteous of all nations of the earth share in the future world" (Sanhedrin X, 2). At the beginning of the first century the two chief Pharisaic schools of Hillel and Shammai believed in a bodily resurrection. Those who denied resurrection were considered to be without salvation: "And these are they that have no share in the world to come: he that says that no resurrection of the dead is taught in the Law, and he that says that the Law is not from Heaven, and he that is a despiser of religion" (Mishnah: Sanhedrin X,1). The main group that denied the resurrection of the dead were the Sadducees, a conservative elite group of priests, who according to Lapide were "theocentric in its doctrine, aristocratic in its world view, and pedantically literalistic in its understanding of Scriptures." Since the resurrection of the dead is not mentioned **explicitly** in the Hebrew Scriptures, it was rejected by the Sadducees.

A group of Sadducees came to Yeshua to argue with Him concerning the resurrection of the dead. (Mark 12) Yeshua answered them saying, *"But concerning the dead, that they rise, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the burning bush passage, how God spoke to him, saying, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not the God of the dead, but the God of the living. You are therefore greatly mistaken"* (Mark 12:26-27).

Yeshua and his followers (who were Pharisees) succeeded in *"silencing the Sadducees"* (Matthew 22:34), and the Pharisaic belief in the resurrection of the dead became part of normative Jewish belief. The Thirteen Articles of Faith of Maimonides which are a regular part of Jewish liturgy today state: "I believe with full conviction that there will be a resurrection of the dead at a time which will please the creator." Devout Jews all over the world also pray the following from the Eighteen Benedictions: "Thou, O Lord, art mighty forever, thou revivest the dead...and keepest thy faith to them that sleep in the dust..."

Resurrection in the Brit HaDashah

As a New Testament (*Brit HaDashah*) theologian, Mr Lapidé believes that Yeshua, Jesus was definitely raised from the dead. He does not, however believe that Yeshua is the Messiah, the One who was to usher in the Kingdom of God. We, of course, do believe that Yeshua did bring in the kingdom—on the inside—righteousness, peace and joy in the heart of His followers. He is The King, with a kingdom "*not of this world*" (John 18:36).

In spite of his denial of Yeshua's Messiahship, Mr. Lapidé has some fascinating things to say about the resurrection of Yeshua from the dead: "The resurrection of Jesus was a real historical occurrence, and not something first and foremost taking place in the hearts and minds of the first believers. The crucifixion of Jesus by itself could not have motivated the courage of martyrdom and unquenchable hope for the cause of salvation which Jesus preached and embodied in his actions. Jesus' resurrection convinced his disciples that he would return soon as the Messiah of Israel, and in the power of this Resurrection hope they carried the gospel to the nations, causing them to convert to the worship of the One God of Israel, Father of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. But for the resurrection of Jesus, Christianity, would never have left the environs of Jerusalem..."

Lapidé points out that I Corinthians 15 was written by the Apostle Paul as a refutation of any doubts or denials of the resurrection of Yeshua. (See I Corinthians 15:3-6 and I Corinthians 15:12-14, 17, 20-23.) To those who doubt Yeshua's resurrection from the dead Lapidé says, "If God's power which was active in Elisha is great enough to resuscitate even a dead person who was thrown into the tomb of the prophet (2 Kings 13:20), then the bodily resurrection of a crucified Jew also would not be inconceivable. '*Or I have no power to deliver?*' (Isaiah 50:2), asks the Lord of those who are hard of believing."

Bringing Life, Even After Death

Chuck and Karen Cohen also comment on the resurrection in 2 Kings 13: "Even after death, God used this prophet to bring life. The picture is clear—all who 'touch' Yeshua, the Prophet sent from God, after His death, also receive life. Yeshua said: "*I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die*" (John 11:25-26). As believers we pass from death to life the moment we receive Yeshua as our Lord and Redeemer. The One who defeated death itself gives us the gift of eternal life.

You, like the prophet Elisha, can continue to bring life, even after the Lord takes you home. Our Father has shown us that it is time to begin thinking about our legacies—what we leave behind. Recently, a precious Messianic Jew from NY called us to share a glorious praise report with us. The granddaughter of an ultra-orthodox rabbi, Cynthia came upon Jewish Jewels on television one day. She watched the program for a few years before finally receiving Yeshua into her heart and life. Cynthia suffered physically for many years, especially after taking the diet drug Fen Fen. Her heart was damaged by the drug, and as a result, she is being awarded a substantial settlement. Cynthia called to tell us that she is now including the ministry of Jewish Jewels in her estate plan. When the Lord finally takes her home, her gift to this ministry will enable Cynthia to keep sharing the Good News with God's People Israel.

Cynthia understands Yeshua's teaching on **stewardship**. That's why she is looking forward to a hug from her Heavenly Father as He welcomes her into His kingdom with the words: "*Well done, good and faithful servant (steward); you have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord*" (Matthew 25:21,23).

For your sake, for the sake of your family, and for the sake of His kingdom, you should have an estate plan. We would like to send you a free booklet that will outline the Godly principles of stewardship that will enable you to plan for your future, for your Heavenly Father's hug, and for your children and grandchildren to still be hugging each other after you have gone to be with the Lord.

Resurrection and the Land of Israel

When Mark Twain visited the land of Israel in 1867 he found a desolate country. Referring to the area of Caesarea Philippi, he said in his book **The Innocents Abroad**: "It is seven in the morning, and as we are in the country, the grass ought to be sparkling with dew, the flowers enriching the air with their fragrance, and the birds singing in the trees. But alas, there is no dew here, nor flowers, nor birds, nor trees."

Caesarea Philippi today is an area of lush vegetation and sparkling streams. Each time we get off the tour bus at this site, the sweet fragrance of fig trees envelopes us. Flowers, birds, and trees abound. A colorful sukkah, erected near a waterfall, adds to the natural beauty of the landscape during Tabernacles.

The rest of Israel has blossomed as the rose as well (Isaiah 35:1). A barren wasteland has become a flourishing country whose people speak a resurrected language (Hebrew).

Come see for yourself! Our 2005 Mercy Mission during the Feast of Sukkot will be at harvest time. We will not only have the privilege of bearing fruit for Yeshua, but also sharing in Israel's fall harvest. Our goal: to minister love and resurrection life in the name of Yeshua.

If you can't come to the Land with us in October, we have found a way to bring the Land to you! The Land of Israel Necklace, handmade by artisans in Israel, consists of a crystal glass pendant filled with earth and water from sites throughout the biblical Land of Israel. The earth inside has beautiful color variations creating a natural layered effect. The chain on the necklace is sterling silver. A portion of the proceeds from the sale of each necklace goes to an organization in Israel that helps the family and friends of terror victims.

A good way to keep the Land of Israel close to your heart! You are close to our hearts. We pray for you each night!

Love,

Neil and Jamie