

Connecting the Dots: The Feast of Tishri, Sukkoth and Thanksgiving

by **Jerry Gordon** (October 2016)

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The Dedication of Solomon's Temple

Painting by Jean Jacques Tissot

I have a secret to admit. I never knew what the Scottish Rite of Freemasonry was about until a late member of B'nai Israel Synagogue here in Pensacola, Jon Davies, and a Past Master at Escambia #15 told me. It had to do with the architect of King Solomon's Temple, Hiram Abiff, and the mystery behind his abduction and murder by three rough customers. Strange that King Solomon's name in Hebrew, Schlomo, means peace. With 700 marriages and 300 concubines, Solomon, was the ultimate peacemaker. He built the first temple in Jerusalem, the platform of which forms the revered Western Wall for world Jewry and atop of which sits the Al Aqsa Mosque.



President Washington in Masonic regalia laying cornerstone of US Capitol

Freemasonry is more a brotherhood of free thinkers, tolerant and charitable. Among its illustrious American members are the first President of the embryonic U.S., George Washington, several signers of the Declaration of Independence, among them fellow Bostonians, Ben Franklin, John Hancock, Joseph Warren and Grand Master Paul Revere. Patriots all. President Washington decked out in his Masonic regalia and handy trowel deposited some Masonic Medals in the laying of the cornerstone of our nation's capital. We have to thank another Mason, General, later Florida's first governor and ultimately seventh President, Andrew Jackson. He liberated Pensacola in November 1814 from a Spanish, British and Creek Indian force for which we are still paying at the Wind Creek Casino

resort in nearby Atmore, Alabama.

We have Masonic iconography gracing our currency. My wife Jean told me there were even treasure hunts involving the Washington Masonic Memorial in Alexandria, Virginia. The only thing I knew about Masons was Mozart's opera, *The Magic Flute*, and Masonic symbols in the Nicholas Cage thriller, *The National Treasure*. The Indiana Jones film, *Raiders of the Lost Ark* sent a message to Nazis and other them not to fool around with Temple Jewish Rites. I even had a brief introduction to the Order of Demolay as a late teenager with its symbology of Knights Templar but was thoroughly confused about the relationship. Then I learned about the distaff contingent; the Daughters of the Nile, the Eastern Star and the Rainbow Girls.

It wasn't until my friend, Gene Rosenbaum, a member of the Scottish Rite, asked me to make this presentation that I even knew there was a Feast of Tishri celebrating the dedication of Solomon's Temple. For someone who considers himself somewhat educated and worldly wise, I didn't have a clue. It got even more confusing when I learned that the Scottish Rite really had its origins in France. Scottish Masonic rites were carried by Jacobite refugees after the 1746 Battle of Colluden when Bonnie Prince Charles, a Stuart pretender to the Throne of Scotland and his supporters, were defeated by British redcoats.

Those were later codified into the *Practice and Procedure for the Scottish Rite* originally issued in the 1880's. In Chapter Seven, I learned about the significance of the 14th Rite, the Feast of Tishri, and found a connection to the Jewish Festival of Sukkoth, with its own iconography and symbols. Ultimately that connected to a tradition I knew well, as a New Englander, what must be the ultimate Masonic inspired holiday of Thanksgiving. So, without boring you who are long steeped in the traditions of this Scottish rite, I would like to connect some dots and thus pay tribute to the contributions of American Freemasonry.

Tishri – the month of significant holy days capped by the festival of Sukkoth

Sunday, October 1st, when my wife Jean and I drove home from B'nai Israel Synagogue after attending Rosh Hashanah eve services, she pointed out the rising sliver of a new moon, the precursor of the start or head of the seventh month of

the Jewish calendar, Tishri. Monday, October 3rd which marked the start of the Ten days of Awe, Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year of 5777 culminating in the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, a fast day on the ninth and tenth of Tishri, October 11 and 12th. This is a period of intense introspection culminating in a public confessional where Jews conduct a 26-hour fast, endeavoring to acknowledge their past sins of omission and commission between themselves and Ha Shem and between men, hoping to have a blessed New Year, sealed in the Book of Life by God for themselves and loved ones. During the Yom Kippur Service, members of the congregation who are descendents of High Priests from the Temple period, Kohanim assisted by Levite descendents commemorate in prayers the ancient Temple Practices. One of those is the designation of a goat to carry all of the sins of Israel into the wilderness of Judea wearing a red ribbon. That is the derivation of our word in English – scapegoat.

Wait a minute, how can the start of the seventh month be a New Year? Well, Tishri is the start of the civil year on the Jewish calendar. The first month of the Jewish calendar is Nisan, which celebrates the Passover, Maundy Thursday and Easter in the Masonic calendar. Just after the conclusion of Rosh Hashanah is a fast day that you may not know of, Zom Gedalia, the Third of Tishri, October 5th. That is day before this Feast of Tishri. It commemorates the assassination of the Jewish governor appointed by the Babylonian conqueror of Jerusalem and destroyer of Solomon's temple, King Nebuchadnezzar. That occurred four years after the fall of Solomon's Temple in 582 C.E. Gedalia was the man who saved the Prophet Jeremiah from being killed. Jeremiah was alleged to have been taken by Jewish refugees to the ancient Hebrew military colony on Elephantine Island in the Egyptian Nile. It was alleged that was where the Ark of the Covenant may have been taken after the destruction of Solomon's Temple. It is also alleged that a replica in miniature of Solomon's temple was built there with prayers and sacrifices made to Ha Shem. I have great empathy for Jeremiah, who prophesized the return of Jewish Exiles from Babylonia, as I share my Hebrew name with him, Yirmeyahu.

Just before the culmination of the Days of Awe, eighth of Tishri, October 10th marks the date in the ancient Hebrew name for Tishri, Ethanim, when the dedication of Solomon's Temple was celebrated. Note these verses from the Book of Kings:

1 Kings 6:38 And in the eleventh year, in the month Bul, which is the eighth month, was the house finished throughout all the parts thereof, and according to all the fashion of it. So was he seven years in building it. (JPS)

1 Kings 8:2 And all the men of Israel assembled themselves unto king Solomon at the feast, in the month Ethanim, which is the seventh month.

By the way Tishri, Nisan, Tammuz and other months in the Jewish calendar are Babylonian in origin adopted following the return from Exile, the rebuilding of the Second Temple and initial reading of the torah, the five books of Moses, the Pentateuch.

On the 15th day of Tishri, October 17th, is the Jewish festival of Sukkoth extending for seven days until culminating in the final Holy Days of Tishri, Shemini Atzeret and Simcha Torah. The latter celebrates the renewal of the cycle reading the Torah. Sukkoth means booths; it marks the period following the liberation and salvation by God of the Jewish nation from Egyptian tyranny and slavery celebrated at Passover. Jews wandered in the desert encamped in rickety structures open to the elements and heavens. It was also during this period that after much duress the Ark of the Covenant was built to contain the Ten Commandments given to Moses by Ha Shem on Mount Sinai. It was also alleged that instruction from Ha Shem were also conveyed to Moses and Aaron for creation of adornments and a portable tabernacle attended by the Kohanim, High Priests and Levites. Because of King David's sins it was left to King Solomon to call upon the aid of King Hiram of Tyre and the fabled architect, Hiram Abiff, to finally build the First temple in Jerusalem.



Celebrating Sukkoth inside the Sukkah

The Significance of the Symbols of Sukkoth for the Mission of Freemasonry

Nearly three thousand years later, Jews faithfully follow the commandments of Ha Shem given to Moses in Leviticus regarding celebration of Sukkoth.

In Chapter 23, Verses 9–10, we read, “And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying, Speak unto the children of Israel, and say unto them: When come into the land which I give unto you, and shall reap the harvest thereof, then ye shall bring a sheaf of the first fruits of your harvest unto the priest.” In Verses 39 and 40, we read, “Also in the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when ye have gathered in the fruit of the land, ye shall keep a feast unto the Lord... And ye shall take you on the first day the boughs of goodly trees, branches of palm trees, and the boughs of thick trees, and willows of the brook; and ye shall rejoice before the Lord your God seven days.”

Our synagogue has a sukkah, or booth, open to the elements, adorned with goards, palm fronds, willow, and other fruits of the season. It is considered a blessing to say prayers and have a repast in the sukkah during the Sukkoth festival. My

son at his home on Long Island has a sturdy sukkah similarly adorned open to the elements and heaven.

During Sukkoth holiday services in synagogue, members of the congregation are encouraged to come to the bimah or central platform and bless a bundle composed of an etrog or citron, palm fronds, myrtle and willow. In doing my research about this Fourteenth Scottish Rite I came across commentary by Julius Nodel, a St. Louis Rabbi and 33rd degree Scottish Rite mason, who connected the dots between this symbolic Sukkoth offering and the goals of freemasonry. Nodel wrote:

Among the symbols of Succoth are four species of plants—the citron, the branch of the palm tree, the myrtle leaves, and the willow leaves. The citron plant produces both fruit and fragrance. The palm produces fruit but no fragrance. The myrtle produces fragrance but no fruit, and the willow produces neither fruit nor fragrance. This teaches us that there are also four kinds of people. There are those that have knowledge and good deeds—they correspond to the citron. There are those who live a life of good deeds, but have no knowledge—they are like the palm. There are those who have knowledge, but perform no good deeds—they are like the myrtle, and there are those who have neither knowledge nor good deeds—they are like the willow. Yet, on Succoth, all of these different species of plants are placed together and bound as one, thus teaching us that though there are different kinds of people on Earth, with their own interests and desires, accomplishments and failures, they must still be bound together in one universal brotherhood.”



The First Thanksgiving 1621 by Jean Leon Gerome 1899

Thanksgiving, the American Sukkoth

When the Pilgrims left Plymouth Harbor for what ultimately became the founding of what they deemed the New Israel, they may have brought with them impressions of the Jewish festival of Sukkoth, when they sojourned in the Netherlands and encountered the Sephardic Portuguese Jewish refugees who had found safe haven and freedom of worship there. Thus, after spending their first year in arduous circumstances, near starvation, many deaths, a miracle happened. An English

speaking Indian named Squanto, that chief Samoset introduced to Governor William Bradford, taught them the native agriculture and fauna. That led to the first thanksgiving in the Plimouth Plantation. It was from this first New England feast of survival that a grateful colony ultimately extended this via transplants who moved west in America. President Abraham Lincoln declared the national holiday of Thanksgiving during the civil war. Later President Franklin Roosevelt fixed a calendar date of the third Thursday in November with a 1941 proclamation.

Conclusion

The brotherhood and great works of the American Freemasonry continue an admirable tradition. It is ironic for me to discover as an adult connecting the dots between the ancient Jewish traditions of Sukkoth and the Feast of Tishri commemorating the dedication of Solomon's Temple that plays a prominent role in the Scottish rites.

While, I haven't shared in the brotherhood of the Masonic movement, I know by virtue of my military service, what brotherhood means. That experience transformed my attitudes and values as a young adult and serving US Army officer. It is best captured in an exchange with a grandson by the late Dick Winters in his memoir and tv series *Band of Brothers*. Winters was a 101st Airborne officer who survived D-Day, intense grueling combat in the European Theater of Action, the loss of men under his command culminating in the liberation of a Nazi concentration camp. Winters replied to his grandchild, "I served in a company of heroes." That is not lost on many of us who served and experienced the loss of comrades who fell in mortal combat.

I would like to end this presentation with a prayer for our government that we use at my synagogue during High Holy Day Services. Would you please stand.

O God, Father of all men, do Thou bind us ever more closely into a brotherhood of peoples, that we may labor unceasingly against the festering vices of malice and greed, fear and ignorance, hypocrisy and corruption, avarice and violence. May this country forever be the land of the free, where all may dwell in security and peace. Amen.

Thank you for allowing me to speak before this brotherhood of Masons.

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