

ISRAEL Teaching Letter

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THE PROPHET *Joel* RELEVANT TODAY

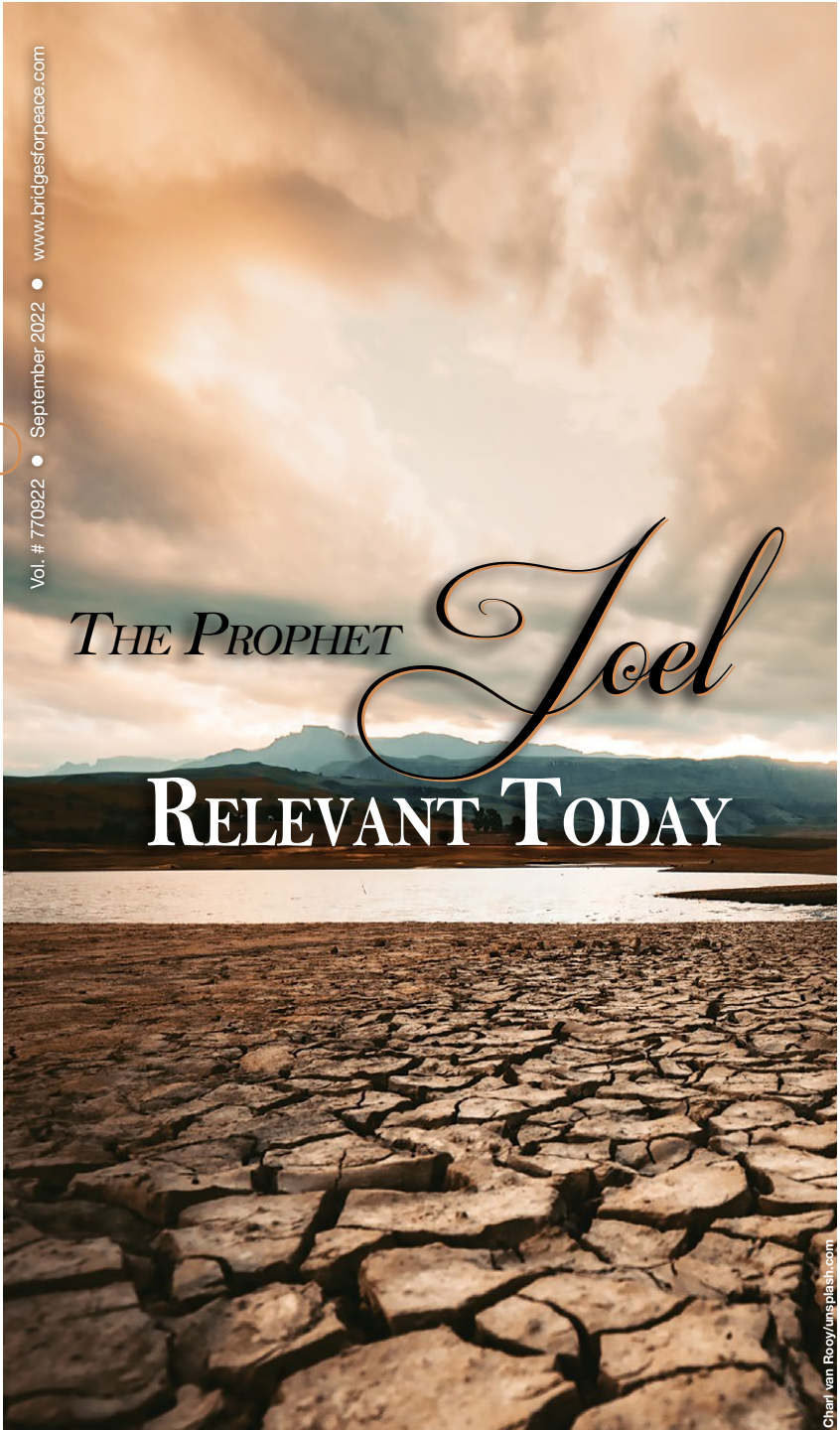


Chart van Rooy/unsplash.com

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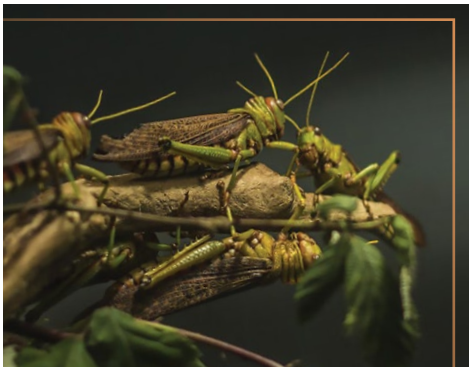
IN OUR BIBLE READING PROGRAM THIS MONTH we are reading the Minor Prophets. In Hebrew, these twelve smaller books of prophecy are called *trei asar*, which simply means the 12 prophets. These are the biblical prophets of the smaller books. The Major Prophets are Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

PROPHETS IN BIBLE TIMES

What was the function of a prophet? Perhaps it is simply being on a mission from God. Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto said, “The essence of prophecy is that one is attached to God, may He be blessed, and that one experience His revelation.” In the Artscroll Jewish commentary on the 12 prophets, it says, “Essentially, a prophet is an individual who has purified his mind and nature to the point where he is able to receive the outpouring of God’s spirit upon himself.”

In the *Tanakh* (OT), we have words recorded of 55 prophets, some with as little as one line of text. Yet Jewish history tells us that there were many more prophets whose words were not recorded in the Bible. The Jewish sages said, “Only such prophecy that was needed for later generations was written down.” With that in mind, as we read through the prophets, it is important to discern what God was saying to the original hearers, but also what He wants us to receive today. Some prophecies have already been fulfilled, while others await their fulfillment. Some have more than one fulfillment. Let’s look at the book of Joel. The name Joel, which means “the Lord is God,” was penned by one of these Minor Prophets. Although the book is short (three chapters), it is packed with meaning, warnings and hope both for ancient Israel and for us today.

TIMES OF NATURAL DISASTER



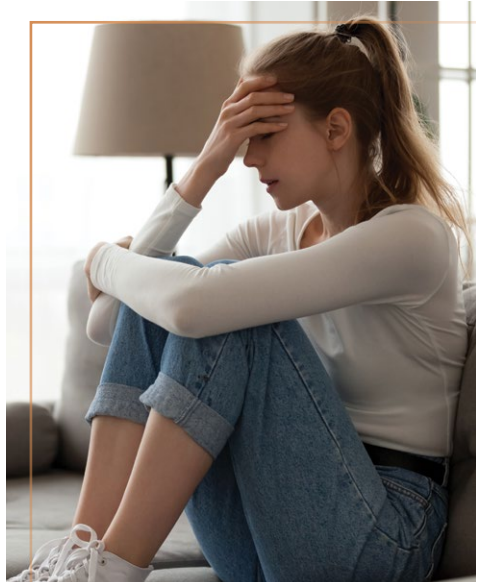
Joel speaks of a time of disaster, a time of locusts and famine. He describes a time of overwhelming disaster for the people of Judah. The first chapter speaks of the sorrow and mourning that are experienced by every level of society in the face of famine. It was a disaster

beyond their control that threatened their very existence. Today, many are experiencing great difficulty, with soaring inflation, unemployment, pandemics, wars and food insecurity. Unlike in Joel's time, we still have food available in our stores, but our ability to purchase what we need is diminishing. The price of bread in Israel just increased by 36%. Ukraine, one of the world's largest grain producers, has been unable to provide grain because of the ongoing war with Russia. This war has also caused fuel prices to increase dramatically, which has caused costs of nearly everything to increase. This is a worldwide problem. Some places are experiencing drought. In the aftermath of a worldwide pandemic, many find their income reduced, while at the same time, prices are soaring. Joel describes a time of despair, and I wonder how many people today are depressed, anxious, fearful and without hope.

CRY OUT TO GOD

In this time of devastation, God gave the prophet something to communicate to the people. *“Gird yourselves and lament, you priests; wail you who minister before the altar; come, lie all night in sackcloth, you who minister to my God...Consecrate a fast, call a sacred assembly; gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land into the house of the LORD your God, and cry out to the LORD”* (Joel 1:13a–14).

In a time when the world is wringing its hands, when world leaders don't know what to do, God's people are called to action. Now is the time for all who truly call upon the name of the Lord to intercede for our nations, our world and our economy. The prophet describes this intercession in very serious terms. It was time for seriousness, a time to fast, to gather together in prayer and to weep before the Lord.



TIMES OF WAR

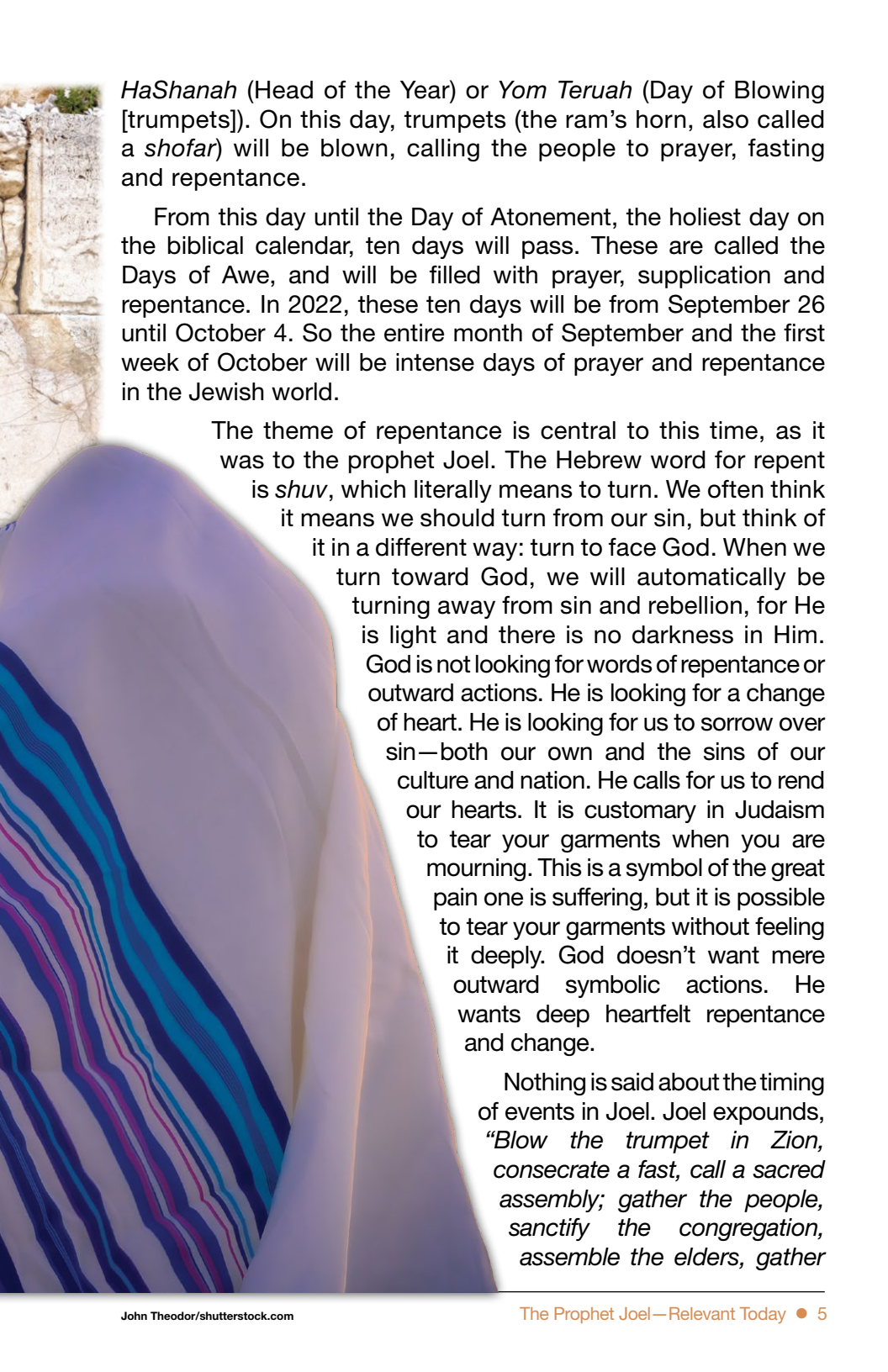
Joel 2 describes the day of the Lord as a terrible time, a time of war and invasion. Natural disaster (locusts and famine) was followed by terrifying war. Today we see such a combination as well. Disaster is following disaster in our world with harsh consequences. Many mourn those they have lost to disease. Others despair over their financial situation, while others mourn those lost to war. Over 30,000 Jewish refugees have arrived in Israel since the invasion of Ukraine by Russia. We listen to their accounts of killing, bodies lying in the streets, being threatened at gunpoint, buildings destroyed and lack of food and other necessities. We see the PTSD they suffer from in the aftermath of severe trauma. We weep with them over all that is lost.

REPENT

“Now, therefore,” says the LORD, ‘Turn to Me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning.’ So rend your heart, and not your garments; return to the LORD your God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness; and He relents from doing harm. Who knows if He will turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind Him—a grain offering and a drink offering for the Lord your God?” (Joel 2:12–14).

On the biblical calendar, there are times set aside for repentance and mourning. The Day of Atonement, or *Yom Kippur* in Hebrew, is preceded by 40 days of repentance. The month of *Elul* started on August 28. It is a month of preparation for the fall holy days. During these 30 days, there is an increased prayer effort and concentration of repentance. At the end of *Elul*, the month of *Tishrei* begins. The first of *Tishrei* is an important day on the biblical calendar. It is the Feast of Trumpets, also known in Hebrew as *Rosh*





HaShanah (Head of the Year) or *Yom Teruah* (Day of Blowing [trumpets]). On this day, trumpets (the ram's horn, also called a *shofar*) will be blown, calling the people to prayer, fasting and repentance.

From this day until the Day of Atonement, the holiest day on the biblical calendar, ten days will pass. These are called the Days of Awe, and will be filled with prayer, supplication and repentance. In 2022, these ten days will be from September 26 until October 4. So the entire month of September and the first week of October will be intense days of prayer and repentance in the Jewish world.

The theme of repentance is central to this time, as it was to the prophet Joel. The Hebrew word for repent is *shuv*, which literally means to turn. We often think it means we should turn from our sin, but think of it in a different way: turn to face God. When we turn toward God, we will automatically be turning away from sin and rebellion, for He is light and there is no darkness in Him. God is not looking for words of repentance or outward actions. He is looking for a change of heart. He is looking for us to sorrow over sin—both our own and the sins of our culture and nation. He calls for us to rend our hearts. It is customary in Judaism to tear your garments when you are mourning. This is a symbol of the great pain one is suffering, but it is possible to tear your garments without feeling it deeply. God doesn't want mere outward symbolic actions. He wants deep heartfelt repentance and change.

Nothing is said about the timing of events in Joel. Joel expounds, *“Blow the trumpet in Zion, consecrate a fast, call a sacred assembly; gather the people, sanctify the congregation, assemble the elders, gather*

the children and nursing babes; let the bridegroom go out from his chamber, and the bride from her dressing room. Let the priests, who minister to the LORD, weep between the porch and the altar; let them say, ‘Spare Your people, O LORD, and do not give your heritage to reproach, that the nations should rule over them. Why should they say among the peoples, “Where is their God?”’” (Joel 2:15–17). This is a remarkable picture of the Feast of Trumpets and the 10 Days of Awe.

HEALING FOLLOWS REPENTANCE

Perhaps one of the most quoted Scriptures is found in 2 Chronicles 7:13–14. In this passage, God describes a time of difficulty and how to get out of it. *“When I shut up heaven and there is no rain, or command the locusts to devour the land, or send pestilence among My people, if My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.”*

The same kind of assurance is found in Joel. *“Then the LORD will be zealous for His land, and pity His people. The LORD will answer and say to His people, ‘Behold I will send you grain and new wine and oil, and you will be satisfied by them; I will no longer make you a reproach among the nations’” (Joel 2:18–19).*

BLESSING FOLLOWS REPENTANCE

Joel, inspired by the Spirit of God, tells that the land will be blessed (2:18, 21–22). He tells the children of Israel to be glad: *“Be glad then, you children of Zion, and rejoice in the LORD your God; for He has given you the former rain faithfully, and He will cause the rains to come down for you—the former rain, and the latter rain in the first month. The threshing floors shall be full of wheat, and the vats shall overflow with new wine and oil” (2:23–24).*

In Israel, we don’t generally receive any rain during the long summer season. From April to October, it is rare to have any rain. When the Lord promises “former rains,” that is rain that comes before the Feast of Tabernacles, when it is almost

miraculous to receive rain. The latter rains are rains that fall after Passover, again when it is unusual for it to rain. I love the promise of abundant grain, since today the world's grain supply is threatened by the loss of the harvest in Ukraine. What the Lord is promising is abundant life. This is the physical blessing—you won't starve! Then He promises the spiritual blessing: *“And it shall come to pass afterward that I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophecy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions. And also, on My menservants and on My maidservants I will pour out My Spirit in those days”* (2:28).

In Peter's sermon in Acts 2, he claims the events of that day were a fulfillment of this Scripture. Yet many scholars believe this was a partial fulfillment and the fullness will be with the coming of Messiah.

IT ISN'T OVER YET

Read on in Joel and you will find the judgment on the nations that mistreat the people and nation of Israel (chapter 3). You will find that there are difficult days foretold *“before the coming of the great and awesome day of the LORD”* (2:31b).

HOPE REIGNS

Joel's prophetic writings have a message of hope. *“And it shall come to pass that whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved. For in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be deliverance, as the LORD has said, among the remnant whom the LORD calls”* (2:32).

Interestingly the word translated “remnant” could just as easily be translated “remainder.” That reminds me of the promise in Ezekiel 39:28 that says that God wants to bring all the Jewish people home, leaving none behind. I believe that God's covenant with Israel is eternal and we will see the remainder rescued.

The last two verses are a great promise which shows the eternity of God's covenant blessings, *“But Judah shall abide forever, and Jerusalem from generation to generation. For I will acquit them of the guilt of bloodshed, whom I had not acquitted; for the LORD dwells in Zion”* (Joel 3:20–21).

CHALLENGE

Let's join with the Jewish people in repentance, fasting and prayer during August 28–October 4, 2022, the days leading up to the day God ordained for all time: the Day of Atonement. Let's carry out 2 Chronicles 7:14 and watch God pour out His blessings once again.



Bibliography

The Nelson Study Bible: New King James Version. USA: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1997.

Trei Asar I/Twelve Prophets I. ArtScroll Tanach Series. New York: ArtScroll Mesorah Publications, 1995.

Scripture is taken from the New King James Version, unless otherwise noted.

TERMINOLOGY:

Many of our readers are seasoned supporters of Israel while others are just beginning to understand the importance of standing with God's chosen nation; some prefer the use of Hebrew names and terms, while others are comfortable with more traditional Christian terminology. Because we want to show respect to all of our readers while providing an enjoyable educational experience, we are making every effort to use both terms whenever possible. The following are some of the most common examples:

- Jesus (Yeshua)
- *Tanakh* (Old Testament or OT) – *Tanakh* is an acronym used in Judaism which stands for *Torah*, *Neviim* or Prophets and *Ketuvim* or Writings.
- Writings of the Apostles (New Testament or NT)
- *Torah* (Gen.–Deut.)

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