

4 Shevat, 5772 (28/01/12) *Community Our Corporate Spiritual Identity* J. M. Terrett
Toxic Fellowship

Bo Enter His Irresistible Grace

Torah: Ex. 10:1-13:16

(1) 10:3: "Moses and Aaron went into Pharaoh and said to him: thus says YHVH, the G-d of the Hebrews. How long will you refuse to humble yourself before Me? Let my people go that they may serve me."

(2) 11:3: "YHVH caused the people to find grace in the eyes of the Egyptians; Moses himself was highly esteemed in the country of Egypt in the eyes of the servants of Pharaoh and in the eyes of the people."

(3) 12:14: "You shall conserve the memory of this day and you shall celebrate it as a festival in honour of the L-RD. You shall celebrate it as a perpetual law for your descendants.

(4) 13:16: "It shall be as a sign upon your hand and as frontlets between your eyes, because it was by a powerful hand that YHVH made you to come out of Egypt."

Haftarah: Jer. 46:13-28

(5) 46:25: "YHVH of Hosts, the G-d of Israel says: behold I will chastise Amon and No (Thebes), Pharaoh, Egypt and her gods and her kings – Pharaoh and those who trust in him."

(6) 46:27: "And you, my servant Jacob, do not be afraid and do not be alarmed, Israel! For, behold I will deliver you from the far off land. I will deliver your posterity from the country where they are captive. Jacob shall return and enjoy rest and tranquility and there will be nobody to trouble him."

Brit Chadashah: Rom. 9:14-19

(7) 9:16: "Therefore, it does not depend on the one who wishes it or on the one who runs, but on G-d who shows mercy:"

Ps. 77 (Jewish hero, the Egyptians who joined Israel)

Verses: Gal. 5:13-15; I Cor. 11:17-22; James 2:1-4

As we examine our corporate spiritual identity, I want to avoid two extremes – I do not want to be either, too **idealistic**, nor too **pessimistic**. Some people look at the verses which speak of the wonder and of the glory of our fellowship as believers and they see the life of believers as the most wonderful place for friends to grow together, and love each other and help each other in the midst of a dark and dying world. Other people, who have been burned by believers and by congregations, see the hypocrisy and the double standards which plague too many communities and have very little respect for organized religion and those people who practice it.

I want to examine three passages with you today and look at the **dark side of fellowship** – what I call toxic fellowship, when the negative, carnal and foolish side of human nature pushes away the spiritual potential of true fellowship and leaves something toxic and poisonous instead.

One of the most unpredictable features of how we relate to each other is the **voluntary nature** of this interaction. You see habits are just disciplines we have decided to adopt, but they are never automatic reflexes, or people would never get out of shape or gain so much weight.

In Gal. 5:13-15 Paul deals with this liberty in a way which is often misunderstood. He is speaking about the freedom we have not to be tied to an arbitrary system of ritual observances which we have to perform at the right time and in the right order, in order to know the L-rd and in order to walk with Him – as if we were **spiritual robots**, doing everything by remote control, according to some programming over which we have no control.

That would be too easy. When we come to faith, we come willingly and adopt disciplines which will help us develop good spiritual health and one of these is fellowship, where will voluntarily choose to care for one another and swerve each other.

However, if we use this liberty as an excuse to try and run each other's lives or judge one another, then that which is supposed to help us will destroy us. I have heard it said that an **intense workout** produces as much stress on our bodies as a session of torture, but the difference is that the one wants to push us to our limits and to build up our strength and the other wants to push us pass our limits and to destroy us.

It is so easy to get offended and even to give offense and to fight and argue and to find fault and act like the grumbling crew that turned the joy of the exodus from Egypt into a relational nightmare. It is true that nothing is ever really good enough, if you look hard enough and there is always room to point out how it could have been done better and to show people how they could have done it better – and to make it look like we are trying to do it for their own good (when really it is for our own good, to make us feel better or to get back at them or to make look worse for our benefit).

This kind of **character assassination** is quite subtle and these kinds of judgments can be delivered with a smile or a pat on the shoulder, but are easily identified by their fascination with the negative criticisms and the put downs which are really just disguises for bullies and busybodies to use to take over and run things and to crush and shush anyone who gets in their way.

How do you deal with these kinds of assaults? Sometimes I am convinced that the people who fall into this kind of behaviour, just need to be faced down and quietly put in their place, like Paul did – by being firm and friendly and by saying that describing any situation as **win/lose scenario** is to misunderstand the purpose of our fellowship. It is based on forgiveness and on a love which is not always looking for a fight, but let's move on to our next passage: I Cor 11:17-22.

Besides the ones who want to bully and to argue and take over, there are those who may wish to use our gatherings as social functions instead of as spiritual gatherings and this can be toxic because we are not called to form a group where the point is to eat and to drink and to establish some kind of **social hierarchy**, where those who have a lot dominate over those who have less or where the needs of those who have less pass after the needs of those who have more.

Today we are going to be celebrating the L-rd's table, which was taken from the Passover Seder and which allows us to look into our souls as we do during the season of **Yom Kippur** and to bring our lives back into alignment with His Word and with His purposes.

We gather to consider spiritual truth and to evaluate our performance of His commandments, not to show off our wardrobe or to boast about our accomplishments during the week.

There will always be a solemn component to our gatherings that does not have to take away from their joyfulness, but which should always cause us to pause and to reflect on the meaning of our lives and on how well our spirituality is doing, whether we have a lot or only a very little, which brings me to the last passage: James 2:1-4.

Some might feel that spirituality and walking with the L-rd is a contest – sort of like seeing who can be the most spiritual and who is the most “worthy” or which kind of people do we want to attract to get the best community going. In other words sometimes people might want to look at people as **assets** or as **liabilities** and may want to cater to those who appear to have the most to offer, spiritually or financially.

This kind of approach is toxic because it mirrors how people in the world arrange their lives and their “groups”. We are never to look at ourselves like some kind of **wannabe country club** where we let the richest and the most talented occupy the best positions and where people of lesser gifting are kept in lesser places. ***Our position in the world does not matter to the L-RD; it is our place in Him and in His community which matters and which should matter to us.***

We are not trying to form a kind of **spiritual elite** where special people with lots of money are those who run the show, just like in the world. We want to build a community which resembles a family, where everyone is cherished, regardless of their wealth, their power or their talent. We need to see everyone as a precious commodity that has a place in the community which they do not have to earn, as much as they have to discover and grow into.

All of us have spiritual gifting which will enrich our community and which are not measured in the same way as in the society at large.

It would be possible to talk more about these kinds of toxic fellowship, but I wanted to touch on them so we can learn to avoid them, remove them and not fall into them as we grow and develop as a *dynamic community of Jews and Gentiles who are discovering the wonder of what it means to grow together in Him and in each other.*

We need to avoid the bully, critical trap, where we are always pointing out the negative, instead of figuring out how we can serve and how we can help and become part of the improvement, instead of sitting back and sniping, griping (and using the **hush and shush** if we are called to task over it.

We need to avoid turning our gatherings into purely social gatherings which do not focus on the spiritual realities we are called to embrace and to examine as the central part of why we gather together. It is fun to meet and to talk and to share, but our **main reason** for gathering is to examine ourselves and to examine His Word and to offer comfort, counsel and help to one another as fellow pilgrims and not just to pass the time together as if we were just cruise buddies looking for a good time.

Finally, we are not to gather to form some kind of spiritual elite, where the most talented ones lead the way and the less able are shuffled off to the side because they have less to offer. We are to be a community which recognizes the **spiritual giftedness** of all its members and we are to help one another find our place in the community, so that we can function as an extended family which recognizes the value of each member equally and does not place some ahead or behind others.

How about you? I have said that I do not want to be neither too idealistic. I realize every community encounters problems – it is how we resolve these challenges which will determine our spiritual strength and how well we function as a team together. We will have to learn **good spiritual habits** and we will have to unlearn bad spiritual habits, if we want to make real progress as a community in our corporate spiritual identity.

We will need to learn not to be critical, always having to be on guard and watching our back. We will build a safe place where no biting or devouring occurs. We will need to be a place where spiritual values and spiritual progress are the reason we gather, so that we are always much more than just a social club. We will also have to learn to not build a community where different people are looked at as if they had different levels of spiritual worth. We need to learn to look at each other as **family members**, where we are welcomed and cherished, instead of brow beaten and assigned a position related to size of our purse, the sound of our voice, or how good we look.

This is what we want to build at B'nai Chayim. We want redemptive fellowship that is not only not toxic, but that is also able to deal with toxic behaviour when we encounter it and give people an opportunity to abandon it and learn to function positively in their corporate spiritual identity in our midst.

No fighting, biting, kicking, hushing or shushing.

No ignoring of our spirituality, as we jockey for the best social position.

No building of an elite where people are measured as more or less valuable based on their contribution, instead of being valued equally because they belong to us as members of the same **generational, extended family** of Jews and Gentiles who are learning to walk with the King through the twists and turns of this life.

Let's pray.