

2 Adar 2, 5776 (12/03/16) **There's a Hole in the Bucket Dear Liza!** J. M. Terrett

Pekudei Accountings of (Sherri Barsy, Torah Provider)

Torah: Exodus 38:21-40:38

Haftarah: I Kings 7:51-8:21

Brit Chadashah: Hebrews 8:1-12

(Sharon pp. 85,87) **Ps. 45**

Jewish Hero: Hanna.

Torah Carrier: Donna.

L-rd's Table

Chazak, chazak, v'Nitchazek

Passage: ***Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! Because you pay the tithe of mint, dill, and cumin, and you have ignored that which is more important in the Law: righteousness, mercy and faithfulness – this is what you should have practised, without neglecting the other things.***

Some of us old folks know this old folk song which was made famous in the sixties by the calypso singer Harry Belafonte. Liza wants her man to fetch some water from the well, but he says that he can't because there is a hole in the bucket. She tells him to fix the hole with straw and he says the straw is too long, so she tells him to cut the straw.

He asks her with what he should cut the straw and she says with an axe, but he says that the axe is too dull and she says to sharpen it. He asks her with what he should sharpen the axe and she says to use a stone, but he says that stone is too dry. She tells him to wet the stone with water and he asks her with what he should fetch the water. She replies that he should fetch the water with a bucket, to which he replies: "there's a hole in the bucket dear Liza, dear Liza, there's a hole in the bucket, dear Liza, a hole".

It is an amusing song and I enjoyed listening to it again online as I was getting this message ready. It is really an ode to both laziness and to the stalling and triangulation which many people experience as they try to get important things done. This morning, I want to talk to you about spiritual priorities, so that we can avoid being stalled by all and any holes which our lives or our enemies put in our buckets as we end up doing unimportant things first.

I selected one of my favourite passages on spiritual priorities which contains a version of the big spiritual three (righteousness, mercy and faithfulness) and which also appear in similar versions in other passages of Scripture. There is also a call to prioritize in Jeremiah 9:23, 24 (steadfast love, justice and righteousness) and also in Micah 6:8 (righteousness, mercy and humility). The words in Hebrew have similar meanings to ones Matthew uses in Greek and they summarize what should be our practical reaction to our faith in the L-rd as they summarize the kind of obedience the L-rd requires of us and what is really important to Him.

We live in a society where success is measured by achievements – in monetary gain, in societal status or in great personal achievements and these are sought out even at the cost of personal happiness, friendships and family. In the realm of spirituality, believers also want to set goals so that they can accomplish great things in the L-rd, but there is often a problem.

The goals we set are too often like the disputes among the apostles about who was the greatest among us, and it can also be about who loves the L-rd best and who serves Him with the most faithfulness and with the most faith. It becomes a contest to achieve, instead of a commitment to serve.

Among the Pharisees and many modern rabbinic Jews, it becomes a contest to be the one who can say: "I'm more Jewish than you are" "I am more observant than you are" and the Messiah pronounces this woe on those who are so conscious of the minutia, the details of serving the L-rd, that they lose the big picture and become hypocrites.

Well, how does this apply to the hole in the bucket? Last weekend we studied the lives of David and Saul and when Saul forfeited his right to be king, the prophet Samuel went in search of a replacement and he arrived in David's home and was greatly impressed by David's large and talented brothers. Samuel was told that none of these worthy men was the one whom the L-rd wanted to anoint and when the younger son was singled out, the L-rd told Samuel that the L-rd always looks at things from a different perspective. He looks at the heart and not at the outward appearance, which he is not impressed by.

In just the same way, He is more concerned with the inner attitude than He is with the outer accomplishments. The almighty Creator will always make sure that His will is accomplished and He will use a startling variety of people and circumstances in order for this to happen. In one instance he used a donkey, in another he used a pagan sovereign and in yet another, he used a virtuous young Jewish bride (Queen Esther).

As believers, we need to understand that the logistics and the details are not the hard part of walking with the L-rd, rather it is the inner reality which each of us struggles with that is His main concern. For years there was a republican MP in the British parliament who worked for the abolition of the monarchy. When Prince Charles was a young man, he said that the prince was quite an exceptional young man, but who wouldn't be with all the massive advantages and privileges he was born into.

Without any disrespect to the royal family, anybody in that position would be bound for a great deal of success, without the slightest effort and without having any of the usual character strengths from which success should be derived. Before our G-d and King being the right person is more important than being in the right place or even doing mighty things, because spirituality is not about impressing G-d with how great and talented we are.

Our King has all the ability to arrange for His will to be accomplished, but before all else He is seeking for a people who will share the heart priorities which actually reflect the nature and image of G-d, everything else should be seen as secondary and not really what our walk with the King is all about.

This does not mean that we shouldn't set priorities, nor that we should not seek to accomplish great things for our King, but He will always be more impressed by our widow's mite than by all the gold and silver and precious jewels in the world which we could offer to Him.

Sometimes we get stalled when we want to climb every mountain and ford every stream and sometimes it seems that every bucket in our lives has multiple holes and the straw is always too long, the axe is always too dull and the stone is always too dry. But I wonder if we are not missing the amusing point of the song. We will not always be stalled by the buckets in our lives

as much as we are stalled by the attitudes of our heart and the habits of our lives.

Before I got so sick, I was working on my doctorate and I still have lots of plans for the shul and for the Messianic movement, both in Alberta and around the world. It is not wrong to have these plans, but it is sad to feel like we have accomplished little or nothing when the best laid plans of mice and men gang aft a-gley (get derailed and are not achieved). If we measure our worth by our achievements, instead of by our heart attitude and the habits of our inner spirituality, then we will indeed pay the tithe of mint and dill and cumin and miss out on what is really important to the L-rd and to the Law. We will wallow in the unimportant.

The real treasures of the Torah are righteousness, mercy and faithfulness and it is these we should actively pursue with all our might, without neglecting the minor details in the process. This does not mean that we should be sloppy and careless with the Word or have a happy go lucky, hit and miss approach to faith and obedience. In a discussion of creation versus evolution, I was once asked what difference does it make what you believe and I heard the hissing of the snake in the background (has G-d really said).

The whole point of the Torah is to worship the true King of the cosmos without slipping into any forms of functional idolatry or using our faith to try and control or manipulate G-d. This is followed by a complete submission to the central spiritual and moral priorities of His law, and where the details take a minor place. King Saul wrongly confused the central principles with the details and was rejected as King for his disobedience.

When we talk about the hole in the bucket, we are not promoting disobedience of any kind, but a heart obedience which we are called to promote and cherish above all things, even at the expense of letting the minor details take care of themselves. Without pushing the analogy too far, the man in the song who lamented the hole in the bucket was actually finding all and any apparently valid excuses to avoid doing the work which he did not want to do.

Sometimes we will be prevented from doing what we want to do, not because we are trying to find excuses not to do the work we want to accomplish, but because we measure our worth by the tasks we are able to accomplish, rather than by the heart attitudes and life habits we are called to cherish and to maintain. Let's look at these core values and let the bucket drip because we do not want anything to get in the way of serving the L-rd from the inside out, so that we make it all about Him and not all about us (look at me, momma, look at me momma, aren't I amazing).

The first of the big three is righteousness. Now the order of the three and the slight variations in wording in other passages is inconsequential because they describe the same core spiritual values. Righteousness is a commitment to do things right according to the Word of the L-rd, especially as a reflection of our heart commitment to the Ten Commandments.

In the world it is a different story. People are told to get all they can, can all they get and sit on the lid – to step on anyone who gets in our way and to push everything out of our way until we are the king of the castle. We should never let this infection spread among us as a safe, caring community of believers who are committed to righteousness from the heart in every area of our lives, individually and corporately.

The pathway to our success should never be strewn with people we have crushed or lives we have ruined on our way to the White House! Success should not come at any cost.

Righteousness is too precious to violate or bypass and when we do, we become spiritual victims who are crushed and ruined spiritually by our violation of the straight and narrow path which is non-negotiable before the L-rd.

Righteousness is its own reward and without a commitment to live a righteous life, our faith is vain and as dead as a corpse which has ceased to breathe. We become like so many Jacob Marley's dragging the chains behind us that we have forged in life because we did not make His core spiritual and moral values the hard drive which drives our hearts and lives.

Let's look at the second one, mercy, which is learning not to kick a man when he is down and to forgive seven times seventy times a day, even those who really tick us off and hurt us.

When we work with people who have experienced great brokenness, we need to understand that some wounds take longer to heal than others and that even great failure does not disqualify anyone from walking with the L-rd, providing they learn the greatest key to their eventual freedom – repentance. It has been said that if you give a man enough rope he will hang himself, but in the L-rd we want to give people enough rope to pull themselves out of the pit and out of the snares of the enemy, so that which is wounded be made better and not worse. We want to give them time and support for success and not condemn them to failure.

I find it hard to give up on people and to quit praying for them, not because I suffer from an excessive amount of empathy (I call it the empathaholic blues), but because I understand the massive impact which trauma, pain and abuse can have on people who become functionally disabled because of the emotional, spiritual or even physical damage which they have encountered. Some people take the blame and hide behind it and use their problems as an excuse not to fix the holes in their bucket and they go through life playing the blame game or the self-pity trap as they weep and whine and look for pity, and not mercy.

Mercy allows all the Ruth's and Rahab's and Egyptian and Persian refugees to seek refuge beneath the wings of the Almighty even if it takes them time to be healed from the damage which they encountered while they languished in the darkness of the world. Mercy also allows those who have been abused and offended by the carnal stupidity of rebellious believers to take the time to heal and recover, because the L-rd came to save sinners of whom I am without a doubt the incontestable chief. I'll fight anyone for the title.

I do not nor will not, easily indulge the fools who want to play silly, carnal games because they like to fight and argue or dominate and bully or are just too lazy (or cold and cruel) to want to fix their bucket because they have no intention of walking with the L-rd or working for Him.

It is not always easy to tell the difference and some forms of damage may permanently partially disable us in this life, but we need to be given the chance to learn to limp along the straight and narrow of the L-rd's path and not wallow in the pain and confusion which the world wants to distract and disable us with – and here I am talking about alcoholics, drug addicts, abuse survivors, prostitutes, gay people and even violent and deceitful criminals of any stripe who truly want a chance to change, come clean and get their inner lives in shape and learn to walk with the L-rd in His healing light(I Corinthians 6:9-11).

Mercy is not for cowards or the squeamish, nor is it for the self-righteous and the judgmental who do not want to get their hands dirty dealing with broken people who truly want our help.

We were not put into this world to show people and the L-rd how wonderful we are, but to reach out to the victims of sin and darkness and show them how to live in the light as we are in the light, so that His blood can cleanse them and us from all unrighteousness as we learn with Rachel to surrender our idols and bury them far from our hearts and lives.

It is still a commitment to take up our sword against those who would build golden calves in our midst or promote the worship of any modern versions of Baal or Astarte, not because we are any better, but because we have tasted and seen how good the L-rd is and want His mercy and His sacrifice to set us free and cleanse all and any darkness which wants to hide in our hearts and lives, personally or in our shul. Tough love is stronger than sin.

Let's look at the third core moral spiritual priority and it is faithfulness (or goodness or humility). People will come into our lives and wander out of our lives for as long as we live, but there is one core quality they should find in abundance during their dealings with us as believers – faithfulness. Some translators use the word faith, as they do in the fruit of the Spirit, but faith is directed towards G-d and faithfulness emanates from G-d and should also do so from us.

We need to be people whom others can count on, not because we are seeking any advantage or are trying to take control or manipulate, but because, just as G-d will always be faithful to His Word, we also need to be faithful to His Word in all of our dealings with anyone. We need to do this, not to look good, but to be good out of gratitude towards the One whose great faithfulness and goodness has never let us down.

We need to be people whom others know they can count on to be there and to stay there when others have gotten bored or busy or have run away. We may be outnumbered or totally alone with incredible pressure trying to pull us under and cause us to abandon the L-rd and His Word, but we will not cave or give in. Sadly many who call themselves liberal Christians and Jews are really those who have abandoned the teachings of the Torah to believe in the greatest deception of the ages (Evolution) and to practice all kinds of moral abominations (materialism, fornication – which includes homosexuality and abortion and euthanasia and other unethical medical malpractice).

Faithfulness is not afraid to make a stand and speak up (even squeak up) because it does not seek to please others but only the One who has called us into His glorious light and love. There may be a hole in our bucket because we really do not want to do what we know we should. There may be a hole in our bucket because we are trying so hard to do things which really do not matter, to make us look good, successful and powerful. There may be a hole in our bucket because we are focused on the minutia and have forgotten the more important matters of the Law. We may be trying to fix the wrong bucket.

We are not here to please anyone less than our King and we are here to accomplish the greatest matters of His Law, whether He foists us into the White House or traps us in Buckingham Palace (St. James palace to the cognoscenti). Instead of wishing we were elsewhere, leaping tall buildings and slaying evil dragons and doing other things to impress people and win the attention and approbation we crave, we should be taking to heart the core matters of the Law and giving our lives over to the big three: righteousness, mercy and faithfulness.

No matter what obstacles we encounter and no matter how much damage happens to us, as long as we are focused on these central matters in our own lives and in the lives of those who

come into and out of our lives, we shall succeed in that which matters to the L-rd. We shall also avoid being ravaged by the birds of doubt, shrivelled on the rocks of temptation or choked by the cares, the riches and the pleasures of this life.

Our bucket may have a bunch of holes in it which prevent us from doing all we want and being all that we feel we should be in the best of all possible worlds, but as long as we let the details take care of themselves and focus on G-d's bigger picture then His righteousness, mercy and faithfulness will cover us like the cloud, lead us like the flame and feed us with manna and quail as our clothes do not wear out and our feet do not swell, because no enemy will be able to defeat us as we successfully wage the true battle of the ages, which is to walk with Him from the heart according to the core teachings of His Word.

As long as we accomplish His righteousness and His mercy and His faithfulness in whatever happenstances we wander through in this life, whatever else we achieve pales in comparison to this central task. There is a hole in the bucket, dear Liza, but I want to fix the right hole in the right bucket and not waste my time and energy on the holes and on the buckets which don't make no never mind to the only person in the universe whose opinion really matters, whether or not I am able to finish my doctorate or do any of the other things which are unimportant in the economy of G-d.

It is good to set goals and have high standards and want to achieve great things, but not at the cost of the greatest things. If G-d puts a hole in your bucket, maybe you should start looking for the right bucket, because in Him there is nothing which comes our way, be it ever so good or ever so bad which can keep us from doing that which is important to Him or from being the kind of people He wants us to be or from having the heart priorities He is calling us to give our soul's best effort for. Let Liza take care of herself because we are going to fix the right bucket and plug the right holes, in our heart first, then with all the unimportant mint, dill and cumin which are in our lives, but which we will never allow to steal our primary attention away from righteousness, mercy and faithfulness, l'olam va'ed.