

Emor! **Say!** **Celebrating His Holiness as a Lifestyle**

Torah: Leviticus 21:1-24:23

Haftarah: Ezekiel 44:15-31

Brit Chadashah: Luke 14:12-24

(Bernie p. 145) **Ps. 42**

Jewish Hero: Josiah

Torah carrier: Julie

This week's Torah Portion deals with two major themes and two minor themes and reflects the teaching process which the people went through as they camped around the mountain during the first year of their freedom. The Haftarah portion reiterates the role of the priests in keeping the people walking in holiness, once they have completed the captivity and have returned to the land. The New Testament portion reflects the false excuses the people were succumbing to so that they did not respond to the banquet call of the L-rd.

At the mountain, the people were being taught to make their lives revolve around the festivals of the L-rd so that they would focus their lives on putting His commandments into practice and learn the practical holiness which is still the call of the L-rd to believers, to the Jew first and also to the Gentile. It takes a while for anyone to integrate the Word of G-d into their lives, but until our lives become the place where the integration of His Word occurs, He is not prepared to take us further or teach us anything more until we have learned to master the basics of what it means to walk with Him.

The first major theme of our portion is the priesthood and far from setting up this special group of people as elite above the people, the L-rd intended them to be models of both the holiness which we are called to and of the holiness which the L-rd alone possesses. Nothing flawed could be offered to G-d and no one with a physical flaw could serve in the Holy Place.

Instead of looking at this set of requirements as perfectionism which excluded handicapped people from serving the L-rd, we need to see it as a measure which would prevent people from bringing the L-rd down to their level. His holiness can never be compromised or infected and He wants to teach us never to become spiritually compromised and never to allow the world to infect us and begin to drag us away from His light, back into the darkness we were set free from. He is the unchanging One who wants to change us, redeem us and set us free from all the stains and defilement of the world.

The second major theme deals with the annual festival cycle, which is also dealt with at length in Numbers and summarized again in Deuteronomy. It is interesting that the Festival of the New Moon is only mentioned in Numbers, but a discussion of what this means is something I want someone to bring up at Yeshiva because it is a whole other question. In this portion, He wants to teach us that the primary festival of the L-rd is the Sabbath and that the seven annual harvest based festivals are also Sabbaths where the redeemed nation will learn to rest in the L-rd as their primary strategy once they have entered the Land. Our lives are to be festival driven, not conflict driven, based on resting in Him and not on endless struggles.

We will always encounter struggles and the evil trio (the flesh, the world and the enemy) will always try and derail our spirituality, but the L-rd wants us to see that learning to rest in His provision is our calling. No matter which mountains we have to climb and whatever valleys we

have to struggle through, our lives are called to remain Sabbath powered and festival driven. This means our lives must always be about what He is saying to us and what He is doing in our lives because He remains our single destination and resting in Him remains the only way He wants us to relate to life, no matter how good or how bad things get.

The first minor issue deals with making sure there is always oil for the tabernacle menorah and that the twelve loaves of presentation were always offered on the Sabbath. His light must always be burning in our hearts and lives so that we do not lose our way in the darkness and we must always be feeding ourselves on the bread of His Word and never become distracted or influenced by anything that would take our attention or devotion away from focusing our lives on Him and His objectives for our lives, generation by generation until His kingdom is established in the New Heavens and on the New Earth.

The second minor issue dealt with the only case of sanctioned stoning recorded in the Torah. While the people camped around the mountain which shone with fire and which covered them with shade, the son of an Egyptian man and an Israelite woman resorted to cursing G-d in a dispute with an Israelite man. We are not given much detail and his ethnicity is mentioned solely to underscore that there are no exceptions to the laws which governed the camp. He wanted to use the L-rd as a weapon in a dispute with another community member or He got so mad that He turned his back on the L-rd in a dispute with a community member.

Our G-d is holy and wants to teach us to rest in Him as a lifestyle and He cannot be used or abused in quarrels which flare up in how we relate to each other. We belong to Him and He will not be dragged down to our level because He will always call us to rise up and learn to walk with Him at His level. We have to exercise care that we do not commit acts of spiritual violence against the L-rd or against each other and we should never forget who G-d is and what He is like. In a very real sense, good spiritual hygiene is as much a part of holiness as Sabbath observance and festival observance. Abusive behaviour towards the L-rd or towards each other is never to be tolerated.

The message of the portion is reflected in Ezekiel because our calling to holiness will always entail being Sabbath powered and festival driven – because no matter where we wander or what we wander through, holiness (being separated from the world and resting in the L-rd) will always be our calling and the response He wants us to exercise as we face whatever this life throws at us.

Refusing to heed this call is the subject of the New Testament portion and even though the blind and the lame and the defiled were excluded from serving in the tabernacle, they are never excluded from the banquet (from being Sabbath powered and festival driven). And if ever we fall short of this calling in our lives, He will call others, because it is only those who will listen and learn to walk with Him who are worthy of entering His rest and feasting with Him in His Kingdom when all the nonsense of life is over. Celebrating holiness is our calling.

Sermon: Hearing His Voice and Opening the Door

Passage: *Behold, I stand at the door and I knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come into Him, I will dine with Him and He with Me.* (Revelation 3:20)

This is the passage which lead me to the L-rd in 1972, some 44 years ago and today, I want to talk to you about the spiritual openness which is both what the L-rd is pursuing with those who have not yet come to faith and what He is calling us to maintain, once we have entered into a personal relationship with Him. It is the inability to hear the knocking and not being able to recognize the voice which leads people to turn their backs on the L-rd, both in the world and also among believers who should know better.

Well, how do you hear the knocking and how do you recognize the voice? Let me first make a few clarifications and then we will briefly examine the meaning of the kind of spiritual openness which should be at the centre of our walk with the L-rd as we live Sabbath powered and festival driven lives.

First, the door: It refers to our ability and our need to choose to walk with the L-rd as a lifestyle of listening and of dining. In the Torah portion, we spoke about resting in the L-rd as a lifestyle we are called to maintain as our primary response to everything and anything this life can throw at us. In our passage, hearing the knocking and recognizing the voice need to become staples of how we live our lives as we wander through this life on our way home to the final banquet, the marriage supper of the Lamb.

The voice which we hear and the Word which we read are saying the same thing and it does not refer to some kind of psychotic break where we hear voices telling us to commit strange, mysterious acts and behave in bizarre ways which make no sense. It means that the L-rd wants to first get our attention and then once He has it, He will speak to us with the same kind of clarity and intensity He used in His message to the churches.

Learning to hear the knocking and learning to hear the voice are the keys to dining, He with us and us with Him. Said another way, whenever we cease to listen to what the L-rd is saying to the churches we begin to lose the spiritual vitality and spiritual life which we need in order not to succumb to the cares, the riches and the pleasures of this fleeting world. Spiritual health and spiritual life are related concepts. Spiritual life comes when we accept the L-rd and invite Him into our lives. Spiritual health only remains as long as we continue to listen to the voice we first responded to.

As we continue to count down the Omer to Shavuot (Pentecost), we need to remind ourselves that if ever the L-rd does not have our attention and if ever we cease to be able to hear His voice in His Word, we are falling back into the spiritual sleep which the darkness of this world wants us to succumb to again. As believers, it is not enough for us to have heard and responded the voice of the L-rd as a one-time entrance experience into the faith. We need to remain attentive so that His knocking and His speaking are where we draw both our spiritual inspiration and spiritual strength from.

The passage has three sets of verbs: knocking, speaking and dining. It refers to three levels of communication which the L-rd is actively engaged in. He wants to speak to the world and offer them salvation through faith and repentance. He is speaking to individual believers to remind us that our salvation is a commitment to faith and obedience (stage two repentance). He is also speaking to the worldwide, generational community of believers to let us know that our calling to have faith and exercise obedience has a dining objective which involves dynamic intimacy with Him and with each other.

I am not afraid that the voice of radical Islam or the bellowing of evolutionary secularism will ever drown out the authentic voice of the L-rd, because His activity in this world is focused and persistent and no one is ever able to escape from it for long, whether they respond or try to ignore it. What I am more afraid of is that believers will be so busy with the cares, the riches and the pleasures of this life that they will grow hard of spiritual hearing and function as if they were still part of this life – and not live like citizens of the life which is to come.

I want to dialogue with people about the truths of G-d's Word and if that dialogue means engaging in a discussion about creationism or any aspect of biblical morality, I want to do so, not to win an argument and show them how wrong they are, but to help them engage in a dialogue with the voice of the L-rd which is knocking at the door of their hearts and lives. With all of our gadgets and our amazing affluence, people are still trying to figure out what life is all about and even though many will succumb to one of the myriad forms of pernicious modern mythologies which try to explain away G-d and His Word, basic life questions do not change and cannot be suppressed.

What does this all mean? What am I supposed to do about it? These are questions which will not go away and which only the Bible can adequately answer because the Gospel of our blessed Messiah is all about meaning and purpose. Once the L-rd got my attention and I responded to His knocking and heard His voice (and opened the door), I began a personal relationship with Him and learned to see life differently and learned to relate to life differently. This is the only kind of response which the L-rd would find acceptable and it is as we hear His knocking and hear His voice and invite Him into our hearts and lives that we begin a lifelong banquet where we feed our souls on the truths of His Word and escape from the moral folly and spiritual deception which is prowling around our planet, looking for new captives.

However, too many believers lose sight of the greatest spiritual reality we are called to embrace – listening for the knock, hearing the voice and opening the door – and learning to dine with Him. We all make choices as we go through various stages of our pilgrimage, but learning to go through these stages and learning to make these choices in a life which is based on hearing His voice and walking in faith and obedience, describes the only kind of spiritual openness which believers are called to embrace.

Once He has our attention and once we embrace faith, we embark on a learning curve of repentance and obedience under the direction of His voice because in all the noise and clamour of life, we remain tuned to listen for His knocking and to learn to open our doors to only His voice. We become listening people, ready to hear and to obey, nothing more or less. He has a message for the world. He has a message for individual believers. He also has a message for the generational, worldwide community of believers and it also involves listening with a call to dining. Believers face the challenges of a world which wants to assimilate us and either return us to Egypt or turn us into Canaanites and the means for this spiritual defeat to be accomplished is distraction and confusion – anything to get us to stop listening for the knock and the voice.

What are we opening our door to in our community? What are we feasting on? What are we listening to? Our world is darkening at an alarming pace as our belief system is not just mocked, but it is attacked and the pace of our marginalization is increasing. Both the school system and the legal system want to convince us that we have to abandon our primitive faith and become enlightened citizens, no longer chained by the shackles of religion. The amazing discoveries

of science and the technological advances of the last few centuries seem to make people feel they have explained the origin and meaning of life, even though the conclusions they reach have nothing to do with the evidence they have found.

Definitions of right and wrong are changing and what we have believed to be right is now being redefined as wrong and some of the arguments and justifications for our growing politically correct nightmare may initially seem to be reasonable, but as we listen to the voice of our Lord in His Word, we are set free from this creeping darkness. I want to conclude with a triple warning for us as a community of believers who have heard His knocking and who have heard His voice and who should be dining with Him as we live Sabbath powered and Festival driven lives.

First of all, the goals and objectives we set for ourselves in life; are they based on His Word or have we adopted the values and priorities of the world we have been set free from? We live in an incredibly materialistic, hedonistic world which pursues the perfect house, the best car and the most amazing vacation, while it ignores what really matters. There is a spiritual war being fought all around us and it is principally a conflict of allegiance – we are either vainly trying to build a better world in this life or we are focused on the world to come.

We are either seeing this world as the place to build the best life for ourselves, or we see it as a training ground so that we can exercise the values of the world to come as strangers and pilgrims who are only passing through this one. Yes, we want to defend the widow and the orphan and yes, we want to heal the sick, feed the poor and speak out on behalf of the oppressed and the downtrodden. This is because we are citizens of the world to come – we are ambassadors of the next life and our efforts to promote healing in this life (and social justice and economic reform) are part of a call to each new generation to learn to listen for the knock and to hear the voice and to open the door, because the Messiah is coming and this world is ending.

Next we need to make sure that we have not forgotten what it means to listen for His knock and to hear His voice and to open the door, daily and constantly, and not allow ourselves to become spiritually entitled, where our faith is made to serve our lives, instead of making our lives serve our faith as we learn to walk with Him, whatever else is going on in our lives.

What is He saying to you about your job? About your family? Your finances? Your friends? What is He saying to you about how you should be spending your time? What is He saying to you about how you should be dealing with conflicts and problems (challenges) in your life? What is He saying to you about the particular stage of life you are at in your pilgrimage from conception to the grave and beyond? How are your devotions? How powerful or how weak are your prayers? Are you listening to Him when He calls to you to speak to people in your life? Do you see the happenstances of your life as opportunities to react from faith and obedience and be light and salt or are you still trying to be the king of the castle? What is He saying to you on a regular basis? Are you listening for His knocking or have you padlocked the door?

Do you understand that the works of the flesh (anger, lust, greed, disputes, judging and condemning and pouting and complaining) prevent you from hearing Him when He knocks? Do you make listening to Him and listening for Him the main focus of your life (your day, your week, your year)? When believers are no longer aware of what he is saying to them, they are slipping into a spiritual coma, whether life and people are treating us well or not.

Spiritual basics never change; they are intended to change us. During his captivity on the island of Patmos, John is given a vision of the condition of his generation of the church and he gives us a vision of the final destruction of the world and the final victory of the L-rd over all the adversaries who oppose Him and His kingdom.

If the truth be told, it is neither the enemy, nor the beast, nor the harlot which together or separately represent the greatest threat to believers or to the believing community of any generation. In our passage we are told that the inability to hear the knocking and the inability to hear His voice and to open the door are the greatest threat to us as individual believers and to any generation or community of believers, to the Jew first and also to the Gentile.

He never stops knocking and He never stops speaking, but it is only as we open the door and let Him come in to us that we can dine with Him and He with us. John's generation was experiencing some of the most intense persecution in the history of the church and the synagogue, but the sevenfold message which the L-rd gave him for the churches loudly proclaims that when we walk with the King and follow His lead through His Word, then our lives are a perpetual spiritual feast and it is this feasting which is the only thing which should matter.

To be Sabbath powered and festival driven means listening for the knock and hearing the voice and opening the door as a steadfast lifestyle because He is faithful and He knows what is best for us, both in this life and in the life which is to come. If ever we feel we know better than Him through His Word, we are in greater spiritual danger than if all the hosts of the enemy were arrayed against us. As believers, we cannot be defeated by an open assault, so the enemy of our souls tries the next best thing – to get us to disconnect from the L-rd in all and any areas of our lives. May His knocking and His voice always be a part of our lives as we open the door and learn to feast with Him, daily and constantly, anything less is not worthy of our time and energy, to the Jew first and also to the Gentile.

Shabbat shalom campers.