

Bamidbar **In the Wilderness** **Packing Up to Move On**

Torah: Numbers 1:1-4:20

Haftarah: Hosea 1:10-2:20 (2:1-22)

Brit Chadashah: Romans 9:22-33

Reading: Sharon: pp. 85, 87 and Ps. 122. Jewish Hero: Miriam. Torah carrier: Bernie L-rd's Table

In my permanent list of Torah Portions, this one is listed as technical because it deals with the first census of the House of Jacob and sets out the four banners that the tribes were to camp under around the tabernacle. It also deals with counting the tribe of Levi, along with the first born of Israel. It ends with a description of how the House of Aaron was to go into the newly erected Tabernacle and wrap up everything, first in the most Holy place and then in the Holy place. Once these holy items were wrapped, they could be carried by Kohathites, except for the ark itself, which was carried by the sons of Aaron (and their descendants). They were never seen by the rank and file of Israel again in their unwrapped state.

Four important dates affect the final months which Israel spent camping around the mountain. It had taken them seven days to walk out of Egyptian controlled territory and a further 50 days to arrive at the mountain. In Exodus 40:17, it says that the tabernacle was put up on the first day of the first month of the second year. In Numbers 9:1 it says that the first Passover was celebrated in the first month of the second year. In Numbers 1:1, it says that the first census was taken in on the first day of the second month of the second year. In Numbers 10:11 it says that the first departure occurred on the twentieth day of the second month of the second year.

The camp had not been organized during their camping time and before they could move out towards the Promised Land, they had to be organized into four banners and move into their designated positions around the tabernacle. Then the Levites had to be organized into their camping and carrying positions. The portion ends with instructions on how the holy things had to be wrapped up and we can learn three lessons from these details.

First of all, whenever and wherever believers gather, He wants us to be organized, so that our giftedness can more efficiently be placed at the service of the whole community – sort of like a place for everybody and everybody in their place even if this is constantly changing.

Secondly, the whole point of our organization should be to maximize our potential to worship and serve the L-rd as we grow in our ability to walk with Him. We are pilgrims through this life and the primary function we need to engage in during our journey is to worship Him and keep Him as the central focus of our lives no matter what else is going on in our lives.

Lastly, our calling will always be a balance between our individual walk with the L-rd and our community expression of our faith, as we form cohesive and harmonious communities to meet the needs of the flock. Both of these walks combine to form our first and greatest witness to the world we are walking through, but never really belong to.

Israel had become a great nation and could now begin to fulfil her destiny to be a light to the nations as the organized camp prepared to move away from the mountain and take possession of the Holy Land, which was the original site of the Garden of Eden. There could be no darkness

or confusion among the ranks of the people of G-d and the way the camp was set up and the way it travelled was designed to make sure that their light shone and that none of the foolishness or darkness of the surrounding pagan nations was allowed to take root in their midst.

We are also called to organize ourselves with the presence of the L-rd as our central focus and worship of the L-rd as the central purpose of our lives. We also need to organize our community so that no darkness or foolishness of the world is allowed to take root in our midst, as we relate to one another in love and holiness.

All that we do and all that we are, needs to reflect the L-rd whom we serve as we walk with Him according to His Word. May the L-rd continue to give us wisdom and perseverance, so that, like the newly organized camp of Israel, we never depart from this unique calling, no matter how much planning and maintenance it takes to keep us all going together in the right direction. May the L-rd preserve us from all and any personal or community disorganization.

sermon: Learning to do it His Way: It Cuts Both ways

Passage: *For the Word of G-d is alive and powerful (efficient and full of energy), sharper than any double edged sword, penetrating, even to the dividing of soul and spirit, joints and marrow and it judges the thoughts and intents of the heart. For no creature is hidden from G-d, but everything is exposed and open before the eyes of the One to whom we must all give an account of ourselves.* (Hebrews 4:12, 13)

This is our second last Shabbat in our Shavuot series and we want to continue to keep our hearts and lives open to His scrutiny, so that we do not have any unpleasant surprises on the Day when it is no longer possible to make any changes or fix any problems. If we live every day in the awareness that our final examination is coming, we could either cringe and hide and attempt to conceal as much of desires and actions of our hearts and lives as possible, or we could rest in the assurance that what ever we cannot handle in this life, we can surrender to Him. In this way, we can make sure that all the decisions we make in our lives and how we relate to all the happenstances of our lives, will have a positive impact on how much of our lives in this world will count for His everlasting Kingdom.

I have entitled this message: It Cuts Both ways, because the Word of G-d not only teaches us the truths of G-d and His Kingdom, it also cuts deep into our hearts and lives to reveal hidden motivations and desires that we have and which we may not otherwise ever be willing to admit to. This is not just referring to our fleshly or sinful nature, but also to the inner drives and life themes which really make us tick, so that we do not go through life ignoring what is really important to us.

Often the measure of how much success a believer has in walking with the L-rd will be enhanced or diminished according to how well we really know ourselves and the motivations which drive our hearts. How well do you really know what makes you tick?

Our passage is preceded a passionate call for believers to learn the discipline of resting in what the L-rd has done and is still doing, and to respond with obedience to Him through His Word even through all the ups and downs which of life which swirl all around us. It is in part a realization His power and grace superintends the ultimate direction of our universe, over and above all the plots, schemes and crises which the affairs of mankind are prone to.

We are called to rest in faithful obedience as our major response to life as we wait for the ultimate rest which we shall enter, once His Kingdom comes and all the hopes and fears of all the years evaporate and wither away as if they never happened. In order for us to successfully seek first His Kingdom and His righteousness, we need the intimate scrutiny of His Word, which is not just an amazing document which we study, it is a living force within our hearts and lives which is studying us. In a very real sense, His word is performing an endless series of penetrating vivisections to help us determine what is really going on in the depths of our hearts and minds.

Part of this inner analysis includes assuring us that the Lord will expend as much energy guiding and transforming our inner selves as He does superintending the final and eventual direction which our world is moving towards. He does not spend so much of His power and grace riding herd on humanity as a whole, that He has neither the time nor the energy to help us sort out our inner lives so that the eventual reign He will exercise over the world, can begin in the depths of our hearts and lives.

To this end, our passage is followed by a description of the actual heavenly mercy seat from which all the power and help we need is readily available so that no weakness and no failure will ever be able to sink us or snatch us away from the light and love of His coming Kingdom.

He has prepared a place of final rest for all believers which cannot be removed or overthrown and in the interim, He reaches out and lifts us out of any hole or darkness which our frail humanity causes us to be prone to stumble into. He has got our back and He opens a way for us to walk on the straight and narrow, no matter what we may encounter on our pilgrimage through this life towards our home in Glory.

So when our passage says that His Word is alive and powerful and pierces into the depths of our being, we need never suspect it of any malicious intent. He wants us to be strong from the inside out and the author uses three poetic examples of how the two edged sword cuts both ways.

The first involves separating soul and spirit, which is a distinction that is hard to make from the overall context of the Scriptures. In fact there is no substantial difference between our souls and our spirits which can be supported from how these terms are presented in various passages in the Bible. In the Greek, both words refer to breath or to a breeze and can be used interchangeably to refer to the same inner life force we all possess. In Hebrew, soul refers to a fire, while spirit refers to a breath or to a wind, but again both terms are used interchangeably when it comes to describing how our inner life force functions. Then why does the author use such closely related, interchangeable terms? The distinction is really between two interrelated functions which in English we might call thoughts and feelings.

How we feel is often referred to as a heart reaction or an emotion and what we think is often referred to as a mental reaction or an idea. Now we understand that the heart is an organ which pumps blood and which can respond to how we feel, but which is not really involved in influencing what we feel. Feelings are a kind of thought or idea which is produced by brain activity and which does not come from the physical heart itself.

We really just have at least two ways of thinking, one which relates to how we perceive and understand, the other one refers to how we feel about what we perceive and understand. The

soul is often referred to as the intellectual function of our brain, while the spirit is often referred to as the feeling function of the brain. At best it is a poetic description of at least two closely related functions of the brain, but it is never intended to be used as an arbitrary distinction between two parts of the brain as if they were completely separate.

Some have falsely described the human spirit as that dynamic inner force which connects us to G-d in ways which our mind could never understand. It is said to be an inner intuition which can give us a sort of emotional assurance separate from any understanding we may have of the experience. How many of you see the flaw in this line of reasoning?

Feeling is a way of thinking, just as thinking is a way of feeling, even though what you feel about things and what you think about things are not always the same. Intuition is also a way of thinking, which is not always related to facts and figures, but which perceives non verbal signals without intellectual analysis. Neither kind of thinking actually occurs in our hearts and both kinds of thinking affect the way we view reality. Music and art and friendship are not the same as problem solving and intense analysis, but the realm of feelings and the realm of the intellect are both functions of our brains and not of our hearts.

The Word of G-d both gives us the necessary information for us to walk with the Messiah as well as inspiring a deep emotional response to the Gospel, so that we do not think one way and feel another way – so that we do not get pulled in two different directions.

Just as the joints and the marrow are complementary functions of a healthy body, and just as the thoughts and intents of our hearts and minds work together to help us decide how to act or respond, so the Word of G-d uncovers what is really going on in behind the scenes on the inside, so we do not end up being pulled in two directions or stalled.

His Word wants us to be fully convinced in our minds and in our emotions, so that we neither adopt foolish or erroneous doctrinal positions nor do we give in to influences which feel good but are not wholesome. His Word wants to dialogue with us on the outside and on the inside so that both mental functions, our thoughts and our feelings, are engaged so that we give ourselves completely and entirely to the L-rd.

This is not an easy objective to attain and it is one which has to remain active in our lives throughout our pilgrimage through this life. People can be complicated and many of us struggle with doubts and fears on the inside which we rarely allow to come to the surface. Some of us also have inner rage and lust which we have never dealt with, because we feel that as long as we have things under control, we really don't have to resolve our inner struggles. This is not the kind of life the L-rd wants us to live.

He wants us to be in an interactive relationship with His Living Word, building convictions and casting down all and any emotional or intellectual fortresses which try to rise up against the progress of the Kingdom of G-d in our lives. This means having an ongoing inner discussion with His word where our fears and doubts and hopes and desires are examined and worked through so that the Kingdom of G-d is not excluded from any area of our lives, both in what we think and in how we live.

This does not mean that our flesh will no longer be a problem or that we are excluded from the usual trials and temptations which believers encounter as they relate to the world. It just means that there is no part of our lives where negative intellectual or emotional influences are allowed

to get a foothold and trouble the peace and harmony of our spiritual lives.

The image of a two-edged sword indicates that we will have to spend our lives engaging in both offensive and defensive actions as part of the spiritual war which is being waged all around us. It also means that we are not to live conflicted lives where our hearts and our minds pull in two different directions because of unresolved issues in our lives.

Whatever happens to us when we come to the L-rd and whatever baggage we bring with us when we come to the L-rd, needs the ministry of G-d's living sword so that we are not filled with inner turmoil and struggle with perpetual spiritual insecurities, which we barely manage to keep under control when we are really called to resolve them.

The world is convinced that we live in an aggressive state of perpetual denial and that we would rather be pursuing the lust of the eyes and the lust of the flesh according to the pride of life and not according to the word of G-d. The Word of G-d is equipped to root out all the negative emotions and motivations which rage in our hearts and move us forwards towards the sources of inner satisfaction which He so freely promises to those who truly seek his face.

He does not want us to live lives of quiet frustration where we feel our spirituality is in any way cramping our style and preventing us from getting any true and lasting satisfaction. He wants to do combat with both our thoughts and feelings and to show our hearts and lives that His way is a better way than that which our fading world follows.

Dealing with all of our heart issues and fears and doubts may be a longer process that has to occur over many years and through many experiences where we learn to trust in Him and His Word. However, His Word wants to engage with us in this process and this process needs to be active throughout our lives, so that neither the storms of life nor the seductions of the world and the flesh can pull us away from our primary allegiance to the L-rd and His coming Kingdom.

He wants us to be convinced about the truth of His Word, in both our hearts and in our minds, because nothing that is happening to us and nothing that we are thinking about or dealing with is hidden from His eyes. As sophisticated and attractive as our world tries to appear, His Word is capable of cutting through the lies and the half truths and showing us that living for the kingdom which is to come, is the greatest source of satisfaction and healing in the whole universe at every stage of our lives and in whatever situation we find ourselves in.

There is no hidden lie which His Word cannot uncover and there is no situation where His power and control does not apply. His Word cuts both ways because it not only reveals the darkness which is trying to seize control of our hearts from the inside, it also bursts the bubbles which the world is trying to distract and confuse us with.

We may not like what His Word reveals about us or about the world around us, but because we understand that everyone who has ever lived must one day give an account of their actions to the L-rd, we are set free from the lies and deceptions which the god of this world is using to deceive and snare people who turn their backs on the truth of G-d's Word.

None of the excuses which people come up with, will stand the test of eternity when both the contents of everyone's hearts and lives are revealed before the judgment of G-d which is awaiting all of us, believers and unbelievers alike. We do not see this coming judgment as a

sad truth which is trying to get in the way of our pursuit of happiness and satisfaction. We see it as an ongoing liberation so that we do not waste our lives seeking after that which does not truly satisfy or trade in our eternal inheritance for the carnal potage of this world.

His Word cuts both ways and is able to both heal our inner hurts and resolve inner conflicts as well as providing us with the inner drive we need to shine and be salty, not because we do not know any better, but because, in Him we definitely know better and want to live for the best, both in this world and in the world which is to come.

How is your dialogue with His living Word doing? Are you letting Him adjust the thoughts and intents of your heart or are you still letting your flesh pine for the things of the world, even though you know that they cannot satisfy?

Are there issues in your life which you are not willing to bring under the scrutiny of His Word? Is there any darkness lurking on the back burner of your hearts, which He wants to show you how to resolve to His satisfaction?

Is there anything in your life where you are running away from the L-rd and hiding, instead of walking with Him and resolving?

Some things may not be finally resolved until the Day of Judgment, but as we let His Word have its way in our hearts and lives, He promises to help us cut to the chase and make sure that we will have no unpleasant surprises because of either the way we believe or the way we live.

As we come to the L-rd's Table, at the beginning of a new lunar month, let us resolve to quit resisting and hiding and to start walking and healing. You see, He wants us to be whole from the inside out and this can only happen as we let His Word come from the outside in. Since we cannot really hide anything from Him, we should quit trying and allow for His cleansing power to remove both the stain and the pain of any sinfulness or darkness which is trying to stall our progress.

We are called to walk with a clean slate and His two-edged sword cuts both ways to make this possible and to reveal and remove anything which stands in its way. How about you?