

Learning How to Behave in the Presence of the L-rd: Shifting Our Focus

Balak **Destroyer** **Undermining Our Impregnability**

Torah: Numbers 22:2-25:9

Haftarah: Micah 5:6-6:8

Brit Chadashah: Romans 11:25-32

Reading: Marie p. 135 and Psalm 79. Jewish hero: Oholiab. Torah Carrier: Bernie

Once our people set up camp on the Plains of Moab, across from Jericho, their wandering years are over and they are preparing to renew their covenant with YHVH, as they prepare to finally enter the Promised Land. Balak, the king of Moab invites his elders and those of south Moab (Midianites) to discuss the problem of Israel. He realizes that they were brought out of Egypt to serve a powerful G-d, who has overcome all opposition and that His people cannot be defeated militarily.

In desperation, he seeks a prophet who serves this powerful G-d, so that they might be cursed before they come after Moab. Balaam initially refuses to come, because G-d will not let him curse Israel. He is allowed to come when they send an even bigger delegation, but with a caveat (condition). He is only allowed to say what G-d tells him to say.

Along the way, he encounters an angel which only his donkey can see. He beats the donkey for its erratic behaviour and the L-rd permits it to speak. It does not matter if the one who is speaking for G-d is a donkey, we need to listen to the Word of G-d! Balaam is so angry he would have killed the donkey, but his eyes are opened and he bows down before the angel who repeats G-d's warning to only say what he is instructed to say and he agrees.

He finally understands the seriousness of the situation, because he is being sent to bless Israel, no matter how much Balak offers him or threatens him. His is taken to three sites which are holy to the Moabites and to the consternation of his host, he pronounces four blessings on Israel and three prophecies against those who are Israel's enemies. Balak mistakenly assumes that if you find someone who serves YHVH, this servant can somehow control YHVH and cause Him to curse, even the people which He has blessed.

Those who speak for YHVH should restrict themselves to preaching and teaching what His Word teaches and should not sell their services to the highest bidder, as if their special relationship with YHVH gave them the ability to make Him say or do what they want Him to. We are to remain His messengers and faithfully represent His Word, nothing more and nothing less.

Balaam goes home, but somehow he returns on his own initiative and tells the Moabites that if they can get the people to disobey G-d and violate His Word, they are no longer impregnable

and G-d will either destroy them Himself or allow them to be destroyed. On Balaam's recommendation, the priestesses of Moab enter the camp and want to show the men a new way of praying. We are not told what they said to convince so many men to commit fornication, but any time we violate His Word, we are playing into the hands of our enemies and are removing ourselves from the blessings and protection of the L-rd.

A plague breaks out amidst the people, killing 24,000 of them, most likely those who committed fornication with the Moabite prostitutes. Phineas, Aaron's grandson, slays one of the leaders of the tribe of Simeon who is taking a prostitute into his tent and the plague stops. As long as we walk with the L-rd, we have His protection and provision. When we violate His Word, our impregnability is breached and until we repent and fix the breach, we lose His provision and protection.

We learn later that Balaam has settled among Moab and is killed in the punitive action Israel launches to punish those who sent the prostitutes and breached Israel's impregnability.

The Haftarah portion speaks of the arrival of Messiah's final kingdom when all strife and war will be over and reminds the people both of those He has sent to guide them and of those who have risen up against them. He also reminds them that walking with G-d is not about fulfilling ritual obligations that remind us of the truth, it is all about walking with the L-rd humbly and practising righteousness and loving mercy.

The New Testament portion speaks about the future return of Israel to the Gospel, because their calling as the people of G-d is irrevocable. The Gentiles are included in this mandate to seek for G-d's mercy and to abandon disobedience.

We are impregnable as long as we walk with the L-rd according to His Word and in so doing, we are granted both His provision and His protection. We need to be careful not to allow our armour to be breached. It is only when our grip on having faith and obeying His Word is weakened that we are in danger.

His purposes will either be fulfilled through us or in spite of us. Balaam violated his mandate to speak on behalf of the L-rd and we need to also beware of anyone who claims to speak for the L-rd, while also encouraging the people to abandon His Word. You have to be careful who you listen to and whose advice you take. It is only when we are standing firm on His Word, we are impregnable.

Sermon: Learning How to Behave in the Presence of the L-rd: Shifting our Focus

Passage: *Seek the L-rd while He may be found and call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked abandon his way and the man of iniquity his thoughts. Let Him return to the L-rd who will have pity on him and to our G-d who does not grow tired of forgiving.*

This morning, I want to deal with three elements in our service which shift our focus from the cares of the week onto the things of the L-rd and His coming Kingdom. We will deal with He Being Merciful, the Half Kaddish and the L'khoo. In any worship service, it is too easy to lose our focus and just go through the motions without actually being spiritually present. This does not mean that we have to always be exuberant and upbeat as we enthusiastically dive in to the presence of the L-rd.

What we need to acknowledge is that the presence of the L-rd does not depend on our feelings or our moods, nor does it depend on how good things are going in our lives or on how bad they are going. We do not generate the presence of the L-rd, like some kind of seance where our ability to contact Him depends on how hard we try.

Entering His presence needs to be a realization that He exists over and above the storms of life and even when we are singing and rejoicing on the mountain tops. He is a person and His presence proceeds from Him and not from us.

Some congregations and churches try to come up with endless new and exciting ways to lead their people into the presence of the L-rd, and while this may be a commendable objective, there is a risk that services may be transformed into cheer leading sessions, trying to get the people pumped and excited. Again there is no one mood or feeling that we need to generate, in order to enter into the presence of our great King. What we need is a shift, where our focus is shifted away from us and from this world and turns towards our G-d and the things of the world to come.

He Being Merciful is the first of our three shifts and it identifies whose presence we are entering and reminds us of what He is like. It also reminds us that the world we live in is not destroyed because G-d's primary objective with mankind is redemption and not destruction. Too many times believers stumble and bite and devour each other, like so many maniacs trying to chop holes in the lifeboat, just because they do not like the company they are being rescued with.

There is also so much cruelty and corruption in the world that it should have been drowned again or consumed by fire to many times to count. And yet G-d holds off His judgment, lest some of His wheat is torn up with the tares of this world. G-d is not yet finished stirring up His wrath, but He is holding off pouring it out on all the nations and generations of mankind, because there are still those who seek His face and when we come to faith, the Gospel becomes our ark which floats us above all the storms and folly of the wicked.

There are those who seem bent on destroying our world and seem to wish to totally corrupt all of mankind and as our world increasingly globalizes, the pace of this physical and moral destructiveness will only accelerate. G-d is willing to forgive the penitent and to turn away His wrath from those who are struggling to free themselves from the burgeoning iniquity which is quickly engulfing our world. He is not ignorant of all the stupidity and immorality which wants to do away with biblical and impose their politically correct agenda upon us.

It is nothing more than warmed up idolatry and the thinly disguised fornication which is now deemed respectable, even though it violates G-d's Word. The world's solution is to silence and discredit G-d's Word and it is only for the sake of the elect who still want to seek the face of the L-rd, that the full wrath of G-d is not yet poured out on our dark and dying world.

He seeks to forgive, but never to condone that which His word declares to be unacceptable and abominable. He wants to deliver us from evil and not just change our perspective so that we consider as good, that which His Word condemns. Those who wish to flee from the wrath which is to come, are peddling hard to keep their heads up, against the current which wants to drag them under. and as long as there are those light seekers who want to be pulled out of their folly, G-d will delay His judgment, just until the last refugee from the Sodom and Gomorrah of this world has found refuge from the destruction which is to come.

He Being Merciful, shifts to a personal prayer, recognizing that G-d is good and forgiving and is exceedingly kind to all who seek Him. He is not the grumpy deity in the sky, watching for anyone who steps out of line, so He can stomp on them and squish them flat. He is the merciful G-d whose Spirit stands at the entrance of all the noisy places, calling out to those who have a hunger and a thirst for righteousness to abandon a lifestyle that has no real satisfaction and only offers temporary stimulation.

As we recite He Being Merciful, we reaffirm our commitment to always be turning away from the wickedness of this world, towards the exceedingly kind G-d who wants to free us from the wrath which is to come. Because we acknowledge that evil is evil, He is both faithful and just, not just to forgive us, but to cleanse from all the unrighteousness we were wallowing in before we came to faith in Him.

The cleaning agent is the precious blood of our gracious Messiah which is capable of cleansing us from all sin. It may take a while for us to accept that we are cleansed, as we learn to live lives that are free of the pollution of the world, but as long as we keep coming back to His blood which was shed according to His Word, we will not be overwhelmed and snared by the world and the enemy who is roaring and prowling around, seeking for new victims to devour.

Do you realize who He is and what He wants to accomplish in our lives?

We are called to live forgiven lives where the impact of the world is felt less and less, even while it builds up a weight of wrath, which our good and forgiving G-d is not yet willing to unleash upon those who so richly deserve it. We need to be regularly cleansed from the scum of the world and renewed in our walk with our King. Now we are ready to move onto the second stage of our focus, the Half Kaddish.

This is one of the oldest prayers in Judaism and was composed in Aramaic sometime after our people were taken captive by the Aramaic speaking Babylonians. It has served many purposes as our people became focused on the Word of G-d and on the G-d of the Word. It states that the primary purpose of mankind is to glorify and sanctify the name of the One who created the

whole universe according to His purposes and not ours.

It is a pleading call for the coming Kingdom and as such strives to keep our hearts and our services focused on this coming Kingdom. It is Messiah's Kingdom and all of Judaism is called to be Messiah focused because our final destiny is to live in this kingdom. While we wait for this glorious event to occur, we are also called to live for this kingdom and make our lives turn around it.

Our lives need to be worship centered because His name will actually be praised forever and ever, eternally. Nothing else really matters in the long run. Is your life focused on G-d's long run or have the temporary cares, pleasure and riches of this life blinded your eyes to that which is eternally important. We have to take care of the practical business of living, but unless our lives are focused on the eternal business of living, we are wasting our time and all the foolish things that we have given our best energy to will just fade and pass away with the world which we should no longer belong to.

How do we accomplish this focus and rise above the cares of this life? The last part of the Kaddish is an actual staircase to Heaven with four paired declarations which want to capture our attention and help us to climb into His presence and escape from the power and influence of the world we are travelling through towards our amazingly wonderful final destination. Are you a regular climber of the praise staircase to heaven?

First He is blessed and praised by us on earth and by the angels in Heaven. Next He is glorified and exalted because He is so much better and superior to anything this world has to offer. We lift Him up so that we can be lifted up with Him above everything that is happening in this fading world. Third He is extolled and honoured as we realize how pure and wonderful He is. It is like discovering a priceless treasure each time we climb into the presence of our heavenly King. He and His Word are full of incredible surprises to feed our souls and rejoice our hearts as we rise up into the presence where we will be spending eternity. What an amazing privilege!

Lastly, He is magnified and lauded because He and His Word are always worthy of further examination and can never be depleted from the limitless treasures it contains and wants to reveal unto us. As we enter His presence, we become overwhelmed with wonder and worship and laud Him as the only sensible reaction to our amazing Saviour and G-d.

Worship is a journey from the things of this world to the things of the world to come and it is a staircase to Heaven we need to learn how to climb so that our focus is renewed and extended and not crowded out by the things of this world. Whether we are struggling with doubt of temptation or whether we are celebrating great achievements or recovering from great sorrow and loss, our focus needs to be first and foremost on the things of the Kingdom which is to come and on the glorious King whom we serve in this life.

Do you climb the staircase to Heaven with us or are you left behind to wallow in the lukewarm

things of this passing age?

Our third focus shift is where we move from talking about praise and worship, to doing it as we invite one another to join us on this extraordinary journey, daily, weekly and constantly. The L'khoo is a transition where we declare ourselves ready and clear the runway as we are about to take flight. We enter His presence as we sing unto Him and acclaim Him as the rock of our salvation, which nothing and no one can remove or overcome. It crushes all its opponents and shipwrecks those who try to run over it. However, those who worship Him and who enter His presence, build their homes upon this solid foundation of His Word and are able to come before His face with thanksgiving and songs of joy.

It is both a discipline we exercise and an experience which lifts us up as we realize who it is we have come to worship and what He is really like. We also learn to climb the staircase to Heaven and leave the fading things of this world behind. We are both experiencing the wonder of the world which is to come and learning to focus on it and give it our primary attention to it. Once we are cleansed and released from the power of this present age, we climb up the staircase of praise and enter the presence where we will be spending eternity.

We clear the runway of our hearts and lives and make sure there is nothing between us and the wonderful Saviour. He is the One who is waiting to meet with us, as we are healed, renewed and strengthened in His presence. This is what we are gathering to experience whenever we gather to worship. Worship is not something we can do casually or even quickly. The three focus shifters we have examined today are part of preliminaries we have included in our services so that we can make a smooth, powerful transition from the temporary things of this world and actually get a taste of the world which is to come.

This is one of the staples of the authentic Jews space we maintain during our services, so we never lose our way as we rise up beyond this world which is on the verge of disappearing and contemplate the one which is to come. How is your focus doing today? Shalom.