

Refining our Focus: The Siddur and the Psalm of the Week

Eikev As a Result Walking According to His Word is Our Calling

Torah: Deuteronomy 7:12-11:25

Haftarah: Isaiah 49:14-51:3

Brit Chadashah: Hebrews 11:8-13

Reading: Donna p.145 and Ps. 75 Jewish Hero: Phineas. Torah Carrier: Bernie

Our shul is a New Testament Torah Observant Community which distinguishes between the Word of G-d and the Traditions and Teaching of men. That which is biblical, we observe and that which is non biblical is optional. That which is unbiblical is not integrated into the spiritual life of our community.

Today's Torah portion is both a summary of the History of the House of Israel from Egypt to their camping on the plains of Moab and a solemn call for the generations of the House of Jacob to realize that our calling is to walk according to His Word. The Haftarah portion both explains why Israel was sold into captivity and emphasizes that G-d still has the power to redeem and return her scattered sons from among the nations.

It is the second prophetic portion of comfort and reminds us that G-d' power and love have not diminished and are still there to restore us to the place from which we have fallen. The New Testament portions speaks of the faith of those who received the promises which were not fulfilled in their lifetime. They believed them because they saw them far off and realized that they were waiting for a city whose foundation and building is of G-d. What are you waiting for in your life and devotion?

There is so much which is deep and rich in this portion. Let me take you to a few places which I have gleaned and leave discovering the wonder of the rest to your own Bible Study – and don't forget to bring your discoveries and your questions to our weekly Yeshiva.

Verses:

Deut. 7:22: **YHVH your G-d will chase out these nations before you, little by little. You cannot exterminate them promptly for fear that the beasts of the field would multiply against you.** We need to learn to walk in our strength and let it grow to the place where we are able to take hold of the promises. Set backs are chances to regroup and gradually we can grow and be strengthened to the place where we can walk according to His Word, which is our calling.

Deut. 8:17: **Be careful that you do not say in your heart: my strength and the power of my hand have acquired for me these riches.** People are far too eager to blame G-d for their own foolishness and to take credit for His great provision. Even as we climb out of trials, it is because of His great strength and provision that we are where we are.

Deut. 9:24: **You have been rebellious against the L-rd ever since I have known you.** It is not always easy to deal with believers, because we tend to be opinionated and rebellious. If

the truth be told, we will always have more trouble dealing with our own flesh than anything which the world or the enemy can throw at us. How well are you dealing with you flesh so tht yiu can reakize your calling and walk with the L-rd according to His word?

Deut. 10:16: **You shall circumcise your heart and you shall not stiffen your neck.** Our flesh will either be the mighty steed we train and ride victoriously into His Kingdom or the wild donkey which will defeat us and drag us in the other direction. Circumcising your heart does it no harm, but marks it for the service of the King. Is your heart circumcised or have you stiffened your neck, instead of fulfilling your calling to walk with the L-rd according to His Word.

Deut.11:11 **The country you are going to possess is a country of mountains and valleys and which drinks the waters of the rains from Heaven.** Rain water is always healthier than river water and Canaan is a fertile country as long as there is rain. As long as we are learning to walk with our Messiah according to His Word, He will ensure that there is enough rain in our lives. Are you drinking from the waters of heaven or are you still depending on the waters of the world?

Is. 49:16: **I have engraved you upon My hands and your walls are always before my eyes.** Even in the midst of all the majesty and terror of human history, G-d has never forgotten His people and He has never lost the final control over how things will eventually turn out. Even in its current ruin, the walls of Jerusalem are constantly before Him. G-d knows what we are going through on our pilgrimage through this life and will never forget us or forsake us, but will always bring us back to the place where we can learn to walk with Him according to His Word.

Is. 49:26: **I shall make your oppressors eat their own flesh and they shall get drunk on their blood as if it were wine. And all flesh will know that I am YHVH your Saviour, your Redeemer, the Powerful One of Jacob.** The fate of the enemies of G-d and of His people is exceedingly far worse than anything they can do to us. Instead of hating them and wanting to get even, we need to turn them over to the L-rd, as we learn to walk with G-d according to His word in every situation of our lives.

Hebrews 11:13: **It is by faith that they all died without receiving the things which were promised; but from a distance, they saw them and greeted them and recognized that they were strangers and pilgrims upon the earth.** We live in the era of instant gratification. Anything we want at any season of the year, we will find in our supermarkets and the answers to any question we have are easily available on line. We can text and phone around the globe and we are almost instantly alerted to everything which is going on anywhere around the world.

But, in this life, we will not receive everything which is promised and we have to be content to greet them far off and realize that, as surely as the sun rises and sets, they will finally come to pass. In the meantime, it remains our paramount duty and privilege to fulfil our calling and in every situation of life learn, to walk with the L-rd according to His Word.

Sermon: Learning How to Behave in the House of the L-rd by Refining our Focus.

Passage: *Let everything be done decently and in order. . . as for the other matters, I will settle them when I come* (I Cor. 14:40 and 11:34).

The fullest account in the New Testament about how the apostles dealt with deficiencies in the lives of the congregations which they established is found in the two Epistles to the Corinthians.

The issues they struggled with parallel those our people also struggled with both on their way to the Promised Land and as they took possession of the Promised Land.

There is a lot we can learn from the experience of those who have gone before us, both in how we should live and how we should not live. The point of a healthy congregational life is learning to do things decently and in order and even to acknowledge that part of this order is to acknowledge that some concerns will remain ongoing for various lengths of time, when we don't have the resources to deal with them right away.

I would love to have a dynamic youth group, a young couples group and well attended Prayer Meetings and Yeshiva Bible Studies. I would also like to be training an assistant to eventually replace me, along with training up a new generation of leaders who will ensure the strength and health of our congregation through this century and even into the next – and for as long as it takes for His Kingdom to explode into our midst and bring this fading world to a definitive and final end.

We are sowing the seeds for the future in what we have established in the life of our synagogue and we are developing a core of committed, stable believers who will ensure that our community is generationally self sustaining, long after the current leadership have finished their term and gone on to their reward.

How do we prepare for the glorious future which the L-rd has in store for B'nai Chayim as we grow little by little into our full, mature strength? We will be dealing with these issues at our leadership meetings and at our quarterly meetings. They also remain the central focus of our worship services and all the other ministries of our excellent Shul. We want to be effective in all aspects of our outreach, both to the Jewish community and to our friends in the Gentile churches.

There are droves of people in our fair city who would benefit from our fourfold ministry (as a lighthouse, a tree, a bride and a repair shop). Our online ministries are one way to reach out to our growth groups along with our personal testimonies in our community and among our friends and coworkers. I know that each week, the L-rd brings people our way and even when we have struggles, how we handle ourselves under pressure can be our greatest testimony, as we share our faith and love with our darkening world.

Over the summer, we have been examining various aspects of our liturgy and our worship, so that we would know how to behave in the House of the L-rd, from the moment the shofar sounds until the Aaronic Benediction dismisses us. Liturgy refers to the basic staples which we always include in our Shabbat services, to cover all of the bases and help us to constantly be refining our focus as we enjoy a weekly spiritual full meal deal in the L-rd.

When we ran over these basics, as we prepared for the service in Patti's and my absence, I was impressed both by how much Hebrew we include in our worship and by the flexibility we exercise to draw people into the presence of the L-rd by His Word. We neither rush through the various elements of service so people can have their lunch as early as possible, nor do we unnecessarily linger over any specific part of our services, so that they become cumbersome and a burden to our limited attention spans.

Each element of our services has a specific purpose and helps us to reach our overall weekly objective, which remains to provide everyone with a meaningful, enriching encounter with the

L-rd and with each other. This is a tall order, but we do not want our spirituality just to become a habit we perform without really understanding that we are called to walk with the L-rd with all of our hearts, all of our strength and with all of our life. The Sabbath may be the spiritual high point of our week, but it needs to remain connected to the coming week as we learn to let His word shine into every other aspect of our lives.

Our Sabbath observance is not undertaken to get the L-rd off our backs for the rest of the week, nor is it an attempt to curry favour with the L-rd so that He will look favourably on us and bless us during the coming week. It is both a time when we check in to make sure that everything is in shape for one more week and also where we feed on His Word and offer prayers and thanksgiving to Him for who He is and what He does in our lives.

Our prayers function both to express new concerns as they come up and to remind us of the life priorities we should be cherishing in our lives. We should not always be looking for new things, but we should always be looking to renew things in our life on our journey through this life to our Father's Home in glory.

A central part of our Shabbat service is going through the Siddur, so that we never lose our way spiritually amidst all the voices which cry out for our attention. After we have read and chanted our way through to the Shema and either the L-rd's Prayer or the 23rd Psalm, I realize that we have only touched on a small portion of all the treasures which our Siddur contains for our benefit.

The Siddur we follow covers all the main points which a traditional rabbinic Siddur would also touch on, but without the extensive, almost relentless sets of traditional prayers which usually take several hours to wade through with much repetition and overlap.

Ours is a simplified version, designed to give our Messiah the central place in our worship. We want to be heard because of the earnest desire of our hearts and not because of the great length and sheer number of prayers we offer up, as if we were trying to be heard by bombarding Heaven with as many prayers and supplications that we can muster.

Some congregations even encourage people to show great, noisy enthusiasm as if the increased volume would make their prayers more readily heard. The ancient Greeks and the worshippers of false gods like Baal and Astarte, screamed as loud as they could and danced and contorted themselves into exhaustion. We are not to follow their negative example.

Many of the ancient prayers and readings in our Siddur are beautiful expressions of faith and awe designed to refine our focus and understand who G-d is and what He is like. When I started the shul, many years ago, I let the Siddur readers pick one or two of their favourite readings from any section of the Siddur they wished.

This worked for a while, but ended up meaning that only certain familiar readings were selected, while others were ignored or passed over. So eventually, I sat down and prayerfully divided up the Siddur readings so that we go through the entire Siddur in just under a year.

There are portions we only read during the High Holy Days and Sukkoth and there are a few we read every Sabbath. There is a section at the end of the Siddur which explains the meaning

behind some of the prayers and there are some special prayers which we will eventually learn to sing and chant because their content helps us to refine our focus on the things of the coming Kingdom and not be blinded by the enemy, the world and the flesh.

Many of them act as reminders that we should not fill our hearts and lives with the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life. When they were originally composed, they were seen as special prayers which were intended to show people how to pray and what things should be included in the prayers ordinary people composed and offered to the L-rd.

Many of them are exalted expressions of the awe and respect we need to show to the L-rd, but always as reminders of what the Scriptures teach and never as a substitute to our reading of the Word. Our Siddur is peppered with familiar passages of Scripture to highlight our need to walk with the L-rd according to His Word and to keep our focus refined and not polluted with the things of the world through which we are travelling, but to which we do not belong.

The portions we use are not set in cement and will add and subtract from the list in order to highlight the central teachings of the Bible which the prayers of this book were designed to showcase.

In addition to our Siddur readings, every week we have a Psalm whose style and message reflect some aspect of the Torah or Haftarah portions. During the time of the Maccabees, reading the Torah was forbidden and had to be carried out with great stealth and secrecy. In order to find away around this restriction, Haftarah portions were selected which reflected some aspect of the weekly Torah portion. Psalms were also selected for this purpose and to honour the memory of these scholars, their selections are still read on a weekly basis.

Sometimes it is inspiring to hear the words of believers from the past who expressed the same desires that we have and who faced the same conflicts that we encounter on a daily basis. Their faith in G-d and in His Word can show us how these same truths could apply in our lives, just as much as they did in the lives of those believers who have preceded us.

While we can never accept their words and sayings as equal in authority to the Words of the Bible, their insights can give us a perspective we might not have seen otherwise. It is only when their words and the traditions which they established are considered to be extensions of the Bible that we have a problem because the teachings of men should never be confused with those we find in the Scriptures.

In the past, we established an approach to understanding the role of traditions in the life of modern believers. It is the joy and responsibility of each new generation of believers to take the eternal truths of G-d and apply them into their lives. The collective wisdom of believers should serve as a rich spiritual tradition of biblical jurisprudence that we can draw on as we take the changeless truths of G-d's Word and apply them in our particular set of circumstances.

They should never be placed on the same level as the Word of G-d, nor should they be used in competition with the Bible or as a replacement for what the Scriptures teach. We stand on the shoulders of previous generations as we pass the baton of G-d's Word to the next generation, so that they could do the same as we all wait patiently for the Kingdom of G- to be established over all the nations and generations of mankind.

We recognize three levels or kinds of tradition, even as we affirm that the Scriptures remain our final, unchanging authority in matters of faith and practice.

The first category consists of traditions derived directly from the Bible, like the weekly Sabbath and the annual festival cycle and many of the biblical practices of historical Judaism like kosher, circumcision and the L-rd's Table. These are the primary habits of a healthy approach to spirituality, so biblical traditions are observed and cherished in our community.

The next broad category of traditions deals with habits and activities not directly mentioned in the Bible like the Kipah and even the annual Torah reading cycle and all the ceremonies of Shabbat which enrich the day and make it special. These are habits and practices not directly mentioned in the Bible, but which enhance and strengthen how we walk with the L-rd. They actually help us to refine our focus on the things of the L-rd.

In our shul, non biblical traditions are optional with the intention of enriching our walk with the L-rd according to His Word.

There is another category of traditions which are unbiblical and which contradict or undermine the authority of G-d's Word and do not help us to refine our focus on walking with the L-rd. Lucky charms, amulets and things like holy water fall into this category. Psychology calls this magic behaviour where we can influence our lives by manipulating symbols and magic ceremonies.

Unbiblical traditions are excluded from how we practise of faith and nothing in how we handle our Siddur finds its origins in magic behaviour or any other form on unbiblical belief or practice. Our liturgy is based on the Bible and we want to use this portion of our shabbat services to help us to put aside the cares and pleasures of our weekly lives and spend time in the presence of the L-rd.

We go for strength, rather than length in our services and the only thing about our services which is set in cement remains the Scriptures and how well we integrate its truths into every area of our lives. The wisdom of previous generations can help us in this task, but walking with the L-rd according to His word remains our singular, principal task. Shabbat shalom.