

Shoftim Judges Judgment Which Protects Righteousness**Torah:** Deuteronomy 16:18-21:9**Haftarah:** Isaiah 51:12-52:12**Brit Chadashah:** Matthew 3:1-17

Reading: Margaret p. 149 and Psalm 17. Jewish hero: Elisha. Torah carrier: Aaron.

Quarterly Meeting and Nosh

This Torah Portion gives speaks about the need to prevent evil from getting a foothold in the community by establishing and upholding standards of righteousness, which would prevent the people both from adopting the immoral idolatry of the Canaanites and from wandering away from the righteousness stipulations of the Bible. The Haftarah portion declares that the people should not be afraid of men, but have a confident, holy awe of G-d.

The New Testament portion deals with the life and ministry of Yeshua's cousin, John who was Israel's greatest prophet of righteousness. He preached immersion to wash away sin and spoke of the coming Messiah. He called on people to abandon hypocrisy and spiritual entitlement and to seek the L-rd by sincere repentance which broke all and any connections with sin.

Again this is a longer than usual Torah portion which covers portions of two chapters (at the beginning and at the end) four whole chapters (in the middle). I have selected six passages which highlight judgment which protects righteousness.

Deuteronomy 17:18-20. Here the future kings of Israel are instructed to read the Law daily, in order to: put all of it into practice, not elevate themselves above their brothers, not turn away from the Law either by the left or the right and in so doing prolong the days of his kingdom, him and his children in the midst of Israel. Kingship was an inherited mandate to be ruled by the Word of G-d and if the truth be told, daily Bible reading is the royal prerogative of the nation of kings and priests. How well are you exercising yours?

Deuteronomy 18:9-14. Here the immoral idolatry of the Canaanites is forbidden. Such things as divination, magic, trying to communicate with spirits and the dead, interprets omens or practices witchcraft (throwing spells by the use of potions and supposed words of power). Astrology falls into this category.

Also, any use of the stars or the magical combination of numbers or names (kabbalah, gematria, I Ching, card reading, reading tea leaves) to predict the future, obtain personal power or to ensure success is forbidden. There are no hidden messages anywhere in the universe and believers (Jew and Gentile) are to seek for their power and guidance in the L-rd alone.

Deuteronomy 18:18. Yeshua is the prophet who arose from among the House of Israel as the Word Incarnate, because G-d put His word in His mouth. He was the Word dwelling in a tabernacle of flesh.

He would never undo or alter anything which Moses had said, but He would and did say things which Moses was not able to say, because the L-rd was not yet ready to have them said to His people.

Deuteronomy 19:11-13. The cities of refuge were set up to give people accused of a capital crime a fair trial, and so that no one was deprived of due process. Those who wilfully shed innocent blood needed to be tried and executed. Accidental, non intentional death did not face capital punishment. However in cases where murder was intentional and obvious, no murderer was given sanctuary in a city of refuge and faced execution. It was to ensure that the punishment fit the crime and that no innocent blood as shed in the land. Judgment was set up to protect righteousness and to see that it was never violated.

Deuteronomy 19:16-20. When a false witness arose to accuse someone and it was discovered that they were lying, they were to suffer the punishment which they tried to foist upon an innocent person. Malicious gossip and slander would fall into this category and may we never see it raise its ugly head (or use its ugly lips) in our midst. B'nai Chayim is a lashon hara free zone, where we will not permit even true speech to be used for evil purposes. Passing judgment should promote and protect righteousness and should never be used as a weapon to injure or undermine anyone.

Deuteronomy 20:19, 20. Here is an environmentally friendly stipulation concerned with how to wage war and conduct a siege. People often had to build ramparts to be able to climb over the walls of cities they were attacking, but they were forbidden to cut down fruit trees which were a source of food for them. They were to make war on their enemies, not upon the trees which produced food for them.

Judgment is not a dirty word and should never be used to favour one group or a cause in such a way as to deprive people of their rights. It is not a fault finding mission to wrongly destroy or diminish the reputation of anyone. It is only a weapon which should be used to protect righteousness and prevent the rise of evil or corruption in our midst. How do you use your judgment? How do we use ours as a community?

Sermon: How to Behave in the House of the L-rd: Persevere When You Pray

Passage: *"I desire in every place that men should pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or evil thoughts"* (1 Timothy 2:8).

There are so many verses in the Bible which talk about prayer that it was not easy to find one which described both the means and the objectives of prayer. We should pray in every place (and in every situation), lifting up our requests to G-d with holy hands, free of anger and evil thoughts. Prayer should be seen as a sanctuary where we take a break from this world and from all the cares, pleasures and riches we are personally dealing with. It is stepping out for a moment and taking a big spiritual breath, and to find help in our times of need.

Prayer is a learned discipline that can involve intense meditation and passionate supplication. It can also just be a momentary pause where we dedicate ourselves (our day, our journey, our tasks) to the L-rd and ask for His blessing and help.

There are several principles of prayer which I want to cover briefly with you this morning.

Matthew 6:8 says that He knows what we need before we ask Him, so we are not really telling Him something that He is not already aware of. So why bother? It is checking in both to acknowledge Him and His active role in our lives and to make sure that what we are asking

Him is something which we should be asking Him for. Vocalizing our thoughts is one way of sifting through them to separate the straw from the chaff and to clear our heads in the presence of our greatest friend, counsellor and protector. It is a time when we let Him know that we know that He knows what we know before we ask it.

It is not a time where we launch in lengthy, flowery declarations or prepare our case with the best possible arguments, using the best possible language, which covers all the bases, even to the smallest detail. Solomon says that G-d is in Heaven and we are on earth, so our words should be few (Eccl. 5:2). In other words when we have a lot to say, we should say a lot, but not just speak for the sake of hearing our voices.

We are not just chatting or gossiping with a friend in a free and careless manner. Even though we are to speak our minds, we need to realize that we are standing before the L-rd of Heaven and earth and shouldn't just shoot the breeze or say anything which comes to mind.

Related to this, we are not to think that we will be heard because of the multitude of our words and not drone on endlessly like the pagans do (Matt. 6:7). It is neither the amount nor the quality of our words that impresses G-d.

What impresses G-d is the condition of our hearts and our desire to serve Him and walk with Him according to His Word. We are not trying to get Him to serve us, we are doing our best to learn how to serve Him.

Even though we are encouraged not to worry about anything, but in everything, to make known to G-d all our requests by prayer and supplication, prayer is not some kind of spiritual pep rally, where we try to artificially drum up spiritual enthusiasm or fill ourselves up with great spiritual power like so many modern spiritual shamans. It is not intended to give us some kind of magical superhuman power that we can direct at our whim.

It is a time when we seek His face and wade through all the thoughts and desires of our hearts until we see things the way He does and where we determine to do things the way He would have us do things.

Now let me review for you my teaching on the four answers to prayer, which we can expect to receive whenever we lift up our hearts to Him. I have even added a fifth one! First, the most common answer to prayer is “no”, which is an answer too many of us have trouble learning to accept.

He is not our celestial sugar daddy, poised to spoil us and act like our personal genie in a lamp, ready to grant whatever we desire. He is the L-rd of Heaven and Earth with very specific objectives which He will not depart from and He does not want us to depart from them either. There is a positive spiritual tension between John 16:24 (up till now, you have not asked anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, so that your joy will be complete) and I John 5:14, 15 (This is the confidence which we have in approaching G-d: that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us – whatever we ask – we know that we have what we asked of Him).

You cannot write your own ticket with G-d. Instead, we should be asking G-d what His ticket is for us and graciously accept His “no” when He says no.

The next most common answer to prayer is “yes”, when we ask it according to His will and do not feel that we have the right to get a yes from Him every time we ask Him for something. The Scriptures are full of amazingly powerful, miraculous answers to prayer, but there are some equally amazing times when requests were not granted. I do not want to treat G-d like some force which I could manipulate, I want to surrender my will to Him and get on board with His plans and objectives.

The next answer to prayer is “wait” because the timing may not be right and there may be more important things G-d wishes us to do first. Learning not to jump the gun saves us from making big blunders and putting our foot in our mouths. Saul lost big time when he impetuously offers sacrifices because he was too impatient to wait on Samuel's arrival. They that wait upon the L-rd will renew their strength, those who recklessly rush in will lose out big time and may even be disqualified until they learn to patiently wait instead of madly rushing in where angels fear to tread. Waiting is one of the hardest and often the most necessary skill we need to learn in the L-rd.

There are two more answers to prayer, one which frustrates me exceedingly and on which brings peace to my fretting soul. G-d can also answer us by stating that what we want to know or what we want Him to do, is none of our business and we should not concern ourselves with it. Instead of getting mired in what is none of our business, we need to learn to be about the things which are our business – and leave the rest to G-d.

Sometimes, however He will not just say that it is none of our business, He will say that we have to learn some more before we can understand what it is we are really asking for. When we are in over our heads, He wants us to back up so that we do not needlessly drown. Being told to grow some more or learn some more is sometimes the answer that stops me in my tracks before I get into trouble in situations which I really do not understand what is going on. How good is your reverse gear when G-d tells you to back up?

Prayer is really the discipline of asking, listening and discussing and dialoguing, and not the folly of demanding, ignoring, whining and trying to manipulate. What kind of prayer are you engaging in? What kinds of prayer are you learning how to exercise?

Prayer is also seeking His face and learning to rest in His persistence, maybe not for a full forty days and nights but done so that our time with Him becomes the spiritual equivalent of “dine and dash”. Impatience is a great hindrance to effective prayer. It does not however, want to squelch our desire to learn and investigate new things and ask questions freely when we are curious or trying to understand something better.

Paul says to prove all things and hold fast to that which is true (I Thes. 5:21). He wants us to learn to discern that which is good and acceptable to our L-rd and to His will. At the same time, He wants us to learn not to lean on our own understanding, but to trust in G-d as we acknowledge Him in all of our ways, so He can lead us onto straight paths (Prov. 3:5, 6).

We also want Him to try us and search out our hearts, so that He can help us discern all and any wicked ways in us and remove them so that He can guide us on the path everlasting.

The L-rd's prayer is a model for both individual and corporate prayer, not because it has special

power to help us when we recite its words. It identifies our spiritual needs and what our hearts and lives should really be concentrating on. Our greatest need to seek the L-rd who is in Heaven and to hallow His name as we wait for His kingdom to be established according to His on earth, as it is in Heaven. We can ask for what we need on a daily basis and not just what we want, as if we could oblige G-d in anyway to give us anything which His Word forbids or warns us against. We need to exercise the same level of forgiveness with our fellow human beings that we want G-d to exercise with us.

We also need Him to deliver us from the power of the evil one as He leads us away from temptation instead of foolishly stumbling into the enemy's grasp. This is because we understand that the coming Kingdom is His, as well as all the power and glory which this darkening word possesses.

How good are you at actually hearing what it is the L-rd is trying to say to you? How good are you at also hearing what He is saying to us and too everyone in this generation of His body, to the Jew first and also to the Gentile?

How long do you keep on praying for those who will not listen to what the L-rd is trying to say them? You pray until you are sure He is telling you to stop, because they cannot really escape from His Spirit, no matter how hard they try (Prov. 1:20-23). so instead of raising our voice until we can be heard above the noise and folly of this life, we need to have confidence in His hunting skills and turn all of our impatience and frustration over to Him. Instead of yelling at people and uselessly arguing with them, we need to weep for them before G-d and know that our prayers for them are never useless nor ineffective.

He will cause His voice to be heard and we need to pray that we learn to also hear His voice and not need to be shouted at or hit over the head before we agree to learn to see things His way.

I believe strongly in personal prayer and I believe equally as strongly in corporate prayer. When we combine our forces, we can often see things more clearly and see answers because we have learned to walk with Him and neither lag behind him or run ahead of Him.

I sometimes do a sweeping prayer for all those people I have known and all those places I have visited, not to get power over them or to gain favour with G-d, but to make sure my heart is in the right place and that what I am packing in the suitcase of my heart is something that will please G-d not be burned up when He open me up on the Day of Judgment.

How is your prayer life doing?

Do you come up for prayer?

Are you often found in your prayer closet?

Are you just mumbling empty words over and over again or are you pouring out your heart to the King?

Are you trying to get a buzz and hype yourself up when you pray? It is OK to become excited in prayer, but it is not OK to use prayer as some kind of stimulant or steroid to give us an edge

over other people.

Do you repeat the same things over and over in the hope that you can wear G-d down and convince Him to do your will?

Do you know that your present prayer is effective and powerful when you are righteous before Him?

Are you dialoguing with G-d in prayer or are you too busy talking to Him to actually listen to what He is saying?

Do you actually expect to hear from G-d when you pray?

Do you believe that G-d answers prayer exceedingly abundantly beyond all we can think and ask?

Do you accept it when He says no? Are you frustrated when you do not get the answer you want when you pray?

Instead of asking what G-d can do for you, are you asking what you can do for Him?

Are you trying to outdo the prophets of Baal with your volume and with the length of your prayers?

Are you trying to go into a mind altering state or have an excitement induced seizure every time you pray?

Does the Lord's Prayer describe the kind of prayers which you usually offer to G-d?

Is prayer your first and last line of defence as you battle the spiritual forces of evil which are roaring around our world look for new victims to devour?

Are you trying to get power when you pray or are you trying to offer powerful prayers to the King?

Join us for corporate prayer. May you grow and deepen your grasp of individual prayer.