

Emor **Say!**
Torah: Leviticus 21:1-24:23
Haftarah: Ezekiel 44:15-31
Brit Chadashah: Luke 14:12-24

Reading: Hanna p. 141 and Ps. 42. Jewish Hero: Elizabeth (John's mom) Carrier: Laureen

This is fairly long Torah portion that covers four whole chapters. The way Leviticus is set up shows us that it was a guide book for the priests and Levites to show them how to minister effectively. The books covers a lot of ground and can go into some pretty detailed descriptions. It was not meant to be read like a book, by consulted like a manual, which is what we will be doing in this meditation.

Chapter 21 deals with how the priests were to handle grieving for the dead, because just going into the presence of a corpse brought uncleanness which the priests were only allowed to do for their very close relatives. They were also forbidden some of the more common Canaanite funeral practices. They were forbidden to shave all or a portion of their heads as part of their expression of grief. They were not to shave the corner of the beards or make incisions in their flesh in honour of the dead.

As well, to avoid the perverted sexual practices of the Egyptians and the Canaanites, they were forbidden to marry a prostitute or a divorced woman because they had to be totally separate and holy as they functioned in the sanctuary. Also, if the daughter of a priest became a prostitute, which was common among the pagan priests, she was to be burned at the stake for attempting to introduce perverted pagan spirituality into the camp of Israel.

During his tabernacle service, the High priest was not allowed to go into the presence of a corpse to mourn and the priests had to be without any physical deformity whatsoever when they entered the Holy Place. This was not an attack on handicapped people, but because the L-rd is holy and wants His people to be holy and whole, those who served in the sanctuary had to also be holy and whole. Those who suffered from any weeping skin condition were also excluded from serving in the Tabernacle. They could still eat the food which was the portion of the priests, but they were not allowed to participate in the liturgy.

This exclusion of any imperfection also applied to the sacrificial animals. None of them with deformities or who had been wounded could serve as sacrificial animals. New born animals had to remain with their mother for at least seven days, before they could be offered, so that the mother's health would not be compromised. An often repeated theme also appears in our passage for today – all sacrifices of any kind had to be offered both by an acceptable person and in an acceptable manner. The L-rd is not against spontaneity, He just does not find things that are done haphazardly to be acceptable.

Chapter 23 deals with the festivals of the L-rd. Only Numbers 28, 29 go into more detail. But both agree that the most important festival of the L-rd is the Sabbath and the festivals were considered special Sabbaths, no matter what day they fell on. They were to be treated as special Sabbaths over and above the regular Sabbath. The seven festivals of the L-rd occur in three grouping, in the spring, the summer and the fall. Winter was a time to rest and to keep warm and to perform whatever maintenance and repair was required.

Passover is the first festival and it is really three feasts wrapped into one. The Seder was to occur after sunset on the 14th of Nisan and before full dark. The 15th of Nisan was the beginning of the week of unleavened bread and this time period is also referred to as the week of Passover. Beginning on the 16th of Nisan, the people began their 50 day countdown to Pentecost, which is also sometimes called the festival of weeks. The festival which began this countdown was called the festival of first fruits and it was the first of the three pilgrimage festivals when the people would pay their tithes from their harvests.

The festival of Pentecost celebrated the wheat harvest and was the second pilgrimage festival where festival tithes were paid from the people's agricultural increase. Animals were sacrificed throughout the year, with the first born always being dedicated to the L-rd and animals sacrifice was always a big part of the pilgrimage festivals. Tithes were always paid from the increase and the same should apply for us today. A tenth of our salary belongs to the L-rd and if the salary is agricultural increase, a tenth of the harvest belonged to the L-rd.

In the seventh month, the month of Tishri, the last pilgrimage festival was observed as people brought a tithe of their fruit harvest and a tithe of their second grain harvest, but with a difference. During Sukkoth or Tabernacles, the people were to camp in tents for a whole week and have a solemn gathering on the eighth day. No servile labour was allowed on the 1st and 8th days during this week long festival. They were to gather branches from a variety of trees and wave them before the L-rd, both to celebrate His provision in the Promised Land and the remember their wandering through the wilderness, on their journey home.

A discussion ensues about both the oil for the menorah and the 12 loaves which were to be placed before the L-rd on each Sabbath. This discussion is interrupted when the son from the mixed multitude had a quarrel with an Israelite and used blasphemy as part of the quarrel. He did more than take the L-rd's name in vain, he cursed the L-rd and it was judged necessary to stone the offender so that no one else would fall into this heinous error.

An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth is also mentioned again in conjunction to the death penalty, because this kind of blasphemy was considered a capital crime on par with murder. The L-rd is a real person and cursing Him is a form of spiritual murder. Stoning did not occur often in Israel and once the people settled into the land, there is no historical record of stoning occurring frequently. The whole purpose of Israel and the festival cycle is to both worship the L-rd and also to learn how to apply the dictates of His Word into every area of our lives.

The Haftarah portion in Ezekiel reiterates the people's need to live separated lives in holiness and the Brit Chadashah has a humbling message for us. It is the story of all the excuses which were made to avoid attending the L-rd's banquet and we are reminded that our invitation was not extended because we are anything special.

Without the L-rd, we are poor, blind, crippled and lame and we can only find our healing and wholeness in Him. When we begin to think that we are something special, we lose sight of how special the L-rd is and of our need to make our lives revolve around Him and His Word. Refusing to answer, when the L-rd extends an invitation also makes us worse than all the poor, the blind the lame and the crippled who inhabit our darkening world. Are you doing what His Word requires in every area of your life?

Sermon: Counting the Omer: Trusting in G-d.

Scripture: “ For without faith, it is impossible to please G-d. For the one who draws near to G-d, must believe that G-d exists and that He rewards those who seek Him. For I know the One in whom I have placed my trust and I am sure that He is able to keep that which I have committed unto Him until that day. And can any of you add a single hour to the span of your lives by worrying? For it is the Gentiles who strive for of all these things and indeed your heavenly Father knows what it is that you have need of.” (Heb. 11:6; 2 Tim. 1:12; Matt. 6:27, 32)

Waiting on G-d and trusting in Him are very similar functions, so this morning, I want to continue on the theme we began last week. But in order to do so, I must make some clarifications and correct a few wrong ideas.

Trusting in G-d is not a means by which we can guarantee any special treatment, when it comes to the trials and tribulations through which we must all pass. In fact, because our walk angers our three worst enemies (the flesh, the world and the enemy), we can expect to receive more flack and experience more of the resistance of this age than many other people who do not walk on the bumpy straight and narrow.

As well, faith does not give us power over G-d to oblige Him to act in any way in our favour to make us rich or more successful in life than our neighbours who do not share our precious faith. It should never be seen as a kind of formula theology where we try to get the right mix of spiritual ingredients, so that we can name it and claim it and have all of our wishes come true. Faith is not some kind of spiritual lottery or spiritual bingo where we present our extended wish list to G-d and sit back and watch, as we check off each item, because somehow we have G-d on a leash and we have trained Him to do tricks on command.

Contrary to what is sometimes taught, unconsciously and purposely, G-d's people have not overcome the majesty in Glory and we have never found a way to oblige Him to do our bidding, either in our own lives or in the world around us. When we pray that His will may be done, we are in fact surrendering our personal version of all the hopes and fears of all the years and are wanting our earthly lives to reflect the heavenly harmony where His will is always done. We want to bring heaven's peaceful harmony to our tumultuous lives and not use these eternal resources for our temporal profit in this fleeting life.

Authentic faith, to the Jew first and also to the Gentile, is not a form of spiritual materialism, where we are stacking things up in our lives to further our personal gains portfolio. Paul reminded Timothy that godliness with contentment is of great gain and once we realize that always trying to get more and more, gives us less and less satisfaction, we are set free from greed and grief which is poisoning our lost and dying world.

Having said this, we need to know that G-d knows all about our needs and if we can trust Him when the storm is raging and even when we are persecuted and slaughtered, because of our faith, then our inner man can rise up with wings and let the things of this world grow strangely dim. Our outer man can either eventually catch up with our true pilgrimage, or we will be liberated from this world, to rest in the presence of our Messiah, until His Kingdom shall come and all questions will be answered and all debts will be settled.

You see, trusting in G-d brings us to an elevated understanding where we realize that the purposes of G-d and His coming kingdom, and not the hokey pokey is, what it's all about. Personal fulfillment, family fulfillment, social harmony and international social justice are not the core of G-d's heavenly agenda. They may in part or in whole be by-products of people and nations walking with the L-rd, but in the end they are just part of the noise of life where our enemy is trying to throw up serial smoke screens to keep our eyes off the kingdom of G-d and His righteousness.

Now, much can be said about kingdom ethics and the need for mankind to live according to the dictates of G-d's Word, but our trust in Him and in His purposes is not based on the level of compliance we see in the world around us. We are not looking for some kind of consensus before we agree to walk with the L-rd. We are saying that over and above how well or how bad things unravel around us, our calling is not like the calling of any voice in this world and we have more confidence in the purposes of G-d than we do any of the nonsense which this world gets up to, locally, nationally and internationally.

I think global warming may just be a natural occurrence as part of this planet's millennial weather patterns and likely, none of our efforts will have much impact on it. I agree that pollution is destroying this planet and one of the side effects of this destruction which hits me more personally, is the unrestricted use of toxic chemicals to boost scents and poison the air. Recycling is a good idea, so that our world does not slowly sink under the weight of all the garbage our industries are producing and we need to stop turning our oceans into a toxic soup. Battling poverty and social inequality ranks right up with battling racism and defending the rights of the handicapped and all victims of abuse, as causes we need to lend our support to. But these need to be responses to our faith and trust in G-d and should never become the primary focus of our lives. Solving problems is not the same as seeking the kingdom.

G-d is at work in the world, despite the folly of men and the escalating spiritual darkness which the enemy is generating. Trusting in G-d means that we serve His higher purposes and believe that He is able to guide and direct us so that none of the snares of the enemy have our name on them. He prepares a table for us in in the presence of our enemies, and we dwell beside quiet waters, even as all the storms of this age rage around us. His goodness and His mercy are the sheep dogs which know their way home and will keep us from wandering far from the path.

His rod will beat off all our attackers and his staff will hook us out of any pits or brambles we may stumble into. When life rises up against us, we need to never lose confidence in His provision and when tragedy overwhelms us, we need to never lose sight of His sovereignty. This is because over and above it all, not only does He clothe the lily of the valley and have His hand on the sparrow, He will never leave us, nor forsake us. We are cherished in the palm of His hand, whether they behead us, rob us or drive us into the ovens of Auschwitz.

This is not what I am praying will happen to us as a necessary part of what it means to walk with the L-rd and I certainly do not what you to pursue persecution as if G-d is not with us unless our lives are falling apart. What I am saying is that when we trust in G-d, we are set free from the agenda of this current age and will be empowered to rise up against all the onslaughts which may come against us. We are heaven bound, not bound to this earth.

I eagerly encourage people to ask and to seek and rigorously make their needs known to G-d.

But this is only stage one because our spiritual needs should always take precedence over our temporal needs, because we are only strangers and pilgrims wandering through this life as citizens of the world to come. Growing in Him will always be the most important thing

Let me tell you a story to illustrate our need to have a vigorous spiritual focus. When our people were herded into camps, we set up universities and orchestras because we understood that stone walls do not a prison make and they can cage your body, but your spirit soul can still soar free. In one camp a big strong young man came to one of his professors and said he would no longer be attending any of the clandestine classes because he was going to concentrate on surviving. He was dead within a week. Without heaven there is no focus.

So here we have the great spiritual paradox about what it means to trust G-d as we wander through this life towards our Father's Home in Glory. We have got to be taking care of business, as long as the business of the world does not become the business we are living for. We have to balance our commitment to hard work and diligence with our unfailing confidence in the providence of G-d and neither sit around doing nothing, while we wait for Him to provide, nor worry ourselves into a fit trying to figure out how things are ever going to work out. We need to push from down here and trust Him to push from up there.

Our passages were selected to help us build a healthy, balanced approach to trusting in G-d from a Messianic Jewish approach, which would also apply in any context where believers take the Word of G-d and His promises seriously. I believe with all my heart, mind and soul that G-d exists and that He does reward those who diligently seek Him, either in this life or in the next – or sometimes even in both. Walking with Him will always be the best deal.

I will not be talked out of my faith, nor persecuted out of my confidence because I am fully persuaded that He is able to keep that which I have committed to Him against the day of His return. I am not going to be using this faith as some kind of magical manipulation of G-d so that all my dreams come true. But I am going to be pouring my heart out before Him when my heart is deafened by the cry of the widow, the orphan and the oppressed. I will weep when good men flounder and when the wicked prosper and when the evil designs of cruel political and financial moguls bleed poor countries dry for profit and support repressive regimes who slaughter and oppress their own people. I passionately hate all injustice.

I do not expect that everything will turn out for the best in the best of all possible worlds, but I am not going to either become a violent radical or a sold out pessimist who is just looking out for number one. I am a convinced citizen of the Kingdom and this is both my final destiny and my daily expectation, no matter how many briars and brambles I have to trudge through on my way home. I am only in trouble whenever I forget that above it all, I am homeward bound.

I will testify to this final destiny on a daily basis, both by word and by how I live my life. Do people know where you are coming from and if they will not listen to what you are saying, without a word, do they hear the silent voice of your testimony? I am not a strong believer in intrusive evangelism which pummels people with tracts or harangues them with the promise of hellfire unless they immediately surrender their lives to the Messiah. I want to be an influence which will build a context where the truth can be shared and accepted, no matter how long it takes. I have been sharing with family members for decades and I have friends who come to me when they are in need or when they want to enjoy a wholesome time away from the carnal noise of this age. These are those who I am prepping for the Kingdom.

And even if they do not eventually turn their hearts over to the L-rd, I am still their friend and they know where I am coming from and why I lead the life which I do. They have seen me rejoicing in the good times and slogging hard through the bad times and they know that my faith in the Messiah is the anchor which prevents me from going adrift.

They know I am articulately pro-life and decidedly opposed to the false and heinous LGBT inclusive agenda. They know that I will never say, nor do anything to be politically correct, even though I will treat even my worst opponents with politeness and never use violence or defamation to get my point across. I will not play dirty, even in our dirty world.

I want to rise above and wade through the never ending rhetoric which tries to make that which is sour, seem sweet or turn that which is dark into a kind of false light. I want to understand their perspective from my immovable faith perspective and answer them with the wisdom which is derived both from my trust in G-d and my faith in His Word.

I do not want to waste time worrying about tomorrow or trying to get as much of the pie as I can stuff into my personal financial pockets. This world is sinking fast into darkness and you all know that I do not subscribe to the dispensational nonsense that we are going to be spared the worst of the tribulations which are to come. As a Jew, I realize all the horror and sadness which my people have suffered. As a believer in the Messiah, I see how much grief and loss believers have suffered at the hands of those who wanted to drown out their voices.

As an historian I am aware of the horrors of genocide as militarily advanced barbarians have wreaked havoc on multitudes of people who were not in possession of the means to resist their onslaught. Islam has viciously attacked the western world at least twice in its long and sad career. And now it is in the process growing up in our midst, as we replace those babies who were slaughtered in the womb with refugees who want as much freedom to practice their faith as we claim for ourselves. They are now positioned to safely hear our voice!

I am not worried, because G-d's Kingdom is relentlessly coming, over and above all the magnificent folly of this age. I want to continue to explore my faith in the G-d of the Bible and to learn new ways of applying His Word in our world where the pace of change keeps accelerating. I make no effort to keep up with all the latest technologies or all the latest fashions, but what I want to continue to do is to keep pace with what G-d is doing in the Word and to respond with faith and trust to all the situations and to all the people He brings my way.

Under the Soviets, evangelical believers were especially targeted by this communist regime. They were placed in separate camps whose guards were always being shuffled, because no matter how hard they were treated, they would never shut up about their faith and were always an influence for light and salt, no matter where they were and no matter what they were going through. This is the kind of trust I want to harness in my life. I never want life to tell me how to live, I want to always tell life how G-d wants us to live and also what G-d wants us to live for. Authentic trust in G-d never loses sight of this.

I have given you a lot to think about and a lot to digest and to integrate, but honestly, after 47 years of walking with the L-rd, I am only just scratching the surface. Join with me as we keep on scratching, day by day and year by year in all the circumstances of our lives.

Shabbat shalom and Shavua Tov.