

Reh See! L-RD's Table Rosh Chodesh Elul Unfettered spirituality
Torah: Deuteronomy 11:26-16:17
Haftarah: Isaiah 54:11-55:5 (Is. 66:1-24 New Moon Portion)
Brit Chadashah: John 7:37-52
Reading: Laureen p. 171, 173 & Ps. 97 Jewish Hero: John. Carrier: Isaac

This Torah portion begins with what could be called a positive spiritual ultimatum. The people will be blessed if they keep the commandments and statutes of the L-RD and they will be cursed if they violate the commandments of G-d and seek out other, false gods. Even today, G-d wants to be LORD of all, or else He is not L-rd at all. We are not to give any kind of spiritual allegiance to anyone or anything, because our complete and total allegiance belongs solely and completely to the G-d of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Anything less is unacceptable and spiritually dangerous. Like I said last week, in my understanding, taking a chance with Lady Luck and buying a lottery ticket is violating our singular, total allegiance to the G-d of the Bible and His Messiah. We should never take a chance with games of chance!

To get the point across, when they conquered the land the people were to divide into two groups, with one group standing on Mount Gerazim to pronounce the blessings and the other group standing on Mount Ebal and pronounce the curses. You win or lose by the way you choose and the L-rd does not put up with any competition when it comes to our complete and total spiritual allegiance.

One of the major tasks they were to accomplish, once they conquered the land was to totally destroy and cast down every trace of the criminal pagan idolatry which the Canaanites practiced. Their religion was a sexually based religion where the favour of their gods could be obtained through both human sacrifice and sexual immorality (including bestiality).

They also offered their children up as burnt offerings to obtain the favour of their gods. As well, they ate animals alive, drinking their blood while they were dying. This is why we are not to eat the blood of living creatures. We are to kill them and shed their blood because we are eating their flesh, not cannibalizing their life force. Related to this, the Canaanites also boiled a kid in its mother's milk. This does not mean that we cannot mix meat and dairy, it means that we do not consume food to get spiritual advantage. They wanted to sexual power of the ewe and the life force of the kid. We just want to blessing of the L-rd. Nothing less.

The only way to obtain G-d's favour is to obey His Word. This obedience does not give us any power over G-d, it gives G-d complete power over us. He is never our servant and we cannot influence Him to act on our behalf, as if He were a force to be manipulated. We exist to serve Him and not the other way around. He blesses those who walk with Him.

With this in mind, the L-rd told them that once they were in the land, He would select a permanent location for the ark and the Tabernacle. The people would then bring their tithes and offerings, which was defined as a ten percent portion of the increase of their fields and their flocks. They also had to bring the first born of their flocks, before the L-rd three times a year. All tithes belonged to the L-rd because they were part of an increase He had given.

The L-rd is quite insistent that they must never imitate the paganism of the Canaanites.

They could slaughter animals for food and even hunt them, without the need to bring the meat before the L-rd, as long as they did not eat the animals alive. They were not to explore how these criminal idolaters served their gods, because it could lead to an infection of paganism which would culminate in burning their children in honour of these gods, in order to get their favour. This section ends with a repeat reminder that we are to observe and put into practice everything which the L-rd has ordained, without adding anything or taking anything away.

Next, if a prophet arose in their ranks to call the people to serve foreign gods and there was a sign performed in confirmation of this call to idolatry, the people were being put to the test. We serve the L-rd of wonders, but we are to do so by having faith in Him and obeying the teachings of His Word. Signs and wonders are to follow the proclamation of the Word and should never be used to draw us away from our total submission to G-d through His Word. The false prophet was to be put to death in the same manner as the idolatrous Canaanites and their false prophets were put to death.

This would even apply if a close family member also tried to get the people to serve other gods. If a city among the people were also to try and destroy the people's singular allegiance to G-d, careful research was to be done to see if this was actually the case. If it was proven, the town and all of its inhabitants and livestock was to be burned (devoted to destruction) and reduced to a permanent pile of rubble, never to be rebuilt. No one was to take any of this treasure, for fear that they would also be destroyed by the L-rd.

Chapter fourteen begins by forbidding any kind of body piercing in honour of the dead. The same was also said previously about tattoos or marks which were made in honour of pagan gods. Body piercings and tattoos for non religious reasons are not condemned in the Bible, I just think they are a silly, unsanitary thing to subject your body to. Your skin protects your body like a shield. Cutting through it or digging into it (which is what a tattoo does) is like making a hole in the walls of your house which will let anything through.

Next, a summary of kosher animals is given and besides discovering that giraffes are kosher, an list of 21 unkosher, carrion and predatory birds is given. We are not to eat carrion (which means to scavenge dead meat), not are we to eat any carrion eaters. Winged lizards and bats are also forbidden. If it flies it must have feathers and if it has feathers it must fly.

Three times a year, the people were to bring their tithes before the L-rd and to rejoice before Him. If they lived too far, they were to convert their tithes into silver and purchase whatever they desired when they came before the L-rd. Sheep, cattle, wine and strong drink are mentioned as acceptable purchases. However when you pay the tithe of your increase among us, we only accept money. Please do not put food or alcohol in the offering box!

The tithes of every third year were to be offered to the Levite, the stranger, the orphan and the widow. They were to be put outside their dwelling place and not brought before the L-rd. Every third year, poor people in their midst were given the chance to overcome their poverty and performing this act of mercy (tzedakah) would guarantee the blessing of the L-rd in all that the people undertook. He rewards kindness, not stinginess.

In chapter fifteen, the year of Jubilee is called the year of release and is also called the seventh year and all debts were forgiven, except in the case of a stranger not dwelling in their midst. Debt forgiveness was an in-house duty among the people.

Jewish bond slaves were to be set free every seven years and not sent away empty handed. A bond servant was not paid a salary (15:18), he was a temporary slave. A Hebrew could become a permanent slave if he wished and he was identified with a pierced ear and was never to be mistreated as if he were an ordinary slave.

The first born of the livestock was to be offered to the L-rd, except if it was in anyway deformed. This deformed animal could be eaten in the same way that wild meat was eaten, as long as you did not eat it alive.

The Passage ends with a summary reference to the three pilgrimage festivals (shalosh regalim), when the people were to bring their three annual agricultural tithes to the Ark/Tabernacle, along with the first born of their livestock. Once there, sacrifices and rejoicing were to occur and they were to have nothing but joy. They were not to arrive empty handed and each was to give whatever he could according to the blessings which the L-rd had given him, which meant according to the increase which the L-rd had given to him.

The same principle applies to our tithes today. Whenever we have an increase (whenever we are paid), we are to give according to what we are able, because 10% of a little is the same as 10% of a lot. 10% is a tithe, anything above that is an offering. The entire life of the people was to revolve around the L-rd and His festival cycle, as they avoided any cross contamination from the criminal idolatry they were to stamp out when they conquered the land.

Sermon: The Sabbaths of Affliction: Procuring Authentic Spiritual Satisfaction

Passage: Why do you spend money for that which is not nourishing? Why do you work for that which does not satisfy? Listen to me and you will eat that which is good and your soul will delight itself in the richest of delicacies.” (Isaiah 55:2)

Before you can truly understand the Bible and become effective in applying it to your life, you have to become familiar with its use of symbolic, literary language. It is rich in figures of speech which appeal to our senses, but which are not meant to be taken literally. Our Messiah is called a Lamb, a Lion and a rose. He is also called a tender shoot and He calls Himself a vine, a door, a light. We are told we need to be born again, spiritually and not literally. In one place John says that Messiah has seven eyes and seven horns and the Psalmist says that He is the chief cornerstone, upon which the heavenly temple of G-d is being built. All of these symbolically describe certain characteristics which He possesses.

All of these images contain truths we need to understand, but none of them should be taken literally. Symbolic language is a very effective way of communicating truth and our passage in Isaiah is doing just that. Isaiah is saying that the people have been expending their spiritual resources towards that which does not satisfy. He is referring to the paganism which they fell into, but which did not bring with it any enduring spiritual satisfaction, only trouble and pain.

It says in Proverbs that hell and destruction are never full, so the eyes of man are never satisfied (27:20). It also says that the bread of deceit is sweet to the taste, but afterwards the mouth is filled with gravel (20:17). It also laments the fact that a full soul loathes a honeycomb, but to a hungry soul, every bitter things tastes sweet (27:7). As Judah slid into the pagan darkness which led to the Babylonian Captivity, her true spiritual state was increasingly destitute and this was so unnecessary. They were digging their own grave.

The world, the flesh and the enemy, falsely promise fulfillment when we give ourselves over to the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life. Lasting fulfillment comes from faithful obedience and not from violating the commandments of the Lord. This is why we make tithing a vital part of our spirituality, not because we are a greedy shul, but because when we render under God that which is his, He blesses and stretches what is ours to keep.

The same could be said for our approach to sexuality. It is a powerful drive in our sexually addicted society and it is tearing at the fabric of the family and destroying marriages. Most young people have several sexual partners before they settle on someone to marry, but they do not understand that sexually active people are damaged goods who have lost control of their ability to find lifelong sexual fulfillment. Sexually transmitted diseases are ravaging young people and the divorce rate is higher than the marriage rate.

Sometimes divorce is a painful necessity when you are bonded to an unbeliever or to someone who ceases to be a believer. People feel that cheating on their partner is acceptable if they “fall in love” with someone else – when in fact they are just falling in lust and opening the door to all kinds of destructive behaviour. Their sexuality is out of control.

Pleasure seeking is considered a right and the use of recreational drugs and the regular heavy consumption of alcohol is on a dangerous rise. Drunk people and stoned people are turning our roads into dangerous places and often they lose control and become violent to their family and friends. To feed their habit, they steal and lie and need more and more to get less and less pleasure. Our society is increasingly narcissistic, placing the pursuit of any kind of pleasure above living according to a moral standard, such as we have in the Bible.

Through it all, the sad words of Mick Jagger reverberate through the hallowed halls of bars and clubs: “Can’t get no satisfaction”. Did you know that the average age of bar patrons is 19 and they are influenced to add drugs and illicit sex to their menu in the flawed pursuit of satisfaction and happiness? Sexual experimentation is on the rise and monogamy is being eclipsed by marital infidelity and the evangelizing intrusions of the GLBT front runners. Aids has hopped into the heterosexual community because of bisexual behaviour, but a recent survey reported that 87% of all cases of Aids are still to be found in the gay community.

Pleasure seeking, greedy hedonism was the lifestyle the Canaanites were famous for and it may give lots of stimulation, but it ravages people’s ability to find enduring satisfaction, until either their health is broken or their soul is shattered and their mouths are filled with everything bitter and the gravel of sin. The media and the internet are infected with the carnal agenda that rises up against righteousness and holiness, falsely claiming that sexual abstinence equals sexual frustration and that you have to sleep around until you find Mr. or Mrs. right. Sleeping around may prevent you from finding your soul mate.

Seeking first the kingdom and the righteousness of God is the key to intense, enduring satisfaction and this is what Isaiah is declaring to the surviving captives who may not have learned their lesson yet. Paganism in any form is a spiritual infection that will grow like a destructive cancer on anyone’s soul. Sexual boredom is widespread among sex trade workers and increased substance abuse is their primary solution, but it is not working.

Too many people are caught in a rut, going over the same unresolved issues without finding any lasting solutions. Things work for a while, and then they just fall apart again and again.

People now expect to have to wade through several failed relationships and to face betrayal by their partners, before they can settle down and find happiness. Sex is seen as a way of saying hello and many have been sexually active for so long, that they are unable to settle down and bond with just one partner. Instead of fixing what is not working in their lives, they just turn up the volume, and ignore the symptoms, until they encounter a major meltdown.

Religious faith is also increasingly portrayed in a negative, judgmental light, as that which excuses abuse and violence. Religious people are portrayed either as naive victims of corrupt leaders who are after their money, or as predators who feel it is their right to hurt people and prevent them from thinking on their own. Sometimes we are also portrayed as silly people who believe silly things and have no real clue what makes the world go around.

All of this is the concerted attack of the enemy to influence people to expend their personal and material resources in ways that will lead them away from satisfaction and cause them to be caught up on a tread mill of stimulation where the works of the flesh have full reign in their lives. They go from disaster to disaster and never learn their lesson. And they laugh at it.

Our faith offers true and enduring satisfaction and complete fulfillment in this life, as we wander through this darkening world towards our Father's home in glory. When we learn to cultivate the fruit of the Spirit and learn to crucify the works of the flesh, then our potential for happiness and fulfillment grows through the roof in our blessed Messiah. This is what I want.

Religious people are often seen as negative, judgmental, grumpy people and unfortunately there is more than some truth to that when religious people do not walk in the footsteps of the Messiah. Goodness and kindness are two fruit of the spirit which seem to be in very short supply among too many believers. Goodness can be defined as what you do and kindness can be defined as what you wish. I believe in the last judgment where G-d shall decide the eternal fate of all mankind, but I do not go around telling people that they are destined for hellfire and I do not look around for things to criticize. I have not been baptized in vinegar!

Too many believers have an incredibly long list of things they love to condemn and seem determined to see the downside of every situation. I know our world is darkening, but I do not scream condemnation at people. I believe that many positions adopted by the Gentile church are unbiblical and the violation of the Sabbath ranks pretty high. But I don't rant about it.

In our New Testament portion for today, when various conflicting ideas about the identity and validity of the Messiah were bounced around, Nicodemus, who was a member of the Sanhedrin, says that our law does not judge a person until it hears him. He was not listened to because they had their minds made up and were stuck in prejudicial thinking. Ouch.

Arguing with people is wrong and counter productive, even with those who are mired in incredible sin and perversion. Grumpiness is not one of the fruit of the Spirit. If people were not aware of a single thing you believed, would how you lived your life and the joyful peace you lived by, be a testimony to your faith? Or does grumpiness and meanness prevent people from listening to us? I have very strong, clear biblical positions, both doctrinal and moral, but I believe showing kindness, goodness and respect are the most efficient ways for me to share my faith. Dialoguing with people and defining our terms and explaining our selves respectfully (and even forcefully) is a better strategy than hurling insults at people and always trying to pick a fight. You can disagree with people without being rude.

I have been pulled into disagreements and sometimes you have to shut them down and walk away, especially if people are being disrespectful and are trying to pick a fight. But this should always be the exception and not the rule. Friendliness and gentleness are essential tools in our witness to the world. Are people put at ease around you? I have several non believing friends who both respect my positions and who like my wisdom and come to me for advice, even when they know that part of that advice means that I share my faith with them.

I am fully persuaded that walking with the L-rd according to the Torah and the Gospel is the only way to get incredible, lasting satisfaction and fulfillment. We can be joyful, even when we are suffering for our faith and experience things which break our hearts. So many people have come through our shul with pain and trouble which they try and pass on to others. They seem to feel that everyone should be as miserable as they are. With lots of patience and forgiveness, many of them can be weaned away from their sourness and carnal desire for disputes. Others not.

Some have learned just enough Bible to express some pretty serious troubles (psychoses) in spiritual sounding language. They are not being changed or redeemed or transformed into the image of our Messiah. Along with that, there are so many false teachers and creepy people who claim to be believers and some of them say the strangest things that have no basis in truth. But you shall know them by their fruit. What fruit is B'nai Chayim being known by?

As we approach the Fall Feasts, during the Jewish month of Elul, which starts tomorrow, we need to take time to examine ourselves and see what needs to be repaired and what needs to be ejected and uprooted. What will you bring with you into 5780?

Isaiah spent the first 39 chapters of his book, warning the people that they were going to be taken into captivity as a result of their stubborn sinfulness and their, all to frequent, violations of the Word. They broke their promises and sought to cover all their bases by worshiping other gods along with YHVH. They were immoral liars who could not be trusted and they were always up to no good. But in their midst was a growing righteous core, who wanted to leave the horrors of paganism behind. That's the crowd we are looking to attract.

And it was this group that Isaiah was addressing in our passage today. Why expend your resources on things which do not satisfy and which cannot bring fulfillment? Our darkening world is moving farther and farther away from the truth of G-d's Word and from the morality it proclaims. It is making inroads into many liberal churches and synagogues. I even know of a church which flies the LGBT flag and sees nothing wrong with abortion (murder in the womb).

A carnal lifestyle cannot bring satisfaction and fulfillment, whether you live that way in the world or in a religious community. Walking with G-d opens the door to healing and freedom and deep satisfaction which builds people up and does not tear them down. Every person who was ever conceived will one day stand before the Divine Majesty of the Messiah to be judged. He will not ask complicated theological questions. He will want to see if your life was given over to meaning and purpose, as you sought for the eternal truths of His Word.

There are two kinds of lost people I feel very sorry for. First, those who are wallowing in pagan darkness with their mouths full of bitterness and gravel. Next those who haunt religious communities and either live immoral lives in private or bring bitterness and quarrels into the sheepfold and have no light and are not salty. The choice is ours. One month to go. How is your life doing? Are you satisfied and fulfilled? Seek the King and it will come your way.