

Matot/Masei Tribes/Journeys of L-rd's Table Chazak, Chazak, v'Nitchazek

Torah: Numbers 30:1 (2)-32:42/33:1-36:13

Haftarah: Jeremiah 1;1-2:3/2:4-28

Brit Chadashah: John 2:13-25/James 4:1-12

Reading: Aaron p. 163 and Ps. 111(49). Jewish hero: Mordecai. Carrier: Alan

Torah Meditation.

Today is the second Sabbath of Affliction and it is also a double portion which brings our annual study of the Book of Numbers to a close. The Sabbaths of Affliction occur between the Fast of the 17 of Tammuz and the fast of Tisha B'Av (the ninth of Av). This year, Tisha B'Av falls on a Sabbath, so it is observed on the following Sunday and not on the actual date. There are seven Sabbaths of Consolation from Tisha B'Av until Rosh Hashannah, to help us climb up from the Black Fast until we are ready to welcome a new year and another annual Torah reading cycle.

I will talk more about the fasts in my sermon. The Haftarah portions are dire warnings about the consequences of not listening to the L-rd and not obeying His Word. The New Testament passages talk first about the cleansing of the temple and then about the need to avoid evil speech and not to falsely judge each other. There were not two cleansings of the temple, but John chose to mention it out of sequence as a means of introducing the extensive opposition which the L-rd had to deal with throughout His public ministry.

Chapter 30 of Numbers deals with special vows where you promise something in the name of the L-rd. When you promise something in the name of the L-rd and do not fulfill, you are taking His name in vain. In this portion a provision is made to protect ladies who have made hasty, unwise vows. They could be annulled by her husband and in the case of unmarried girls still living at home, they could be annulled by her father.

Chapter 31 deals with the punitive action which was taken against Moab (also called Midian). A smaller striking force is sent against the Moabites and devastates their country as a punishment for their attempt to destroy Israel. They killed several kings and the Prophet Balak and burned all their cities. They took all the treasure and took many Moabites captive. Moses is unhappy about this and orders every married woman slain – because she was dedicated to the service of the gods of Moab as a sexual priestess.

They also killed all the males, because at birth, they were also dedicated to the service of Moabites gods. The unmarried, virgin women were spared, but had to go through a ritual cleansing before they were allowed into the camp which their people had tried so hard to destroy. Detailed instruction is given about the distribution of the Moabite treasure which they acquired and two non combatant groups are mentioned. A portion was given to the members of the camp who did not go to war. A percentage was also designated for the Levites and those who guarded the tent of meeting and the tabernacle.

Chapter 32 deals with the request of Reuben, Gad and the half tribe of Manasseh to be given the lands of Sihon and Og as their inheritance.

Moses grants their request as long as they participate with their brethren in the conquest of the

Promised Land. The land of Galaad becomes their possession and their families did not cross over to take up residence in Canaan.

Chapter 33 cites the 41 campsites of the Children of Israel, from their flight from Egypt until they set up camp on the plains of Moab. Their first camp at Kadesh Barnea was also called Rithma. It was their 14th campsite since Egypt and marks the beginning of the long years of wandering. They arrive back at Kadesh Barnea as their 32nd campsite. They camped 21 times during the years of wandering and Aaron died on the 40th year after their Exodus from Egypt. It took them 6 more campsites to go around Edom and to smash through Og and Sihon and arrive at the plains of Moab, right across the Jordan from Jericho.

They did not wander for exactly 40 years, because they spent most of one year camped around the holy mountain, not including the time it took them to reach the mountain and also the time it took for them to arrive at Kadesh Barnea for the first time. The reciting of the camping places is followed by a severe warning to drive and out and destroy the idolatrous inhabitants of the land. If they fail to do so, these inhabitants will be thorns and needles for the people and G-d says He would treat them in the same way that He has resolved to treat the idolatrous Canaanites.

In Chapter 34, the limits of the Holy Land are given, and this also includes a mention of Galaad. In Chapter 35, they are told to designate 48 Levitical cities scattered among the lands they are to inherit. They are to give each of these cities (villages) enough of the surrounding land so the Levites could be self sufficient in food. This would also mean that they would have ready access to local Bible teachers who could help them follow the festival cycle and keep the commandments as they taught the people the statutes of the L-rd.

Over and above this levitical provision they were to establish six cities of refuge where an accidental murderer could seek refuge until his case was heard. If he was found innocent of premeditation, he was to remain in the city until the death of the High Priest, which would give the grieving family time to recover. If he was found guilty, he was executed.

The double portion ends with an addendum to the laws of inheritance. The daughters of Zelophehad are told that they have to marry within their tribal group, so that the land which was designated to them as an inheritance, would not go to another tribe; which it would have done if they married into another tribe.

The people are to remember the long years of wandering as a warning of what would happen if they did not walk in the ways of the L-rd. They also devastate their enemy, Moab even more severely than what the L-rd did to the Egyptians. They are warned to thoroughly drive out the Canaanites and not assimilate into the criminal idolatry which they practiced.

They are also told that the land would never really belong to them and they are to dwell there as stewards who are to shine and be salt, as a testimony to the surrounding nations – and indeed to all the nations of the world. G-d's great mercy should not be seen as an excuse to violate His Word. It should be seen as a means to show them how to repent and how to have faith and obedience. Their experiences should also serve as reminders to us, so that we do not adopt any of the bad spiritual habits which haunted them. Our calling is to be holy – nothing less.

Sermon: **The Fast: Sowing and Reaping.**

The last four kings of Judah backslid away from the righteousness which Josiah practiced and it was their backsliding which precipitated the destruction of the temple and the Babylonian Captivity. There are three fasts associated with the burning of the temple and the destruction of Jerusalem: (1) the tenth of Tevet (mid winter – December) when the last two year siege of Jerusalem was set. (2) the 17 of Tammuz (July) when the walls of Jerusalem were finally breached and (3) the ninth of Av when the temple was burned.

The people actually went into captivity in three or four waves, the last one being the biggest, after Jerusalem was destroyed. At this point in ancient history, the fortunes of Assyria were failing and those of Babylon and those of the Medes and Persians were rising. Egypt was no longer a great power, but found itself in the Assyrian camp, trying to prop up the failing empire. Judah was a client kingdom to Assyria but did not actively support the Assyrian cause when things began to fall apart.

This may have been why Josiah led an army against Pharaoh Neco, to try and stop him from coming to Assyria's aid when the coalition of three powers were swallowing up the Assyrian empire. They were: Babylon, the Medes and Persians and the Greek kingdom of Lydia. Nineveh, the capital of Assyria had already fallen and Egypt wanted to prevent the rest of the empire from falling. The main battle was to occur at when the Egyptians laid siege to Haran.

Pharaoh Neco warned Josiah that G-d had told him to come to the aid of Assyria and that Judah should stay out of it. For some reason, the aging Josiah did not listen, but led his troops in disguise, so he must have realized that he was doing something wrong. This may be seen as an act of disobedience towards G-d and may have been one of the major reasons why his sons abandoned their faithful obedience and did not walk with G-d as their father had done, right up to the end of his life. When he slipped, they adopted a slipped lifestyle.

His army was defeated and he was mortally wounded. The victorious Egyptians continued on their way to aid Assyria and the people placed Josiah's son, Jehoahaz, on the throne in place of his father. The Egyptians were unable to stop the destruction of Assyria and as they retreated back to Egypt, after a long campaign, they overthrew Jehoahaz and placed another son of Josiah, Eliakim, on the throne and changed his name to Jehoiakim. He reigned over a client kingdom of Egypt for 11 years and did that which was evil in the sight of the L-rd. This likely included criminal idolatry and fornication which his father had tried to stamp out.

It was said that he returned to the evil ways of Manasseh his grandfather (2 Kings 24:3) and filled Jerusalem with innocent blood. He became a vassal to Babylon for three years and then rebelled, probably in support of the Egyptians, who did not come to his aid because they had lost all of the land they had in the Middle East (2 Kings 24:7). In the account in Chronicles, the Babylonians took Jerusalem and carried off some of the vessels from the temple. They bound Jehoiakim and took him as a prisoner to Babylon, where he died.

His son Jehoiakin reigned in his place and only ruled for three months. He is also called Jeconiah and he was likely removed because of his pro-Egyptian sympathies. It is said he did not depart from the evil which his father practiced and the Babylonians came back to besiege the Jerusalem for the second last time. They took all the treasure from the house of the L-rd and from the King's house and took thousands of people into captivity with the king. The Babylonians placed his uncle, Mattaniah on the throne and changed his name to Zedekiah.

Briefly, there are two textual concerns I want to deal with. In Chronicles, Jehoiakin is said to have been eight when he became king. In Second Kings, it said he was 18. Given the age of the text, this is not a real problem and could have been a scribal error. It does not change the meaning of the text and is in a real way, proof of its authenticity. The difference was noted and not buried and either age is possible.

Next, in 2 Kings 24:17 it says that Zedekiah was Jehoiakin's uncle, while in 2 Chronicles 36:10 he is called his brother. Either possibility does not change the meaning of the text, and again, points to its antiquity. This difference was also noted and not hidden. The word, brother, may be used to indicate kinship, without being specific. 2 Kings is more specific.

When Zedekiah, became king over a much diminished kingdom of Judah, he ruled for 11 years. In the 9th year of his reign, he rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar, even though he had sworn by G-d he would not do so. He continued in the evil ways of his predecessors and even mocked the warning messengers who were sent to them by G-d. His brother, Jehoiakim had even burned part of the prophecies of Jeremiah in an attempt to suppress the warnings from G-d. Be careful that your political affiliations do not come into conflict with your spiritual loyalties to G-d through His Word.

Evidently, Judah still trusted in Egypt and this last rebellion may have happened because of promised Egyptian aid that either did not come or was beaten back before it could relieve Jerusalem. The Babylonians laid down a two year siege. This last siege was set on the tenth of the month of Tevet and no help was forthcoming, either from their unreliable Egyptian allies or from G-d. Ezekiel records that right up until the end, the people played both sides, seeking the L-rd in the temple and serving pagan gods in tunnels beneath the temple.

The people ran out of food in the second year on the ninth day of Tammuz, and the walls were breached on the 17 of Tammuz. 2 Kings records that King Zedekiah and his army fled through the breach at night and headed towards Jericho, likely hoping to cross the Jordan river and make it safely into Egyptian territory, further south. When the Babylonian army overtook them, Zedekiah's army scattered and he was taken to Nebuchadnezzar at one of his siege fortresses to be judged.

They killed Zedekiah's sons in front of him, blinded him, took him to Babylon in chains. The Babylonians went back to Jerusalem, pulled down its walls and burned both the houses of the nobles and the House of the L-rd. In the past, I have said that after the walls were breached, the defenders fought on for another month, but after a careful reading of the Scriptures this was not so. All the defenders fled through the breach and there was no one left to oppose the final destruction of the city.

The remaining people and those who had defected to the Babylonians were carried away as captives. The dismemberment of the temple is described in sad detail (2 Kings 25:13-17) as well as the execution of the remaining leaders who had held leadership positions in the rebellion (2 Kings 25:18-21).

The poor were left in the land to harvest and many Jews who had fled to neighboring countries came home and they had an abundant harvest. The Babylonians set up a governor, Gedaliah,

over the remnants of the people and told them they had nothing more to fear from the Babylonians. He was assassinated, likely at the instigation of the Egyptians or their allies and the remaining Jews fled to Egypt for fear of the Babylonians, even though Jeremiah said they had nothing to fear. They took Jeremiah hostage even though they did not listen to him and these Jews gradually disappeared from the pages of history. Some of their descendants moved south into the mountains of Ethiopia, where they stayed right up until they were finally taken home after 1948.

The amazing stubbornness and rebellion of the last four kings of Judah should be a warning to all of us that if you do that which is evil in the eyes of the L-rd, none of the promises can protect you from His wrath. However, as I have said before, among the rebels, there was a considerable righteous core which was taken in several waves into Babylonian captivity. The Jews were scattered among various other captive people and something wonderful and startling happened during their captivity.

They gathered all of the writing which had survived the fall of Jerusalem and arranged them into a collection of 39 books which we call the Old Testament or Tanakh. Over 400 other documents are mentioned in the Tanakh, but they did not survive. Jerusalem was pillaged more than once before it was finally destroyed and it may be that some of these documents were hidden away in caves or buried like the Dead Sea scrolls and may turn up later.

The brave man who supervised the setting up of the Tenach, was called Shimon hatzadik., or Simon the righteous. Historically there were four men by this same name, but he was the one who gathered and organized the contents of the Old Testament. It has come down to us in the same format for centuries and it became a link to hold the survivors of the captivity together and to give them hope that their captivity was only temporary.

I want to deal with one more issue before we outline the lessons we can learn from the fasts and the rebelliousness which triggered the captivity. What happened to the ark of the covenant, with its jar of manna and Aaron's staff which flowered? First of all, it was made as an earthly copy, to reflect the true ark which is in Heaven in the true Heavenly temple. It only became holy when the presence of the L-rd came down off the mountain and took up residence behind the veil in the Holy of holies, first in the tabernacle, then in the temple.

Ezekiel 10:18, 19 describes how the special cherubim driven vehicle, picked up the presence of the L-rd, and took it to heaven, so that all that was left was a golden box and a golden house, which were only earthly copies of heavenly realities. Once the presence left the temple and the ark, they no longer had spiritual significance. Some believe the ark was hidden away and still exists today. They say that because the Bible does not record its destruction, that it was not destroyed or taken to Babylon as part of the spoils of war.

So much detail is given about the treasure of the temple which were lost, but about this, the saddest lost loss, there is silence. Now the Jewish people knew that the ark had to be wrapped up and carried on the shoulders of Aaronites. There were ceremonies to follow and sacrifices to be made and there is no record of this being done. The ark could not have been snuck out and hidden. There was so much turmoil in Judah after the death of Josiah this could not have happened in secret. There was no place for it to go.

It was in its resting place until the presence departed and then it went back to being just a golden box which was likely among the treasures that Babylonians took from Jerusalem, either

one of times before they burned the temple, or as part of what they took when they burned the temple. G-d did not defend or protect the box because His people had abandoned Him, so He abandoned them and the box and the building they had built for Him. They tried to use them as a good luck charm, because they figured G-d would not let Jerusalem fall as long as they had the box and the building. Earthly real estate means nothing to G-d.

Jerusalem would never have fallen if the people had walked with G-d according to His Word. They did not learn the lessons of the destruction of the first temple, because G-d is more interested in the condition of our hearts than He is about even the fanciest piece of real estate. Let me briefly outline what happened to the second temple then I will outline three spiritual lessons we can learn from the horror of all that happened to our people when the temple was destroyed, not once, but twice.

After Herod's bloody reign, he divided his kingdom between three sons: Archelaus, Herod Antipas and Philip. Archelaus was worse than his father and the Sanhedrin petitioned the Roman Senate to remove him and turn Judah into a Roman province. To avoid having to practice emperor worship, they said they would pray for him every day and promised never to rebel by declaring him their sovereign overlord (until Messiah should come).

They were actually rebelling against G-d and even though they destroyed more than one Roman army, they were divided among so many factions who constantly fought among themselves, when they were not fighting the Romans. During one of the battles, they burned their 20 year grain supply and starved until they were no longer able to repel the Romans. The Romans burst into Jerusalem and the streets ran red with blood and millions of our people died in a useless fight they should never have started.

Here are the lessons we can learn. Whenever we stop walking with the L-rd, we are in mortal danger and there is no place on earth where we will be safe until we repent and return to the L-rd. After the brilliant reign of Josiah, our people slipped back into the gross immorality of Manasseh and it is the sad state of their perverted spirituality we should be mourning, not the loss of some prime real estate along with some cultural artifacts.

Taking the L-rd's name in vain is a serious offense and it means making a promise to G-d and then breaking our word. In both instances, our people swore not to rebel and broke their word. When we sin, we need to repent and seek forgiveness and not fight as hard as we can when we know that we are in the wrong. From his prison cell, Manasseh, arguably the most evil of the kings of Judah, repented and sought forgiveness and was delivered from his prison. His son and his grandsons should have learned from his example.

I do not understand why king Josiah was so disobedient and went against an enemy without the L-rd's blessing. I do not know why the last four kings of Judah did not repent and seek the L-rd. But if you sow in the Spirit, you shall reap in the Spirit. If you sow in the flesh, you shall reap in the flesh. What are you sowing? As we remember the loss of both temples, let us rather mourn the loss of spiritual obedience and make sure we never follow suit. The loss of faithful obedience is the greatest tragedy a believer can possibly experience. Faithful obedience is also our greatest treasure. How is your treasure doing?