

Behar/Bechukotai **On the Mountain/In My Statutes**
Torah: Leviticus 25:1-26:2/Leviticus 26:3-27:34
Haftarah: Jeremiah 32:6-27/Jeremiah 16:19-17:14
Brit Chadashah: Luke 4:16-21/ Matthew 22:1-14

This week's double Torah Portion deals with five main themes. It starts off with the Sabbatical year, then goes into considerable depth about the Jubilee year. Most of the second portion deals with conditions for blessings and the consequences of disobedience. The portion ends with a discussion of two kinds of oaths.

Once the House of Israel entered the land, every seven years they were to observe a Sabbatical year where they would not sow in their fields or prune their orchards. They were to live off what the land produced on its own, along with what was stored from previous years. They were to count seven Sabbatical years and hold a Jubilee year every fifty years.

It was a second Sabbatical year in a row and the L-rd promised to bless the forty eighth year so that it produced enough food for three years, or until the harvest of the fifty first year was gathered in. During this year people were to return to their ancestral land and to their family (clan). YHVH stipulates that both the people and the land belong to him and that the House of Israel were really just His tenants. They paid a double rent. Along with dedicating the first born of both their children and their livestock, three times a year they were to bring one fifth of their annual harvests as an offering to the L-rd.

They had to wait until after the usual harvest time on the fiftieth year before they could put a crop in for the new harvest, festival cycle. As well in the Jubilee, all property went back to its original owner. The new temporary owner was really just buying the harvests until the next Jubilee year. The price of the land would decline as the Jubilee year approached.

When it came to houses, if the house was in a walled city, the one selling, had one year to redeem (buy back) his former property or it became the permanent property of the new owner. Houses situated in unwalled villages, reverted to their original owners at the Jubilee. Houses belonging to Levites in their cities had a permanent right to redeem and the fields surrounding the Levitical towns could not be sold.

Next, the portion deals with a person who has temporarily lost their ability to support themselves, but who still has the means to earn a living. In this case anyone who lent money to them, had to do so without charging interest. However if someone completely lost the ability to earn a living, they could sell themselves, probably to pay off debts and they would be set free at the Jubilee. If a Jew sold themselves to a stranger (non Jew), living in their midst, they could be redeemed at any time and if they were not, they would be set free at the Jubilee. Their price would be determined by counting the years until the Jubilee.

A Jew who sold himself into servitude, could not be treated like a regular slave and could not be resold like a regular slave. Only strangers (non Jews) could be held in permanent servitude because the Jews were permanent slaves of YHVH, living as tenants on His land. A jubilee year was never observed in Israel and the Sabbatical year was not consistently observed. The seventy year captivity was to give the land its seventy missing Sabbaticals.

Chapter 26 warns the Children of Israel to revere YHVH's sanctuary and to observe His Sabbaths. It outlines the blessings of abundance and security which come from faithful obedience. Their granaries would be so full of grain from previous harvests, that they would have no more room for the new harvest.

If, however, they disobeyed, they would suffer a whole series of catastrophes. They would be punished seven times for their sins, as wild beasts consumed their children and their livestock, reducing them to a small number of survivors. They would be struck with terror, fatigue and fevers. They would lose their harvests to their enemies and be unable to sow a new crop. They would be greatly reduced by the sword, by pestilence and by famine.

Worst of all, they would be reduced to eating their own children as their bodies dropped on the bodies of their idols AND they would be scattered among the nations and perish in exile until they paid the debt for their iniquities. Their punishment paid for part of the debt and their repentance paid for the other part. As bad as all this got, they would not suffer total annihilation, because the righteous core would seek the L-rd and He would restore the fortunes of the survivors.

Chapter 27 deals with two kinds of offering vows, each using a different Hebrew word. Something or someone could be sanctified (qadash) to the L-rd and this offering could be redeemed for a fixed sum of money. If it was land, it could be redeemed, counting the number of years until the next Jubilee. With animals, they could be substituted and their redemption would cost an added 20% of their value. The same value added tax would apply to a house that was dedicated to the L-RD. If a person was too poor to pay the price of their sanctified offering, the priest would assign a lower price, based on their ability to pay.

The second kind of offering vow was called Charam in Hebrew and it meant that what was so dedicated, was forfeit and could not be redeemed. No one could make an offering vow of either their first born or the first fruit of their fields and livestock. These already belonged to the L-rd. If you wanted to redeem any portion of your tithe, you had to add 20% to its value.

There was a special kind of charam offering vow where whatever was offered belonged to YHVH and had to be destroyed. If a field was offered as charam, it became to permanent property of the priests. If it was an animal, or a person, they had to be killed. My French Bible translates charam as "devoted to destruction". All the wealth of Jericho was devoted to destruction which is why Achan was put to death. The daughter of Jephthah was also foolishly devoted to destruction. The bushwhacking Amalekites were also devoted to destruction. Saul's son Jonathon was also devoted to destruction, but the people refused to let Saul carry out the sentence.

Ananias and Sapphira lied about an offering which they had made for the support of those disciples who stayed in Jerusalem to get trained. When they were given a chance to repent, they persisted in their lie and in so doing, they became dedicated to destruction and perished. It is always best to take G-d's Word very seriously, because everything He says is said with a purpose. We need to believe and obey (trust and obey). All of who we are and what we own, belongs to YHVH. This brings us to the end of the Book of Leviticus.

Chazak, chazak, v'nitchazek. May you be strong, may you be strong and may you be strengthened.

Sermon: Forgiveness. Breaking Spirit Shackles

Authentic spiritual progress is only sustained when we resolve life issues from a truly biblical perspective. In fact, every situation that we encounter, be it ever so good or ever so bad, will always have a biblical response which YHVH wants us to adopt. This includes handling difficult people and even tragedy and loss in our lives. It also includes how we respond when everything is going our way. Walking according to His Word is the only way to live.

You see, it is not what happens to us, as we wander through this life, which will determine our spiritual health and progress. This is determined by how we respond and how good we get at discerning the point of obedience which YHVH attaches to everything which He allows to come our way. This includes times of persecution and tribulation and even when we are betrayed and falsely accused.

It also applies to times of illness, because G-d always wants us to have faith and trust in Him through good times and through bad times. He wants us to have confidence that He will see us through our illness and bring us back to full health. But sometimes we are not healed and He either takes us home to Heaven or requires that we endure great pain and weakness. He does not just want us to trust in Him and walk with Him only when things are going our way.

In his time of great trials, Job gave up trying to solve the mystery of suffering, when bad things happen to good people through no fault of their own. He eventually came to the point of admitting that G-d could do whatever He wants to whomever He wants to do it to and for however long He wants to do it. So, instead of asking: "why is this happening to me?", we need to learn to ask how G-d wants us to respond, no matter how things turn out.

This is especially true when we are dealing with difficulties where we could begin to have issues with anger and we will not be out of the woods until we have learned to forgive and not to rage. But letting go of anger and bitterness is not always an easy thing to do and sometimes it takes time, but it is always time well spent.

As part of letting go and forgetting the past, we have to change the way we think about the past. This is so that memories do not create fresh pain and anger whenever we revisit them. It is not good enough to repress a memory or just do our best to forget it and ignore it. We need to learn to let YHVH teach us how to include forgiveness in how we allow the memory to impact our lives whenever it resurfaces. We want the pain to stop and not to go on damaging our lives. When we learn to include forgiveness, pain and anger begin to fade and the memory no longer has any negative power over our hearts and lives.

Forgiveness does not mean that somehow we are glad that bad things have happened to us or that somehow the pain becomes a desired good thing, which we want to let back into our lives. Holocaust survivors who are no longer broken and shattered by the horror which was imposed on them have learned to deal with such unwanted problems as survivor guilt. They have also come to terms with a searing hatred towards those who tormented them.

There is no simple method for this to occur, but the pain has to become a memory which no longer causes fresh pain. Until this happens, the horror and the pain of the past will dominate our lives and prevent us from beginning to heal and being able to move on.

In Hebrews, the L-rd tells us to make straight paths for our feet, so that which is wounded is made better and not worse (Heb. 12:13). Forgiveness is part of the path straightening which we need to do. In Ephesians, Paul says not to let the sun go down on your wrath (Eph. 4:26). Forgiveness puts our anger to bed and prevents it from ruining our lives. James says that the wrath of man does not accomplish the righteousness of G-d (James 1:20). Forgiveness disarms wrath and helps us to begin accomplishing the righteousness which G-d wants us to have in our lives. Forgiveness is essential for spiritual health and spiritual growth.

Forgiveness needs to be at every step of the closure we sometimes need to have in our lives and helps us to we keep reminding ourselves that the painful experience is over and we can begin to heal. Sometimes, when it is not over, forgiveness helps us to not slip into wrath and bitterness and not to make a bad situation worse.

Forgiveness is especially important when we have to deal long term with difficult family members or troublesome co-workers whom we are unable to exclude from our lives. Forgiveness needs to be part of our initial response and it is also our long term objective for as long as the negative relationship remains part of our lives.

We still have to protect ourselves from abuse and from manipulation, but we need to learn to do so from a position of ongoing, peaceful forgiveness and not from a position of deepening rage or bitterness. This negative place is where too many people and even too many believers live, stuck in negative thoughts and producing negative behaviours.

To break free of this kind of dark space, we need to bathe our hearts and lives in persistent forgiveness so that our hearts and lives are not permanently damaged. Right after the L-rd's Prayer, the Messiah warns us that when we cease to forgive, we cease to be forgiven. I want to surrender everything and every reaction to the L-rd according to His Word, so that this horrible tragedy does not happen to me.

Now when we are learning forgiveness, we are not saying that we need to end up trying to say that the bad things which have happened to us have somehow been transformed into good things. We are just taking positive defensive action so that the bad things which have happened to us, do not cause us to become bad and cause us to do bad things and to say bad things.

Along with this, sadly, conflicts between believers are not always able to be resolved for a variety of reasons and we are left with the potential of letting unresolved issues fill our hearts and lives with anger and bitterness. But the Bible says that as much as it depends on us, we are to be on good terms with everyone (Rom. 12:18). So if anyone refuses to reconcile and will not receive our forgiveness or give us theirs, we just hold our forgiveness in trust. And if they never come around and receive it, it becomes one of the treasures we offer to the L-rd when when we stand before Him on the Day of Judgment.

As believers we need to learn to forgive and not to hold grudges. People may still hate us and say horrible things about us, but we should never follow suit. My old dad used to say that two wrongs, do not make a right and we need to follow the L-rd's example and not theirs. People who hold onto to anger, wrath and bitterness come up with the most elaborate excuses and even wrongly convince themselves that they are right and justified to continue to hold grudges and to not forgive those who have wronged them.

They say things like: "if only you knew what they did to me and what they said about me, then

you would agree with me that I am right to feel the way I do and to say and do the things I do". They do not know how far into the enemy's darkness they have slipped. However, the sinfulness of an action should never be used to ever justify following suit. Paul warned Timothy not to participate in anyone else's sins, but to keep himself pure (1 Tim. 5:22).

Some believers are so twisted up with anger and bitterness that they have no room in their hearts and lives for the love, the peace and the joy which the Lord wants to fill them with. Anger and bitterness can become like an infectious mold that can take over our hearts and lives and make us very sick and even contagious, as we infect others with our carnal hatred. When this occurs, the secondary damage is really much worse than the original pain.

We should never allow monstrous things or monstrous people to turn us into the same kind of monstrous people who justify doing terrible things because terrible things were done to us. Instead we need to recover and to heal. Forgiveness helps us to do this, because we are letting go of the pain and no longer bleeding on the inside.

We can still express anger and regret, but it needs to become a secondary reaction to what happened to us in the past and not an expression of any untreated inner damage which continues to make us spiritually sick in the present. We need to learn to work through our anger and find forgiveness and not let it become something we are stuck in.

If we grow to the place where we understand that our inner lives are way more important than that which is going on in our outer lives, then we will no longer let the darkness of anger and bitterness fester and take over our lives. We can still talk about bad things and about bad people, but without becoming bad ourselves and without doing bad things. Learning to forgive is the key to this kind of spiritual freedom from the spiritual shackles which hold too many people hostage to their anger and bitterness.

Forgiveness can cleanse our inner motivation and give us smile wrinkles, instead of the permanent frown that some people are stuck with. We need to treasure good things in our hearts and lives, so that we remain unshakable when the storms of life overtake us or when lust and the works of the flesh try to establish a foothold on the beaches of our lives.

You all know that as an historian and a Zionist, I think about the Holocaust quite a lot and over the years I have conducted extensive research into this sensitive subject. Even though I am frequently saddened and often angry at what was done to our people and the others who were tortured and executed along with us, it does not have a negative impact on my life. It doesn't leave me seething with anger or make me want to find a German to torture and kill. You see the way we think about something, be it ever so painful, will determine how we are motivated to act in consequence. What are you letting motivate your actions?

All perpetrators deserve to be brought to justice and serve jail terms or even be executed, but I am looking for justice and not vengeance. I am comforted by the fact that though many of them avoided prosecution during their life time, there is coming a day when even the most vile perpetrator shall stand before that Awesome Jew from Nazareth, because nobody gets away with anything forever. In all my studies and in how I live, I just want to do my best to make sure that this never happens again and that those excellent people's memory is cherished and not forgotten. God is the righteous Judge, not me and I leave it in His capable hands.

The Nazis executed slightly over 17 million people in their extermination camps and while I do

want to see all the perpetrators and deniers brought to justice, my biggest concern is twofold. First, I do not want people to ever forget that this happened and next, I want to rejoice in all the Gentile heroes who rescued Jews and hid them from those who wanted to kill them.

Recently I read an article about Pious XII, the pope who lived through WWII. He was sometimes criticized for not speaking out enough against the atrocities which Hitler was perpetrating, but many feel that he knew that this would be a waste of time. He was engaged in a greater work, because he was secretly rescuing Jews and downed allied pilots.

He is credited with helping to save up to 800,000 Jews and hiding them in various Catholic institutions all across occupied Europe. I am not really much of a fan of Roman Catholicism, but I take my hat off to the man who gave such excellent leadership to such a noble humanitarian gesture. Oskar Schindler was really not a very nice man, and after the war he had live on the charity of the Jews whom he saved. However, for the rest of his life he would challenge people and ask them what they did to help save the Jews and other victims of the Nazis during the war. He got at least this one thing right in his life.

How do you choose to remember the horrible things which have happened to you? Wanting justice to be done is not a form of sin, it is an appropriate reaction to injustice. Alongside this desire, forgiveness breaks the chains of anger and bitterness and sets the stage for healing so that our hearts and lives can be filled with love, peace and joy. It is the key to sustained spiritual healing and authentic spiritual growth. How active is it in your life?

What drives your inner life and which motivations control how you live your life? When we all stand before G-d on the Day of Judgment, our real inner motivations and heart reactions will be revealed and can no longer be hidden. What are you harboring in your heart and what will be revealed about its contents on that Final Day? Have you worked through the issues and experiences of your life so that love, joy and peace fill your heart and how you respond to life?

Has forgiveness allowed you to break free from all and any chains of anger and bitterness that have tried to gain control of your heart and life? Have you let forgiveness set you free to heal and to grow spiritually as you move on from all that has happened to you in your life? Is there any area of your heart and life where you are stuck in anger and remained filled with bitterness against anyone or anything? It will not go away on its own, you have to forgive.

Life is too short to waste time being angry and bitter. I am so grateful that the L-rd has repeatedly forgiven me and has repeatedly cleansed my from all unrighteousness when I have stumbled and fallen. He wants us to learn to do the same for all those people and all those things which have caused us pain and have caused damage in our lives. He wants us to be healed and whole on the inside, no matter where we end up on the outside.

When it comes down to the wire, it is not how much Bible we know that will cause us to grow spiritually and be healed on the inside. It is truly how much Bible we have learned to apply that will stimulate growth and inner spiritual health. Are you letting our Messiah teach you about the forgiveness which will break all and any shackles in your heart and life? Living with a spiritually damaged and spiritually stunted heart is not how we are called to live as we wander through this life on our way home to our Father's home in Glory. Shabbat shalom and Shavua Tov.