

Torah Portion: Beha'alotcha In Your Making Go Up
Numbers 8:1-12:16 (Zech 2:10[14] -4:7 Rev. 11:1-19)

This is the last Torah portion before the disaster of the cowardly spies. After such a glorious departure from Egypt and a year of training around the mountain, the victorious hosts of the L-rd are going to self destruct and there are indications in this portion that a disaster was waiting to happen. The people said they trusted in G-d and wanted to serve Him, as long as they always got things their way and did not have to face trials or opposition which made them feel uncomfortable. Do we serve the L-rd for what we can get out of Him or because He is so amazing and wonderful beyond our feeble ability to describe Him?

After having the menorah made according to the model which YHVH gave Moses, he then sets about to consecrate the Levites so they can serve in the newly erected Tabernacle. It is an elaborate ceremony with some features which may seem strange to our modern world. They shave all their body hair and all of Israel lays hands on them. Then they are turned from side to side as an offering, and after their atonement bulls are offered, they are given to Aaron and his sons and are turned from side to side a second time. They are first given by the House of Israel as an offering to the L-rd in the place of all the first born, then they are given to the House of Aaron as a sort of go-between between the people and the Aaronic priesthood.

The Tabernacle is set up on the first of Nissan in their second year after the departure from Egypt and the fiery cloud begins to hover over it. When the cloud lifted, it was time to move and the people camped in their banners around the tabernacle. The people celebrate their first memorial Passover in the wilderness as they camp around the mountain and because some of them were unclean due to contact with a dead person, a second memorial Passover is initiated, one month after the regular celebration.

Two silver trumpets are fashioned, both to call the leaders to meet with Moses and to initiate the orderly marching order once the cloud ceased to hover over the tabernacle. Trumpets were to be sounded: for war, for joy, at festivals, at the new moon as a memorial of the voice they heard from the mountain.

Right after the silver trumpets were fashioned, after the second Passover, the cloud lifted and the people made their first move and traveled three days into the wilderness of Paran. They marched according to their marching order and set up camp around the Tabernacle when the cloud indicated it was time to stop. Two spots of trouble occurred, first as they marched and then once they got to their first camp site away from the mountain.

During the march, some of the people complained and fire fell around the outside edge of the camp. It is likely that some who camped on the outside did not like being so far from the center of the camp. In the L-rd, it does not matter how close you camp to the center, it only matters that you stay in the marching order which He has assigned to you. When Moses cried out to the L-rd on behalf of the complainers, the fire stopped, but the people still had not learned not to complain. How about you? On our pilgrimage to our Father's House, we should never complain because His protection and provision are with us every step of the way, no matter what we are going through, be it ever so good or ever so painful. Being heaven bound makes both the valleys and the mountains, eternally meaningless. Bless Him and worship Him, because in the Messiah, we really have nothing to complain about.

The second problem at their first camping sight was that they complained about the lack of

meat and were tired of the miserable bread the L-rd gave them every morning. They have just completed their first march and all of their needs have been met. They were very close to entering the Holy Land and there was nothing standing in their way. Their lack of gratitude and their grumbling caused Moses to have a general meltdown. Shepherding people is not always pleasant and too often people find fault because they always want things to go their own way and get into the bad habit of always finding fault and complaining.

Moses even asked the L-rd to take his life, but along with other silly prayer requests, this one also went unanswered. G-d solved the problem by empowering the seventy elders with the Spirit with resided on Moses. This does not mean that there was less of the Spirit on Moses, but now the spirit lead leadership burden could be shared. G-d also dealt with the complainers who lusted after meat. He brought them quail.

They had more quail then they could eat and it was figuratively coming out of their nostrils. While those who lead in lusting after meat were stuffing their faces, they were struck down by YHVH. The camping site was now called the grave of coveting and once they had buried the offenders, the cloud lifted and they moved on to their second camp site. While they were there, two more issues came up, one for them and another for us.

Israel has always been a mixed race nation and now Moses takes an Ethiopian lady as one of his wives. We are not told how many wives he had, but polygamy was an acceptable practice in Israel and to stop the practice in the early church, Paul placed a limit on how involved polygamists could be in the redeemed community. Leaders had to be the husband of one wife. He was not talking about divorce and remarriage and he was not preventing widowed men from marrying a second wife. He was excluding polygamists from having a leadership role in the New Testament community.

While the Bible does not strictly forbid polygamy, in the New Testament, it prevents those who practice it from acquiring a leadership role. When a polygamist comes to faith along with his family, he is not called to pick one of his wives and send the others away. Our legal system and our culture forbid the practice of polygamy, but we should not prevent polygamists from coming to faith and joining our community. They just can't be leaders and the practice would likely die out in the second generation of those who have come to faith.

Now to the problem for them and not for us. Miriam and Aaron criticize Moses because he took a woman of another race. It may be that Aaron was not happy with his son Eleazar for also taking a woman of colour. His grandson, Phinehas, was a person of colour. His name is Egyptian and it means dark skinned. Aaron may have thought that one in the family was enough.

Miriam challenges Moses for apparently setting a bad example and says the Hebrew equivalent of: "who does he think he is?" She is struck with leprosy and has to be in isolation for seven days for her to be healed before the camp can move. G-d hates racism and even today, it is a plague whenever it rears its ugly head.

The portion ends with them arriving at their third camping spot on the edge of Canaan and they are poised to push on and take possession of the promised land, or so it would seem at first. They still hadn't learned their lesson about complaining. Have you learned yours?

Sermon: Messianic Bible Basics: the Role of Tradition in Messianic Judaism

The word that is translated as tradition in our Bible has a variety of possible meanings and I want to deal with its purpose in our Messianic community in 2020. Broadly speaking, tradition should be seen as situational applications of biblical truth that need constant modification. His unchanging Word should always be faithfully applied in constantly changing situations. We need to develop flexible, creative ways of applying His Word into every situation of our life as individuals and as a community, even as they constantly change.

However, whatever traditions we formulate, should not be seen a continuation or extension of biblical truth with the same authority as the Scriptures. Our traditions should always be subordinate to and wholly dependent on the Scriptures. The Scriptures should stand without having anything added to them or deleted from them. The Scriptures outline a series of principles without giving an exhaustive list of all the possible situations where these may be applied. The principles should always take precedence over the applications.

Both Talmudic Judaism and mainline churches have developed extensive series of traditions which some hold to be as authoritative as the Scriptures themselves. Traditional Judaism has some 20,000 laws which they wrongly claim have as much divine authority as the Ten Commandments. Mainline churches also wrongly claim that their traditions are on par with the New Testament. Tradition is never the same as Scripture.

The New Testament does mention tradition in both a positive and a negative way. When it comes to Jewish traditions which run counter to the Torah, the prophets and the Sacred Writings, we should not follow them. They are equivalent to paganism which is always trying to make inroads into our faith and they are functionally teaching us to disobey the Word, instead of finding new and creative ways of applying its teachings to every area of our lives.

What a man or a woman teaches should never be given the same status as what G-d said and what His Word teaches. Our Messiah left twelve witnesses to all He said and that He did, and so much of this eventually found its way into the 27 books of the New Testament. This is what is known as authentic apostolic tradition, because, along with the teachings of the Messiah, it promoted a strong reliance on the teachings of the Tanakh (Old Testament).

The New Testament is the greatest and best commentary on the Old Testament and while neither document is a complete collection of all that was said and done by the prophets or the Apostles, it is a way to determine if any teaching actually comes from G-d. I have told you before that the Old Testament mentions some 400 books which have been lost and the New Testament also mentions some of Paul's teachings which have also been lost.

If any of these missing documents should resurface, they would reflect what is already taught in the documents which we possess. While we do not have an exhaustive record of divine truth, we possess a complete record of divine truth with nothing missing that we need to know in order to serve G-d and walk with Him. This record is our final spiritual authority.

We should always examine what the Bible teaches and find ways of applying this to every area of our lives. These applications should never be seen as having the same authority as the Bible and we need to never look at them as possessing the same level of divine truth which His Word alone possesses.

In his second epistle to Timothy, Paul said that all Scripture is G-d breathed and is useful for: correcting, for reproof, for instruction and for training in righteousness. In His second epistle, the apostle Peter says that no word of Scripture came of its own accord because holy men were guided by the Spirit in what they wrote. Later, in the same epistle, he also states that the teaching of Paul is also a part of the Scriptures.

While I would agree that through the ages, many men have been guided by the Spirit in what they have said and in what they have taught, but our only permanent, unchanging measure to evaluate whatever someone has taught, has to remain the Scriptures, both Old and New. Our Messiah reproofed some Jewish teachers because they followed the traditions of their elders instead of giving first place to the Scriptures. It is what G-d has said that really matters.

In Matthew 23 our Messiah made an interesting statement about the rabbis sitting in Moses' chair. There is no piece of furniture in a Synagogue called Moses chair. What he was saying is that the only authority the rabbis should claim is when they teach the words of Moses and not just the opinions of any number of subsequent sages.

In Deuteronomy, it says that Moses taught what he received from G-d, adding nothing and not taking anything away from what he received. We can teach and apply the principles which the Scriptures contain, but we need to understand that our teachings and traditions will always be at a lower level. The Scriptures always stand as our final authority.

Well then, what is the role of tradition in our Movement? We need to look at how previous generations of Jews and even Gentiles have applied G-d's Word to their lives and use the same degree of creative application in our own generation. We also need to look at how both groups have wandered away from the Scriptures and have also taught things which the Scriptures do not teach. We always need to avoid the rabbit trails which they took.

Human tradition should always be a reflection of divine truth and should never become a substitute for what the Scriptures teach. In the past, I have taught the five "C's" or records of the truth which the L-rd has put at our disposal. The first "C" is the cosmos. In Psalm 19 David said the heavens declare the glory of G-d. In Romans, Paul said that a copy of G-d's Law is written in our innate conscience. This is the second "C" - conscience.

Next we have culture, the third "C". David also said that in Psalm 19 that there is no speech and there are no words where His voice is not heard. G-d's truth can penetrate the darkest paganism because all cultures and all religions have the same basic six themes: (1) they all have an act of creation. (2) They all have some kind of fall. (3) They also all have some kind of redemptive intervention. (4) They all have some kind of teaching about the end of the world and (5) a belief in some kind of life after death. (6) They all have some kind of spiritual duty based on the first five. G-d built these themes into culture at the scattering at Babel and they serve as homing beacons to lead people back to Him and to the truth of His Word.

The fourth "C" is circumstance because G-d is at work in everyone's life to give them an indication about His existence and to guide them to a place where they are willing to come to the truth of His Word. His Word is the fifth "C" because the canon of Scripture declares the first four "C's" and introduces us to the Author of Creation and to what His Word teaches.

But in order to teach the principles which the Scriptures outline and in order to apply them to every area of our lives, we need traditions that are more personal reflections of divine truth. When the apostle Paul was correcting some of the major abuses in the Corinthian congregation he said that there were still other things which he would deal with at his next visit. He did not specify what these were, he just indicated that more correction was needed

The author of Hebrews also said that we should set straight paths for our wounded feet so they could be made better and not worse. When no specifics are given, we need to examine which biblical principles need to be applied as we also set straight paths for our sore feet.

For example, we need to decide which style of clothing reflects our commitment to both modesty and to beauty. When we build a house of worship, we need to decide which kind of construction reflects our faith in the One Eternal G-d we wish to serve. Our choice of decoration should not slip into idolatry and our concept of holy space should take into account our commitment to singing as part of our worship, however we choose to sing.

We should also select songs and hymns and choruses which reflect biblical truth and which bring joy and consolation to us as we sing them. When we conduct all types of business which are not mentioned in the Scriptures, we need to explore the biblical principles which reflect our necessary commitment to honesty and generosity, as we practice fair play and avoid criminal materialism. We cannot serve G-d and mammon at the same time.

Our modern society has an entire system of legal jurisprudence in which previous rulings act as guides to future rulings, so that the rule of law can be upheld. Until recently, many of our laws and statutes reflected a biblical understanding of how our country should be run. Even as this continues to change, we will never follow suit and will continue to find new and creative ways of applying the unchanging principles of G-d's Word into every area of our lives.

Every new gadget which our technologically driven society comes up with, needs to be examined in the light of the Scriptures to see how it could best be used in the service of our Messiah and His followers. There are a whole series of biblical principles about speaking the truth which should be applied to every form of social media we engage in. This would also apply to how we raise our children and to how we relate to our neighbors and coworkers.

The traditions we develop should be seen as the attitudes and habits we build into our lives so that we are in fact disciples of the Messiah and not followers of the folly of this current age. This would even apply to how you drive and to what kind of participation you may have in the world of sports and entertainment. We need to be salt and light in our darkening world.

We need to see every new challenge which comes into our lives as the raw material for our sustained obedience and adherence to the eternal Word of G-d. As the situations of our lives change, our habits and attitudes need to change as well. The Scriptures stand as a salty beacon to guide us on our earthly pilgrimage towards our Father's home in glory.

2 Thess. 2:15 says that we should stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that we were taught by the apostles, either by word of mouth or by their letters. By this, we understand that the Scriptures are a complete guide to biblical spirituality, even though they are not an exhaustive source which discusses all the possible circumstances which we will encounter during our brief lives. The Bible is the only rock we need to build our lives upon.

In the past, I have recognized three kinds of tradition and as we draw our discussion to a close, I want to review them for you. First, there are biblical traditions such as Sabbath keeping and festival observance where we are told what to observe, but not always how we should observe it. The Scriptures mandate marriage, but not what kind of service we should follow or on which finger we should wear the wedding ring. The wedding ring is a cultural tradition which not all cultures are obliged to follow.

The Torah scroll is a biblical tradition, as is the wearing of the tallit. Circumcision is also a biblical tradition as well as a commandment, but we have to develop our own traditions as to what kinds of blessings we will use and who we will include in the performance of this initiation rite for our sons. We are told what to do, but not always how to do it.

What the Bible mandates, we will build into personal and community traditions which may vary from person to person and from community to community. These kinds of tradition are called halacha in Hebrew and are seen as a means to show us how to walk in the various situations we may encounter. We always want to build faith and obedience into every aspect of our lives, no matter how much variety we may encounter.

The second kind of tradition I call non biblical, because it involves habits which are not mentioned directly in the Bible, but which could be used to demonstrate our biblical faith and obedience. The kipah falls into this category along with what kind of formal wear we use to show decency and respect when we come to worship. I remember when suits were mandatory for worship services and ladies were expected to wear dresses as well as hats.

We live in a more relaxed era but, over the years, I have had to speak to both young men and young ladies, when the way they dressed was disrespectful and distracting. While biblical traditions are mandatory, non biblical traditions are optional, as long as they enhance our faith and our obedience and do not diminish or detract from it.

The last category are unbiblical traditions which are activities and habits which violate biblical principles. A lot of what transpires in traditional synagogues and many traditional churches falls into this category. Things like the all seeing eye attached to a hand is an infiltration of paganism into traditional Judaism. I would also place the adoration of the consecrated holy communion bread (the host) into this category. It has not been magically transformed into the actual body of the Messiah and worship belongs to G-d alone and not to the symbols which have become a functional form of idolatry.

Biblical traditions will be upheld and how we uphold them will be done with as much creativity and faithfulness to the Scriptures as we are able to generate. Non biblical traditions are optional and will only be upheld if they help us to reflect the teachings of Scripture and they will be discarded when they no longer serve this purpose. Unbiblical traditions should be avoided so that no direct or subtle forms of paganism are allowed to take root in our lives.

All traditions should be regularly evaluated so see if they are still serving their purpose and they will always need constant revision. Biblical truth is unchanging, we just have to figure out ways to apply it into every area of our changing lives, so that our lives can remain changed and remain a dynamic expression of our faith in our Messiah. Shabbat shalom and Shavua Tov (have a blessed week).