

Matot/Masei	Tribes/Journeyings of
Torah:	Numbers 30:1(2)-32:42/33:1-36:13
Haftarah:	Jeremiah 2:4-28
Brit Chadashah:	Acts 9:1-22/James 4:1-12
Chazak, Chazak, v'Nitchazek	Be strong be strong and may you be strengthened

Today, in my Torah Meditation, I will deal with the final chapters of the Book of Numbers, which is actually the end of the Torah. This is because the entire Book of Deuteronomy was given while they camped on the plains of Moab and Numbers ends with the declaration that these were the commandments which the L-rd gave on the plains of Moab. In a sense their camp on the plains of Moab was as much holy ground as their camp was around Mount Sinai.

This may explain the severity of the reaction against the Moabites, because they were desecrating holy ground. The same people group was called both Moab and Midian and the whole nation was attacked and decimated. Moab appears again in the Book of Judges, so some of them may have fled before the approaching army of Israelites and returned later to rebuild their homeland. They would not have been in any condition to trouble Israel for a couple of centuries. Let YHVH also deal with any personal Midianites who come against you.

The first Torah Portion opens with a discussion of vows and oaths that were made before the L-rd. Making vain oaths is forbidden by the third commandment, because, since G-d never goes back on His Word, we are also expected to fulfill the oaths and vows we have made before the L-rd. Many of them would have been made in an "if, then" format, like the one made by Jacob as he was leaving Canaan: "If You bring back safely to my father's house, then I will give you a tithe of all my increase". Breaking promises is a grave sin.

They were considered sacred promises and had to be kept because they were made before the eternal, unchanging G-d. Since G-d always kept His Word, so the servants of the L-rd also had to keep theirs. There was an exception made for young unmarried women, still in their father's house and for married women who lived in their husband's home. If they rashly promised something, on the day when their father or husband heard about it, their oath could be annulled. It could not be canceled if they waited longer than the day they first heard about the rash vow. No such safeguard provision existed for widowed or divorced woman because they were not part of a household team which would suffer if a rash vow was not canceled.

Next comes the punishment of the Midianites who sent their priestesses to try and destroy Israel. This punitive action was to be the last action Moses was to take before he died, so the attack could have happened before, during, or after the giving of the Book of Deuteronomy. A small number of Jews, one thousand from each tribe (except the Levites) was to attack their enemies. They were to kill all the men, burn all the cities and destroy all the enclosures where the Midianites kept their livestock. Midian was not devoted to destruction, because the people were able to keep most of the considerable spoils they were to acquire.

They attacked a much larger group of warriors and killed them all, without the loss of a single life. All the men, the married women and the male children had been consecrated to the Midianite gods and had to be destroyed to prevent them from spiritually infecting the camp for a second time. They took 32,000 virgin women captive as slaves (future wives too?)

The spoils were considerable and were divided into two equal parts, one for the fighters and the other for the rest of the people who did not fight. From the soldiers portion, 1/500th was given to the Levites and from the people's share, 1/50th was also given to the Levites. The soldiers would have been greatly enriched and the threat from Midian was neutralized. The leaders of the attack force brought a considerable offering of Midianite golden ritual objects as an atonement offering to the L-rd, perhaps to atone for the idolatry on the plains of Moab, which would have desecrated the place where they were receiving the second law.

After this great victory, Reuben, Gad and half of the tribe of Manasseh asked for permission to settle on this side of the Jordan. It was good grazing ground and they had considerable livestock. They were still willing to send soldiers to help in the conquest of the land and after seeking the L-rd, Moses granted them permission. This was an addendum to the Holy Land and would have included most of the western portion of the modern state of Jordan and parts of the modern state of Syria. Modern Israel has expressed no desire to recover this land, though they would have the right to do so if they wished.

Next comes a listing of all the campsites where Israel camped during their wilderness wandering. They are mostly given different names than the ones the Canaanites used and no detail is given concerning what the people did during their years of wandering. We can be certain, however, that they kept the Sabbath and all the festivals, because even though they were excluded from the land, it did not exclude them from walking with the L-RD according to His Word. No matter how much success or failure we experience in our own lives, we are also required to walk with the L-RD according to His Word.

Camps 1-3 took them to the sea of Reeds. Camps 4-11 took them to the foot of Mount Sinai. Camps 12-14 brought them to the edge of Canaan at Kadesh Barnea. Camps 13-32 cover the wandering years and finally, camps 33-41 took them around Edom, Ammon and Moab and onto the plains of Moab. Next, the limits of the Holy Land are given along with the procedures which would be necessary for dividing up the land. Then comes the call to set up 48 levitical cities scattered throughout the land and to establish six cities of refuge on both shores of the Jordan. Procedures for the functioning of the cities of refuge are also given.

The double portion ends with a discussion of inheritance where daughters inherit from a father who had no sons. They could inherit, but when they did, they had to marry within their respective tribes, so their portion of the tribal inheritance was not lost to their tribal brethren.

There is no mention in Numbers when the Book of Deuteronomy was given, once the tribes arrived on the plains of Moab. We are also not told whether the attack by the Moabite priestesses occurred before, during, or after the second giving of the Law. We are told that the punitive attack on the Midianites was the last action Moses was to undertake as leader, before he died. I have said before that the events in the Books of the Bible are not always sequential, but they always contain all the essential information we need in order to serve G-d and walk according to His Word. Sometimes pressing for more detail is pointless.

The events covered in Numbers warn us not to get spiritually stalled in our lives or we will also wander in a wilderness of our own making. Unresolved issues and conflicts fall into this category of being spiritually stalled. This, along with various other sins and all the works of the flesh which lie in wait to ambush us and drag us back into the darkness which we were delivered from. Don't let darkness establish a foothold in your life or your life will become a sad series of personal wilderness wandering. Life is too short for such foolishness. **(do chazak)**

Sermon: Messianic Bible Basics: Repentance is Not Just Saying That You Are Sorry

Today is the second of three Sabbaths of Affliction or desolation. These special Sabbaths fall between the 17th of Tammuz, when the walls of Jerusalem were finally breached, and the 9th of Av, when the temple was burned. We also mourn the loss of the second temple and are saddened because both of these sacred buildings were built to last until the Kingdom of Heaven is finally established at the end of the world.

Both of them were intended to be the centre around which the people's spiritual devotion revolved, as well as functioning as a concrete light to the nations, to draw them out of pagan darkness and into the light of the truth of G-d through His Word.

When it comes to remembering disasters, we want to know at least three things. First, we want to know why they happened and then how they could have been avoided, never to recur again. Lastly, we want to know how to recover and repair the damage which was done and get back to walking in a positive direction as we grow in our walk with the Messiah.

We already know that both temples were destroyed because, in both cases, the people broke their solemn covenant oath not to rebel against their sovereign overlords. In the first of today's Torah portions, YHVH emphasized that solemn oaths to G-d were not to be broken under any circumstances. It was seen as sinful as violating the Word of G-d.

I am not so much saddened because of the loss of two such magnificent buildings, as I am that the people reaped what they sowed because they had turned their backs on the promises which they had made to G-d. A silly question has frequently been asked about what happened to the ark which was originally kept in Solomon's temple. The Jewish people did not fashion a second ark for the second temple.

In the grand scheme of things, it was only the abiding presence of G-d that made this piece of furniture special. Once the shechinah or glorious presence of G-d lifted and abandoned the temple, this specially fashioned box had no more enduring spiritual significance. In fact, it was only a symbolic representation of the true ark which resides in the heavenlies.

G-d took no more steps to preserve this religious artifact than He did to preserve either the golden menorahs (there were ten of them, plus the original fashioned under the supervision of Moses) or the altar of incense. You see, once His presence lifted, He did not protect the temple or prevent rebellious Jerusalem from being destroyed.

You may be surprised to learn that it is claimed that the Ark was snuck out of Jerusalem and now secretly resides in one of some 44 supposed locations. Once the siege was set, the enemy surrounded the city and when walls were breached and the city was being destroyed, the ark could not have been spirited, unnoticed out of Jerusalem. There was no time either for it to be taken to some secret tunnels beneath the temple and moved at a later date to a more secure location. Things happen too quickly for elaborate escape plans to be made.

Once the temple began to burn, the Babylonians would have stormed into every part of the building to remove all of its treasures as well as to remove all of the gold which still coated the temple's walls. By the time this happened, there was no more organized resistance and the survivors were herded out of the city and taken into the captivity of Babylon (Ps. 137).

Various people claim to have had visions about the secret location of the ark and some have

even claimed to have seen it, but there is no concrete evidence that the ark still survives. It was undoubtedly taken to Babylon and became part of the treasures that the once mighty city had taken from the peoples it had conquered.

Once the city fell to the Medes and Persians, the Ark may have been taken to the Persian capital of Persepolis as an artifact of a captive deity. History is full of captured treasures being carried off and most often, the gold was melted down and used to make new artifacts which glorified the conquerors who carried off the loot.

Also, the silence of Jewish sources points to the destruction of this sacred artifact. I wonder what the Babylonians or the Persians did with Aaron's rod and the jar of manna? Did the rod bloom for them and did the manna turn to worms so these evil people could not taste this heavenly bread? Can I hear a big amen for Deut. 29:29?

When it came to the gold that decorated the top of the second temple, as the Romans burned it, the gold melted and every stone of the destroyed building had to be removed to get at this pilfered treasure. Yeshua prophesied this tragedy and the only thing which remains of the second temple is the outer wall of the court of the Gentiles, which ironically enough, is considered the most sacred site in Judaism. Gentiles call it the wailing wall, Jews call it the western wall. G-d is not really into preserving relics that have lost their significance.

The Ark is not mentioned again in the Bible, after the destruction of the first temple, because it was a relic of a covenant which the people had repeatedly violated. Be very careful about unsubstantiated, wild speculations that have no basis in fact. Our faith should be firmly based on solid scriptural teaching and not on the myths that are cunningly woven together by people who have let their wild imagination run away with them. I want to walk with the Messiah on this side of the looking glass and I never want to let my faith be carried off to Oz, when it really should stay in Kansas. Have faith in the Bible and not in the myths of men.

Well, back to our mourning about the destruction of these two marvelous artifacts which were unparalleled among all of the sacred structures built in the ancient world. The destruction of Jerusalem and both temples, was not caused by the shifting geopolitical situations in the ancient Middle East, as some secular historians claim. It was caused by sinful behaviour and covenant breaking, where the people made a solemn pledge to G-d and then violated it. The political situation had nothing to do with it in either case. It was G-d who allowed it to happen.

How could it have been avoided? If the people had kept the oath they swore and avoided the infection of criminal paganism, neither temple would have been destroyed and Jerusalem would not have fallen. What needs to happen to restore the people and deal with the damage they suffered? They needed to take repentance one step further and learn to practice faithful obedience to the L-rd through His Word. We need to take our sowing and reaping seriously.

The prophet Jeremiah hit the nail on the head when he outlined the criminal behaviours which the people had fallen into and I want to refer to three verses in the Haftarah portion to help inoculate us against falling into similar negative spiritual behaviour. The Bible not only encourages its readers, it also warns us to follow the positive examples it speaks about and to avoid the negative behaviours it warns about. We should never let our guard down and become sloppy or complacent in how we exercise our biblical spirituality.

Jeremiah reproves the people for functionally changing their gods and worshiping the mute

sticks and stones which were the works of their own hands. You see, Canaanite paganism was quite sophisticated and included some extravagant, perverted ritual sexual behaviour, similar to what our darkening society is declaring acceptable, even though the Bible declares such practices to be an abomination. Unfortunately the worst perpetrators of this criminal paganism were the spiritual leaders of Israel who had become disciples of Baal.

Jeremiah 2:13 *“My people have committed a double sin. They have abandoned me who am a source of living water, in order to dig cisterns that are cracked and cannot retain any water.”* One of the wonderful realities of walking with YHVH is that He always protects and provides for His people. He is wrongly perceived as a strict task master, depriving His followers of basic life pleasures. He wants to fulfill our needs, without indulging our carnal, fleshly nature. This nature is full of stimulation and low on satisfaction. Israel had left this marvelous source of lasting satisfaction to seek after false, pagan gods who could meet none of their needs and whose followers hid this failure by practicing extravagant debauchery. The Ten Commandments are a good guide to living and the fruit of the Spirit are the greatest and most satisfying treasures this world has to offer. The works of the flesh are damaging detours which caused the demise of the Kingdom of Judah, which should have known better. Don't fall into the same error. Serving G-d is the most satisfying life possible.

Jeremiah 2:19: *“Your wickedness shall chastise you and your infidelity shall punish you. You shall know and you shall see that it is an evil and bitter thing to abandon YHVH your G-d and to have no fear of Me says, Adonai, YHVH of Hosts.”* Too many feel that G-d is the one who is directly punishing the wicked and the backslider, but it is the backsliding and the wickedness itself which is the punishment, as it ravages the life of a former believer. If you sow wickedness, you shall reap punishment.

When the peace and love and joy of the L-rd are no longer active in someone's life, this gap is filled with evil and bitterness, along with fear, hatred and a whole host of other manifestations of the dark side. Wickedness wants to break our lives and bring us into submission to the cruel control of the enemy, the world and the flesh. Guilt and a host of lame excuses also try to keep the sinful soul from abandoning its foolishness and returning to the L-rd who forgives, cleanses and restores. Don't let the enemy, the world and the flesh deceive you!

But too many people think they have come too far and they feel they have betrayed the L-rd too badly to ever be welcomed back. They have let sin and the flesh get so large a grip on their lives that they feel that there is no way out of their captivity. Also, they feel ashamed when they ceased to fear (respect) the L-rd and have convinced themselves that they would not be welcomed back. However, with sincere repentance and a return to faithful obedience, even the greatest sinner will be welcomed back. G-d does not give up on His people.

The road back from the chastisement and punishment may not always be easy, as the Jews returning from their first captivity found out. When our people started coming back to their land in the early 1800's, they found it in ruin with nothing in it except swamps and deserts, with a few farms that did not produce very much. It took a great, generational effort to repair the damage to the land which their own rebelliousness triggered. It is never too late to start over and no life is too damaged that the power of the L-rd cannot positively impact. Jeremiah wanted to shake the people loose from their backsliding, but it took a long captivity to reach those who were willing to listen. Are you willing to listen?

Famine, disease and the sword wait to punish those who no longer take shelter in the shadow

of YHVH's wings. They become like a sheepfold whose defensive walls have been breached and where wolves, bears and lions have free reign to devour and scatter the flock. When the spirituality of believers is theologically and morally compromised and breached, the encroaching darkness of this present age escalates its death grip on our dying world. Backslidden liberal believers who have abandoned their faith in the G-d of the Bible are some of their favorite targets. The enemy always hates us, G-d never does.

Jeremiah 2:22:” When you shall wash yourself with lye and use much soap, the stain of your guilt is still before Me, says Adonai YHVH.” Cleaning up and hiding the evidence after committing a sin only disguises and white washes the spiritual damage which has been done to backsliding believers. In the Messiah, we have to call a spade a spade and rupture our link with the sin which is always trying to ensnare us. Then we have to seek for forgiveness and atonement (cleansing - I Jn 1:9), as we rebuild our spiritual vitality. Until we have obtained forgiveness from the L-RD and have also had the stain of our sin washed away by His atonement, our sin has not been dealt with and will continue to pollute and trouble our lives. It should never be buried or disguised, it should be confessed, forgiven and cleansed

When I said that repentance is more than just saying that we are sorry, I was actually calling for us to be prepared to engage in spiritual disaster relief. When natural disasters occur, many expressions of sorrow and words of comfort are offered. But neither the physical damage, nor the necessary rebuilding has been addressed. We have to move beyond just words and actually get involved with damage repair, which includes any necessary rebuilding.

Authentic biblical repentance is more than just an expression of sorrow, no matter how loud and earnest it may be. We must undertake both an active damage control for what we may have damaged, so that the damage does not continue to happen and set in place an active rebuilding program so that our spirituality remains intact (Heb. 12:13). Once this is set in place, we may even begin to grow as we recover from what has happened to us (Ps. 119:71).

Authentic repentance is truly liberating and it releases us from the carnal power of the flesh which is always trying to shipwreck our faith. Listen to how Paul describes the sincere, biblical repentance of the Corinthian church:

For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation and brings no regret, but worldly grief produces death. For see what earnestness this godly grief has produced in you, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what zeal, what punishment. At every point you have proved yourself guiltless in this matter.” 2 Corinthians 7: 10,11

I have often called this the sincere believer's spiritual 711, because we have to use all the biblical resources at our disposal and free ourselves completely from the grip of carnality and sin. The Corinthian church was deceived into practicing the most heinous, carnal violations of biblical spirituality and did all that they needed to do to break free and clear their name. This should always be our objective whenever we encounter departures from biblical procedures in our lives. Life is too short to waste going round and round in circles down the drain of this world, instead of walking straight along the straight and narrow. As we finish off the summer and approach the Fall Feasts, may authentic biblical repentance keep us healthy and focused, as we wander through this darkening age. Shabbat Shalom and Shavua Tov.