

Aharei Mot/Kedoshim

After the Death/Holy Ones

Torah: Leviticus 16:1-18:30/Leviticus 19:1-20:27

Haftarah: Amos 9:7-15; Ezekiel 22:1-16/Ezekiel 20:2-20; 22:1-16; Amos 9:5-15

Brit Chadashah: I Corinthians 6:9-20/ Matthew 5:43-48

Today's double portion is the second of three doubled portions in the book of Leviticus. It covers five chapters, but is nowhere near as technical as the ones we dealt with last Sabbath. It all takes place while our people are camping around the mountain and getting ready to start their journey to the Promised Land. They are being trained and educated so the transition from the motley crew which left Egypt to the mighty hosts of the L-RD can be completed.

Chapter sixteen deals with rules regarding access to the presence of the L-RD which resided behind the veil. Moses alone had a life long, unrestricted access to the presence of YHVH and we have no record that part of this access required that he perform sacrifices each time he entered the Presence. He was possessed of a durable holiness as both the covenant maker and the Law giver. His special status was unique and non transferable.

After the incident where the two sons of Aaron died for violating the protocols of access, and once the tabernacle and its furnishing were completed, the rules of access had to be given. While Moses still had unlimited access to the Presence, this did not apply to either High Priest or any of the other priests who ministered in the Tent of Meeting.

Through the High Priest, they only had access to the Holy of Holies once a year, at Yom Kippur and for the rest of the year, the actual Presence which resided behind the veil had spiritual extraterritoriality, and which had lethal consequences for all and any who did not respect this ritual distancing. The people had witnessed all the furniture of the Tabernacle being built and they even saw the ark being built. But once the Presence of the L-RD came upon the tabernacle and the Ark, it became a very special place, governed by very special rules. They needed to respect the Presence of G-d and so do we.

The only thing which actually made the golden box and the fancy tent holy, was the Presence of the L-RD. Once the Presence left, the box, the tent and all the furniture had no more spiritual significance. So even if the Ark has survived and was found, it would just be an interesting piece of archaeology. The Presence came down and dwelt with us while our Messiah walked among us and will only return when Messiah returns to end human history and inaugurate the eternal Kingdom of G-d.

Once a year, the High Priest performed a special set of ceremonies to accomplish four things. Before he could provide atonement for the ark and the tabernacle, he had to perform a set of personal atonement rituals which gave him the right to proceed with the other three sets of ceremonies. Once he was atoned, the High Priest then proceeded to provide atonement for the tabernacle and for all the ritual furniture which was housed in the Holy Place.

Once this was achieved, he took incense and went behind the ark three times. First it was to provide atonement for the Ark and the other furniture on the other side of the veil, so they could be used for another year to give the people ritual access to YHVH.

Next he provided atonement for the priests who helped perform the rituals and who would supervise the various categories of sacrifice over the coming year. He used the blood of three kinds of sacrificial animals. First the bulls for him and the priests. Then the goats and the ram for the people. After he had sprinkled blood for the tabernacle, he then repeated the blood sprinkling ceremony for the priests and then one final time for the people's atonement.

With the two goats, one was for a blood sacrifice and the other (Azazel, the scapegoat) had the sins of the people confessed over it and was released into the wilderness as a sign that the people's sins were covered. True remission of sins was only accomplished when the true Lamb of God died on the cross and rose from the dead. The atonement ceremonies were solemn and reminded the people of both God's unending mercy and their need to remain holy in order to access this great mercy.

Chapter seventeen begins with the stipulation that offerings to the LORD could only be made at the tabernacle. They were also warned to stop making sacrifices to the pagan billy goats and not to eat the blood of the live animals they were sacrificing. The life of all flesh is in the blood and rather than eat the animals alive, they had to shed the blood and only offer animals to the LORD which had been killed. The cruel practice of eating animals alive was strictly forbidden as a vile pagan practice. The blood of the sacrificial animals had to be shed and not eaten as part of the sacrificial ritual.

Chapter eighteen places three distinct limits on acceptable marital relations. You could not violate: (1) kinship and eighteen forbidden marital unions are listed. (2) gender – homosexual marriage is strictly forbidden. And (3) species – it was considered a forbidden abomination to have relations with an animal.

What is supposed by these prohibitions is that premarital sex and extramarital sex of any kind, are both forbidden and punishable by death. They were reminded not to imitate any of the pagan practices of the Canaanites. The chapter goes on to forbid sexual relations during menstruation. Offering children to the fires of Moloch is also called an abomination which was strictly forbidden. Homosexuality is again called an abomination as is sexual activity with an animal, either by a man or a woman.

The chapter ends by declaring that it was because of these abominable practices that the land was going to vomit out the Canaanite inhabitants. There is a warning that if the children of Israel practiced any of these abominations, they would likewise also be vomited out by the land. In Revelation, carnal believers could also be vomited by the LORD (Rev. 3:16)

In chapter nineteen, various practical aspects of holiness are discussed and the LORD says fourteen times that He is YHWH our God. The people are first told to respect their parents, then they are told to keep the Sabbath and to avoid making idols of any kind. The sacrificial portions could only be eaten on the first and second days of the ritual. On the third day they were rotten and would make the person who ate them unclean.

The people were to leave the corners of their fields for the poor and the strangers. Four negative activities are forbidden: theft, lying, deceit and false oaths. They were also forbidden any form of oppression or violence against their neighbours. They were not to curse the deaf or cause the blind to stumble. They were also to avoid any kind of favoritism in their judgments and they were forbidden to make any kind of slander against their neighbours.

They were forbidden to hate their neighbours and had to love them as they loved themselves. They were also forbidden to hitch two different kinds of animals together or to sow two kind of seed in the same field. These were pagan magical practices intended to increase the crop yield. If they had sex with an unpurchased slave girl, they were not killed, but we are told later that they had to marry them.

They had to wait three years before harvesting fruit in Canaan. The fourth year, all of the fruit was taken to the L-RD and eaten before Him. On the fifth year, they could gather it for their own use. They are reminded not to eat the blood of a living sacrificial animal and then several more common Canaanite pagan practices are forbidden.

They were not to practice augury (looking for signs and omens about the future), and they were not to cut their hair in honour of any other G-d, nor practice self mutilation on behalf of the dead. They were forbidden religious tattoos in the name of another G-d and they were not to allow their daughters to practice ritual prostitution.

They had to keep the Sabbath and revere the sanctuary. Seances were forbidden along with divination, which was similar to augury. They were also told to respect their seniors and to show kindness to strangers who sojourned among them. They were required to have fair trade practices and were to uphold all of the laws and ordinances which the L-RD had given to them.

Chapter twenty outlines some of the punishments for the crimes which were mentioned in the previous chapter. Moloch worship is forbidden again and was a capital crime, as well as seances, because our holiness must be totally free of any kind of paganism. We are not to curse our parents and the punishment for adultery is death. Penalties for kinship marital violations are outlined and they are either death or sterility.

The list appears to bounce all over the place, but this is so that no form of paganism would be able to take root among the Children of Israel, after they had cleansed the land from the abomination of Canaanite paganism. They are reminded to only eat kosher meat and to be holy in all of their conduct (just in case any form of paganism was not specifically mentioned). The passage ends with all and any forms of witchcraft being forbidden.

They were not moving into a spiritual vacuum, but into an infected land which needed radical cleansing. Once this was accomplished, none of the abominations and violations of G-d's law were to be allowed to take root again. Practical holiness in every area of our lives is the only acceptable standard of holiness which the L-RD will bless and permit.

I would add lottery tickets, abortion (modern day Moloch) and sexual immorality of any kind (see I Cor. 6:9-11 for the ten kingdom exclusions) to the list. People fighting to overcome violations should not be treated the same as those who have succumbed to paganism. Whatever the Word forbids, we should forbid as well. Whatever violates the principles of the Word, should also be purged from our lives, even if it is not specifically mentioned.

We are not setting up a strict code of conduct that is brittle, arbitrary and devoid of pleasure and fulfillment. We are building a fence around our hearts and lives to keep the brilliant light of the L-RD shining in our lives and to keep out the foul darkness of the world which is always trying to pollute us. We need constant and strict, good spiritual hygiene.

Sermon: Some Believers Do Not Know Who They Really Are

Passages: *“For it is G-d who is at work in you to give you the ability and the desire (Phil. 2:13). For we are His workmanship, having been created in Yeshua haMashiach for good works, which He has prepared beforehand in order that we should practice them. (Eph. 2:10). Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit that you have received from G-d and that you do not belong to yourself? You have been bought at a great price. Glorify G-d therefore in your body. (I Cor. 6:19, 20). I can do all things through Him who strengthens me. (Phil. 4:13)*

When we come to faith in our blessed Messiah, not only is our eternal destiny changed, but we are also called to live radically different lives as we allow our new identity to take root and to grow. We do not adopt a new personality where we act a role in some kind of spiritual soap opera. The image of G-d which all mankind possesses is both repaired and empowered to make all of our strengths and all of our weaknesses an expression of His mercy and grace that has been so abundantly poured out into our lives.

I remember as if it were yesterday, the moment I gave my heart to our Saviour. Many of the wounds inflicted on me and those which I also inflicted on myself, quit bleeding and began to heal. I no longer felt that I was bleeding to death in my soul. It was after midnight, so I jumped into bed and had the best sleep I had had since I was a small child. As I enter my 49th year in the Messiah, that peace has never gone away and I have spent my short life trying my best to let it take over my entire life. You know, all the good, the bad and the ugly.

I have had bad moments and even bad days, weeks, months and years. But He has never left me nor forsaken me and He has delivered me from so much of my personal baggage that I truly feel like a new person. My carnal nature is still here and I stumble into sinfulness more than I should, but my spiritual nature defines who I am in ways my old nature never could.

Right away, after I accepted the Messiah, I began to devour the Bible and prayer became a vital part of my life. Bit by bit, most of my former life began to disappear. The joy of the L-RD began to replace the sadness and sorrow of the world. I knew I was heaven bound and I began to live a radically new lifestyle. I began to laugh and to cry more than I ever had before and the power of forgiveness became the foundation of my life and I started to become a disciple of the resurrected King.

I had a lot to learn and a lot to unlearn and I faced an entirely new set of challenges, as I set up a whole new set of priorities for my life. I knew I had a calling to ministry, but I wanted to get some valuable life experience first. I became a teacher and got my permanent professional teaching certificate before I went to Bible School and Seminary. It gave me something substantial to fall back on when I needed a break from ministry and when B'nai Chayim was not able to pay me a full salary when we started the congregation.

Believers receive at least two kinds of calling and both our general calling to become a solid disciple and any more specific callings we subsequently receive, need to have a healthy discipleship as their basic foundation. Ministry has been a challenge which is not recommended for the faint of heart. Discipleship should turn all of our carnal stubbornness into spiritual steadfastness. And if we have any cracks or unredeemed wounds and weaknesses, our calling can be breached and even sunk. How firmly on the rock is your faith and life built? How are your cracks and breeches doing? Are you sinking or healing?

The verses I have selected refer to our general calling, which is the most important one. Whatever G-d manages to do through us, pales compared to what He wants to do to us as we grow in the grace and knowledge of our beloved Messiah. I have seen believers crash and burn when they were faced with doubt or temptation. I have seen even pastors and rabbis get choked by the cares, the pleasures and the riches of this fading world.

I have faced doubts and temptations, but greater is He who is in us than the one who is in the world. Ministry has always provided for our needs, and even though we have known some very lean years, but I have never wanted to abandon my calling to concentrate on making money or seeking to become rich. My half brother is worth millions and while I am very proud of all that he has achieved, I am far too busy to waste my time and energy on getting rich. I do not dream of winning the lottery and I have no idea whether my brother has me in his will.

I have always tithed and even through terrible health crises, our needs have always been met because we have made the Messiah the master of our pocket books. It has sometimes been very tough and for a couple of years after we came back from Quebec, we mostly lived on our overdraft. But one of the most important callings which believers receive, is to overcome the trials and temptations which are allowed to wander through our lives and give us a thorough shake down. I would not trade one second of my worst times in the Messiah for a million years of all this world has to offer. Would you?

Lets study these verses so that we all really know who we really are and who it is that we should become, as we grow in our beloved Messiah.

First, before the foundation of the world, our Messiah planned to plant desires and abilities into our heart, along with any handicaps He throws in for good measure. My father-in-law tried for many years to turn me into a handyman, but he finally gave up when he realized I was not wired to handle machines and undertake repairs. I am not an athlete, but I have been reading for as long as I can remember, so being something of a scholar is part of my make up. I spend a lot of time reading every day. How are your desires and abilities doing?

What desires and abilities has G-d planted in your heart? I am not talking about carnal desires or the ability to commit crimes and do violence to the innocent. I am also not talking about the fruit of the Spirit which should be growing and flourishing in all of our lives at every stage of our journey through this life on our way home to our Father's home in Glory. We are all wired for the fruit of the Spirit on an even deeper level than we are prone to the works of the flesh. We are born to choose between right and wrong and are sinners by choice and not by nature. We always need to choose to respond according to His Word.

We can become all twisted up and choked by works of the flesh, not because of any trails or disasters we have experienced, but because of the choices we made in how we would relate to the bumps and ditches on our road. I am both an immigrant and a multiple abuse survivor, raised in a very dysfunctional home. I was bullied into oblivion in Junior High School and even as a believer, I have often been lied to and betrayed by friends and colleagues, with a few cruel strangers thrown in for good measure.

But if we lead lives driven by the desires which G-d has planted in our hearts and if we let the abilities He has gifted us with, be the driving force of our lives, no matter how many times things blow up and we have to start all over again from scratch, we know who we are.

In many respects I may have been happier if I did not have a call to ministry on my life, but even when I went back to full time teaching in the early 90's, I was still shepherding people because it comes so naturally. Some of us do not receive a clearly specific calling in our lives, but we all receive a general calling to faith and obedience, which is the most important calling of the two. Holiness and discipleship are two of the greatest desires which our Messiah plants in our lives, along with the mighty ability to overcome everything which comes our way. We are called to be His servants no matter what other desires and abilities are wired into our souls. We need to walk with Him, no matter where our lives take us.

In fact, we are His workmanship, created to accomplish the good works which He has prepared for us beforehand. We are saved by grace and it is a free gift from G-d, and it is not something we ever earned or accomplished on our own. We are also saved for good works, not by good works. We are all called to sainthood because of who He made us and doing great things in our Messiah is the highest calling of any believer's life. Some churches consider an elite group of special people to be saints because of their great holiness and exceptional spirituality. In reality, this is the high calling of all believers.

We are His workmanship. How well are you letting this be what characterizes how you live your life? Are you performing the good works He has prepared for you to fulfill? Instead of waiting for a lightning bolt to strike, or a voice to speak to us from Heaven, we need to be consistently about our Father's business, be it ever so grand or ever so humble. It is the spiritual battles we face and the spiritual challenges we accomplish which should define our lives from the moment we become aware of our Messiah and are able to choose to walk with Him. How are you choosing to walk with Him?

When he was helping the fractious, carnal Corinthian congregation, Paul reminded them that their bodies were the temple of the Holy Spirit and that they should glorify G-d both in what they did and in how they did it. I am not attacking obesity or any other bad health choices we can make. But where you go and what you do, should be regular expressions of your spiritual identity. Our bodies should be treated like heavenly real estate, from the moment we are conceived until it is our turn to rest in the ground, as we await the coming kingdom.

Now, the last passage is often misunderstood by believers who feel that we can be super heroes, able to leap tall buildings and wrestle dragons into submission. Some even say that when bad or hurtful things wander through our lives, we do not have enough faith and are somehow letting the devil gain control of a portion of our lives. This is utter foolishness.

When Paul says that we can do all things through the one who strengthens us, he means that our King will give us an endless supply of perseverance and while we may have to battle our ways through many valleys, in all things, He will make us more than conquerors, either winning great rewards in this life, or storing them up for the life to come. What Paul went through was often very excruciating (2 Corin. 11:21-33 – 28 categories of troubles), but his faith and obedience never wavered. How is your faith and obedience doing?

Now while I do not wish great troubles on you and while I have survived more than my fair share of tsouris (distress and aggravation in Yiddish) in my short life, I wish for you great victory in every area of your life and in every trial which tries to sink you. Do you know who you are and what the Messiah expects of you (the fruit of the Spirit and never the works of the flesh)? Shabbat Shalom and Shavua Tov.