

B'Har/B'chukotai**On the Mount/ In My Statutes****Chazak, Chazak, v'Nitchazek****Torah:** Leviticus 25:1-26:2/ Leviticus 26:3-27:34**Haftarah:** Jeremiah 32:6-27/ Jeremiah 16:19-17:14 (a life passage for me!)**Brit Chadashah:** Luke 4:16-21/ Matthew 22:1-14

The Book of Leviticus is so technical that you have to struggle, both to understand its complexities and to uncover the great spiritual gems which shine forth from every page. This week is a double portion and brings us to the end of the Book of Leviticus. Its entire content was given as the people camped around the mountain and it is not until chapter 10 of Numbers that the people take their leave of this sacred site and begin their journey to the Promised Land. How is your journey to the Heavenly Promised Land doing?

Was it a year well spent? None of the adults in the exodus group would be allowed into the Holy Land, but receiving the Word was an amazing privilege which should have taught them to make good choices. Too many believers in today's world who are well versed in the Scriptures, follow their bad example and make bad choices. They spend years wandering around in circles in a wilderness of their own making and some never break free and learn to walk with the Messiah. Faith AND obedience are equally necessary if we want to walk the straight and narrow and this, even if we are incredibly gifted like Solomon (who still fell), or are just a humble member of our Messiah's flock.

The double portion deals with both the stipulations of the year of Jubilee and what needs to be done to make acceptable oaths and offerings. Just before getting into the year of Jubilee, chapter 25 begins with the stipulations of sabbatical year, where the land was allowed to rest. The people had two food sources during this time. They first had their stored up harvests from the first six years and they were also allowed to glean what grew on its own during the seventh year. They were not allowed to sow, reap or prune, but they could forage without being allowed to gather this food supply into their granaries.

What grew on its own was to be consumed by a seven fold group of people and animals while the land rested, as the soil recovered. Modern farmers also practice letting their land lie fallow, so its nutrients do not become exhausted. How are your nutrients doing?.

The Jubilee year was declared on Yom Kippur with a loud blast of a trumpet and just like we are still counting down 49 days until Shavuot, the people were to count down 49 years (or seven Sabbatical years) until the year of Jubilee. The word Jubilee has two possible parallel meanings in Hebrew. It means a loud trumpet blast as well as the action of flowing. The trumpet was to give a flowing sound and the people were to flow back to their ancestral land.

This set of stipulations was given while the people were still encamped around the mountain and it was a reminder that the ultimate ownership of the land always remained in G-d's hands. The people were also reminded that they themselves belonged to G-d as His bond servants and had been set free from Egyptian slavery so they could belong to the L-RD and, in a real sense, be His slaves. The conditions of their slavery to G-d were incredibly wonderful and would always give them an amazingly blessed and productive life, as long as they obeyed His stipulations. The same still applies to us in our sophisticated, techno driven world!

Slaves were set free and the people who had wandered off their ancestral tribal portion were to return home and reconnect with their large extended families. In between Jubilee years, some people sold their ancestral land and moved away. People from other tribes also came onto another tribe's portion and took over unoccupied land. In G-d's understanding, both the people and their land remained His, no matter where they wandered or where they settled.

All the members of the twelve tribes were to return home during the Jubilee and land was sold according to the number of harvests until the next Jubilee. No one was actually buying the land, they were buying the harvests which the land produced. The Levites were scattered among the other tribes, living in their levitical towns. We are not told if they had to return to their original levitical towns during the Jubilee, but they functioned both as priests and teachers. They may have helped the people to get organized as they packed up to move, either out of the land which did not belong to their tribe or back into the land which belonged to their tribe and which had just been vacated. How good are you at being supervised?

Not all the land in the tribal portions was settled, but people not from the tribe whose portion it was in, could settle there, as long as they understood that they had to vacate the land at the Jubilee. We are not told what happened to people who married out of their tribe and to the large contingents of Gentiles who lived among the Jews. It is likely that the mixed families returned to the husbands tribe, while the Gentiles either stayed put or traveled back to the tribal land they had settled on, when they first began their sojourn in Israel.

In her long history, Israel never observed a full Jubilee and by the time of David and Solomon, the tribes were so mixed up together that a return to their ancestral tribal portion would no longer be a feasible option. Land prices were never calculated according to how close the year of Jubilee was, but at various times in the life of the people of Israel, they repented very vigorously and re-established their commitment to the sovereignty of G-d. Even today, Jews of every persuasion still acknowledge that the land of Israel belongs to the L-RD and they are merely stewards of it. How is your stewardship doing?

Two more stipulations and we will move onto vows and oaths. The Jubilee was to fall after a Sabbatical year where the people had not been able to sow or harvest. YHVH promised that the sixth year would give enough to last for three years. They would not have planted or harvested for the 49th or the 50th years, so the 48th year would yield enough to last until they brought in the harvest in the 51st year. Again, during these two years of rest, they would be able to glean what grew by itself, but this was not to be gathered into store houses and was given as free food for everyone and all the animals.

Next, when it came to houses in a walled town or city, someone who sold their house, had one year to redeem it (buy it back) or it became the permanent property of the buyer. It did not revert to its original owner at the Jubilee. This did not apply to homes which were in unwalled villages, which reverted to the original owners at the Jubilee. The passage also stipulates that the fields of the Levites could not be sold, even if the original levitical owners of a house in a walled city, lost permanent possession of it. Purchasers of levitical homes in walled cities would have no means of supporting themselves from the land and so would be less likely to settle among the Levites.

The people were told to loan money interest free to both their Jewish neighbours and to the Gentiles who lived among them. We don't just treat other believers well!

Related to this, all Jewish slaves were to be set free at the Jubilee, even if their owners were Gentiles living in their midst. A Jewish slave could not be assigned a regular slave's work and only Gentile slaves remained as the permanent property of their owners. This was probably an incentive to convert, though historically, Jews were never known to mistreat either their servants or their slaves. As believers, we are not allowed to mistreat anyone.

The passage ends with a warning against idolatry and the people are reminded to keep their Sabbaths (meaning both weekly and festival) and to revere the sanctuary. We should never take G-d for granted or get complacent or sloppy in how we worship. This would include never to stop paying our tithes. G-d's provision never stops, so our tithes also should never stop.

Chapter 26 compares the blessings of obedience with the horrors of disobedience. For the obedient, G-d would bless their crops so much that they would run out of space to store them. He also promised astounding victory where five Jews would pursue 100 and where 100 would pursue 10,000. If they became disobedient they would be struck with terror, fatigue and fevers. They would flee when no one was pursuing them and be smitten seven times for their sins. They would be plagued by the sword, the plague and famine as YHVH took vengeance on those who rebelled against His covenant. Obedience is still the key to peace and blessing.

They would become so desperate that they would eat their own children and leave their dead bodies, draped upon their idols. YHVH would ignore the incense which they offered with their prayers as He allowed their towns to be totally devastated. If they still did not repent, they would be scattered among the nations, so the land could rest for the Sabbaths they did not keep (weekly, every seven years and every fiftieth year).

They would be struck with faltering hearts and even trample one another to escape when no one was chasing them. If they still did not repent, their children would be struck because of the sins of their fathers (unless, they broke rank and repented). Their troubles would be a payment they made to atone for their sins and this atonement would only apply if and when they repented. Putting off repentance equals putting off G-d's blessing.

Chapter 27 deals with vows and oaths, especially ones where the people either dedicated themselves or someone else in fulfillment of an oath which they made to the L-RD. If they could not pay the price of their oath, the priests would make a lower estimation according to their resources. No animal could be exchanged and if it were unclean, it would be sold, with 20% added to its value. G-d wants us to be generous with what we have.

If a house or a field were sanctified (dedicated) and the original owner did not buy it back, then the original owner could not redeem it at the Jubilee and it became the property of the priests. If the dedicated house was not in the person's tribal portion, the price was set according to the number of years til the Jubilees, when it would revert to its original owner. You could not dedicate (sanctify) any first born to the L-rd because it already belonged to Him.

The book ends with mention of a very serious, severe act of dedication which is described as "dedicated to destruction". Those so devoted could not be redeemed. The dedicated field was burned, the dedicated house was destroyed and the dedicated person was killed. It was not an oath to be taken lightly. YHVH devoted the Canaanites and their cities to destruction for their great and relentless sinfulness. He and the Children of Israel carried out this judgment and it was a warning to Israel that a similar fate waited them if they should also sin.

Chazak, Chazak, v'Nitchazek

Sermon: Counting Down to Shavuot – Holiness is Priceless

Passage: “If someone teaches false doctrines and is not attached to the wholesome words of our L-rd Yeshua haMashiach and to the doctrine which is according to holiness, he is filled with pride and knows nothing. He has a morbid craving for controversy and for disputes about words. From these come envy, dissension, slander, base suspicions, and wrangling among those who are depraved in mind and bereft of the truth, imagining that holiness is a means of gain. Of course there is great gain in holiness when it is combined with contentment, for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. But those who want to be rich, fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and have thrown themselves into many torments.” (1 Timothy 6:3-10)

Towards the end of his ministry, Paul encountered a lot of negative push back from those carnal believers who wanted to combine their faith with many forms of ungodliness and thus never fully integrate the truths of G-d's Word into every area of their lives. They were argumentative and materialistic. You see, early in my walk as a believer, I encountered people who loved to argue instead of engaging in discussions where spiritual truths were both proclaimed and upheld. They actually promoted the works of the flesh and wanted nothing to do with the fruit of the Spirit. They always seemed to be itching for a fight. How about you?

They loved to argue and to disagree and felt that such carnal activities would lead to both spiritual growth and the defense of the truth of G-d's Word. When people are quick to disagree and want to undermine what the Bible teaches, by biting and devouring and even yelling and screaming, this is a negative approach which has got nothing to do with what our Messiah actually taught and how He dealt with dissension whenever it arose. It is not the one who raises their voice the loudest who speaks the truth.

Yeshua said some pretty harsh things to a number of people, but He never wasted His time with those who were not receptive. He threw them back in and walked away.

Not all who claim to be believers want to engage in spiritual discussions with meekness and respect. They are looking for a fight and seem to revel in it when arguments arise. Whenever an argument arises, and believers are unable to discuss gently and respectfully, the enemy and the flesh take over and many innocent believers get trampled in the stampedes which follow. Some believers have even given up and withdraw from other believers whenever a disagreement arises. Solving disputes is not always very high on many believer's agendas.

I member clearly when I first witnessed a violent argument among believers where accusations began to fly back and forth as if the wrath of man actually accomplished the will of our Father. I once even had to physically separate two young guys who came to blows over a disagreement. I asked them if they were crazy and had no respect for each other.

I have always loved an animated discussion where a question is dealt with and many options

are considered. But I have always disliked arguments where people question the integrity of those who disagree with them and want to silence them at any cost.

Unfortunately, many believers are known for violent quarrels and I will say this. When the fruit of the Spirit are not the basis for a discussion, I am not interested in engaging in a dispute. I came to the L-rd from a fairly mixed up background and I early wanted to sort things out so that my life would be based on the truths of G-d's Word in the power of the Spirit and not be torn apart by the carnal works of the flesh. What is your life based on?

In today's passage, Paul is dealing with people who like to fight and argue and who have no regard for the wholesome words of the Messiah or for the peaceful exchanges which can occur among people who disagree with each other, but who continue to respect each other. If how you deal with dissent and disagreement unleashes the works of the flesh, you are not going to get anywhere that really matters and you run the risk of chewing each other to death and scaring way young converts, as your spiritual credibility sinks until it is virtually gone.

When the Protestant Reformation first got going, the desire of many believers, from many different camps, was to resolve their differences peacefully, without resorting to violence. Because these differences were mixed with political ambitions, they degenerated into religious wars where millions were killed – all supposedly in the name of the Prince of Peace.

In any discussion with Jews of any stripe, disagreements often come up, but they are not seen as a problem unless they cannot be dealt with in a peaceful discussion. Too often, among Jews and among Gentile Christians (and even among Messianic Jews and Gentiles), the enemy takes control as tempers flare and accusations are made. Instead of trying to understand and establish common ground, the guns come out, along with the fists. There is a peaceful way to resolve disputes and that will always remain our primary objective as we stand for the truth of G-d's Word and oppose all and any departures from the same

Over the years, I have often engaged in discussions and even disputations with people from a broad spectrum of opposing opinions. If it cannot be conducted peacefully with mutual respect and calm, I withdraw, because spiritual fist fights are always counter productive. Communication and not disputation, should always be our primary objective.

Along with believers who love to fight and who enjoy the sound of their own voice, Paul had to deal with a specific topic. Along with their general attraction to fighting tooth and nail about almost everything, one particular group was teaching that holiness and spirituality would lead believers to acquire great wealth. They proclaimed that the blessing of the Messiah extended to the acquisition of wealth and that believers who walked with the L-rd, would soon be wealthy, because the L-rd would give them the desires of their heart. They were so wrong.

As an aging former hippy, I have never been attracted to the pursuit of wealth, especially since our true treasures are in Heaven and no upon this darkening, fading world. I am not against those whose careers allow them to get rich, but a career you enjoy which makes you rich is not a problem. Too many people almost destroy themselves in the pursuit of wealth.

Let me make a plug against lottery tickets. Recent studies have found that most big time winners became miserable and their lives fell a part, while ordinary people dream about what they will never really win, instead of enriching their lives and their families with dreams and objectives which are attainable and wholesome. What are you dreaming about? Too many who dream of riches, allow their dreams to fill their lives with bitterness and regret.

Keeping up with the Jones's is a sign of spiritual weakness and immaturity. I want to fill my life with great contentment and not be pulled to pieces by the deceptive riches of this fleeting world. I have great wealth in the Messiah and that is what it should be all about!

Well what about the massive ministries and mega churches with multi million dollar budgets and incredible expenditures? The 70's and the 80's were the golden era of big name ministries, where huge complexes were built and where the ministry leaders lived in billionaire luxury. The two biggest were Jim and Tammy Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart.

The Bakker's had a massive Christian Theme Park, which was, at one time, the number three vacation destiny in North America. The park also had a very advanced production center which broadcast their network to millions of followers around the world. They were close to being America's the biggest television network and their ministry brought in an estimated \$129 million a year. Their main competitor was Jimmy Swaggart and the two often sniped at each other. Just because someone is a good preacher, doesn't mean they walk with the L-rd.

Jimmy Swaggart reached out to an estimated one billion viewers a day around the globe and had his own Bible College and retirement community. At its peak, His ministry generated about \$150 million a year (\$500,000 per work day) and the area which contributed the most to his ministry, was metro Toronto.

It all came crumbling down when Jim Bakker was involved in a sex scandal and was found guilty of defrauding his supporters of several million dollars. His marriage collapsed and he did some jail time. He still has a much diminished ministry network. With Jimmy Swaggart, he was frequenting prostitutes and in the aftermath his ministry imploded, and has never recovered. It still exists in a greatly diminished form.

I could name others, but none came close to the top two money raisers. Many others have been investigated and were accused of fraudulent business practices. Without ethical behaviour, and transparent business practices, no ministry and no minister can really serve the Messiah or be effective for the kingdom. I am not saying that ministers should not be paid, but they should never be getting rich off their ministry.

Pastors, rabbis and other ministers are to live off the tithes and gifts from their people. Ministries can receive gifts and it only becomes a problem when the ministry or the minister becomes part of a huge and profitable, elite corporation. Again, no minister should become wealthy from ministry. Salaries and benefits are fine, but the funds should never become the property of anyone and should remain part of the ministry. Extravagance and decadence have no part in the Gospel. Holiness is priceless and can never be bought.

There are also so many megachurches and some very large synagogues. The money which comes in should be spent for the ministry and I can say it with conviction, that no minister should be living a lavish lifestyle which derives from his ministry. I have nothing against big churches and big colleges, as long as no one is profiting from them, as if they were money making corporations. Making money off the Gospel is a shameful endeavour.

What about the massive cathedrals in Europe? This is not necessarily a problem as long as people were not being robbed to pay for them – and not being forced into slavery to build them. We are building the Messiah's kingdom and not our personal financial portfolio. You see, both of the temples were also quite lavish, as was the tabernacle, but the priests who

ministered there never became rich from their ministry and any spare money was usually spent on behalf of the widow, the orphan and those who were poor. The money also came from voluntary gifts which the people gladly gave to G-d. Being built to the glory of G-d is not the same as being built to puff up any one's ego. Is your life being built to the glory of G-d?

Ministers who develop lavish lifestyles from their ministry have fallen into a trap, because the love of money is a root of all evil. We should be working on building up the living temples of G-d and taking care of the spiritual needs of the people. We should also be engaged in works of charity as we help those who are less fortunate.

Jewish people are often accused as being materialistic and many think that the main objective in any Jew's life is to make as much money as possible. This is not true. A couple of things. First, the richest people in the world are not Jewish. There are some Jews who are rich, but it is not out of proportion with our numbers. Also, in Edmonton, around 18% of Jews live below the poverty level, which is the same proportion for non Jews. Jews practice charity to help the less fortunate among them and anytime you have a community, we build schools and hospitals and take care of our widows and orphans.

Finally, there is a saying in the Talmud: "More Torah, more peace, more gold, more trouble". We should never use the expression of our faith as a means of enriching ourselves. The Jews never have. When we are left alone, we prosper and do not limit our help to just members of our community. If you are hungry, go to a Jew, we are not allowed to turn you away (unless you are a freeloading panhandler).

Acquiring money is never really the problem. It is the love of money which can infect us and cause much damage in our lives. In the first part of my message I mentioned those who love to argue and who are always looking for a fight. This is even a greater problem in our midst than those who dedicate their life energy in the pursuit of fleeting wealth.

What are you pursuing? Are you content? I will always look after my family and I will always tithe to my community. Getting rich is not a high priority. In Zimbabwe, we were not overly rich, but we had servants and my parents usually dressed up for supper. We belonged to the country's white elite. When this elite was ready to shed blood to preserve their lifestyle, we were not and we left the country – and most of the Jews did likewise.

Racism and materialism are big problems in today's world, as are political and religious extremism. We are followers of the Messiah and the weapons of our warfare are spiritual and never carnal. We are peace lovers and should be peace makers and we need to both share our faith peacefully and resolve our differences peacefully. We need to be armed with the fruit and the gifts of the Spirit and not become choked with the works of the flesh.

Carnal believers who bite and devour and argue relentlessly are a bigger problem for the progress of the Kingdom than any other challenge we may face. As we come to the summer and hopefully begin to see restrictions lighten up, may we walk according to the kingdom rules of His Word (Torah and New Testament). This is the only lifestyle worth living. Do not let anyone or anything rob you of it, or cause you to wander away from the words of Messiah and the Word of YHVH. Shavua Tov.