

<b>Devarim</b>	<b>Words</b>
<b>Torah:</b>	Deuteronomy 1:1-3:22
<b>Haftarah:</b>	Isaiah 1:1-27
<b>Brit Chadashah:</b>	Acts. 7:51-8:4
Tisha B'Av (9 <sup>th</sup> of Av)	Lamentations

Today is Black Sabbath (Shabbat Chazon), which is the last Sabbath before the fast of the 9<sup>th</sup> of Av. Mourning and fasting are not usually permitted on the Sabbath and in the years where the 9<sup>th</sup> of Av (Tisha B'Av) falls on a Sabbath, the fast is observed the next day, Sunday. It takes quite a while to be able to make our lives turn around both the annual festival cycle and the four fasts which are mentioned in Zachariah 8:19. But as we grow in the Messiah and get to know His Word, like the back of our spiritual hands, spiritual realities become more important to us than what is going on in the world through which we are just travelling.

Great joys and immense tragedies frequently occur all around us, but most of these tremors are but the birth pangs of Messiah's coming kingdom (Rom. 8:22). We need to study and learn the signs of this coming kingdom so that we are not deceived like those who feel that the kingdom is never coming and those for whom every scrap of news is a sign of the end of the world. Every year that passes, brings us one step closer to our Messiah's return, but this glorious event will only occur, once all of His kingdom purposes have been fulfilled.

Before I take you on a tour of the some of the key verses in Lamentations, let me just say that spiritual maturity means that we accept all that has happened in the Bible as part of our own personal history, whether we do so as Jews or as Messianic Gentiles. History will always be cluttered with any number of ups and downs (and victories and defeats), but every new generation of believers, needs to come and sit with our people on the plains of Moab and make the Torah the lens through which we relate to our darkening world.

With all of its glory and horror, this world is passing away, along with all of its joys and pain and it should never be the place where we live, because we are just strangers and pilgrims passing through it, generation by generation. We need to fully identify with the teachings of G-d's Word and not be pulled into all the hopes and fears of this world or allow ourselves to be detoured into things which have no eternal value. We still need to feed the poor and care for the widows and orphans and show mercy to the sick and the oppressed, but at best, this should only be a faith reaction, based on the teachings of the eternal Word of our Messiah.

Now, lets go through Lamentations, as we remember the destruction of both temples and the scattering of our people, who are just now beginning to come home. Lamentations is the second longest acrostic in the Bible. Each verse begins with a letter of the Hebrew Bible, so the first two chapters and the last two chapters, each have 22 verses. Chapter three has 66 verses and goes through the Hebrew alphabet three times. Only Ps. 119 is a longer acrostic, with 22 stanzas of eight verses each.

Lamentations was written by Jeremiah, who was a priest who lived through the reign of the last three kings of Judah. He saw the mighty revival under the righteous king Josiah and he watched as the kingdom slipped into chaos and idolatry, after King Josiah was killed in a futile battle with an invading Egyptian army.

It was really none of his business that the Assyrian empire was finally crumbling. Judah was not really an ally of these cruel people and he should not have gotten involved. We sometimes need to choose our battles better than him. Some things need to be left alone.

The book may have been written in Egypt, where Jeremiah was being held hostage by the Jews who refused to listen the YHVH and who forced Jeremiah to go into exile with them. In Lamentations 1:2, it says that all of his friends have become his enemies, because they have abandoned the ways of the L-rd. Jeremiah also says that Judah has gone into exile because of the multitude of their sins (1:5).

He mentions with great sadness, that he witnessed the enemy nation going into the Holy Place as they defiled the temple and burned it to the ground. When all of this was happening, even though Zion reached out to G-d, no one was listening. They were reaping all of this destruction because of the solemn oath they violated when they rebelled against the Babylonians whom they had promised to never rebel against.

Jeremiah goes on to describe the desolation of Jerusalem, which was made to forget the Feasts and the Sabbath (2:6) and became a sad ruin (2:8). During the slaughter, babies were dying on their mothers' breast, because there was no milk being produced (2:12). Even while all of this was happening, deceitful prophets filled the people with lies and deceit (2:14). It got so bad, that towards the end of the siege, there was no more food and mothers were eating their own children (2:20).

Jeremiah identifies with the suffering of his people and even says that YHVH has made him a target for his arrows (3:12) and has filled him with the bitterness of absinth. In the midst of this weeping dirge, he has not lost all hope because the people will not be permanently abandoned by G-d (3:31). G-d's mercies are not at their term, but they are renewed daily because of His great faithfulness (3:22, 23).

He asks why a living man should complain about what he is reaping, instead weeping over his own sins (3:39). His poetry is both artistic and extremely graphic and in chapter four, Jeremiah says that the chastisement of the people was worse than that of Sodom. Sodom was destroyed quickly, while Judah was being killed slowly (4:6). As the suffering of the people intensifies, the people's sins will eventually be atoned for and they shall no longer be sent into captivity (4:22). Even though it was rough, there was a light at the end of the tunnel.

Chapter five outlines some of the horror which occurred in Jerusalem, once the walls were breached and as the temple burned. Jerusalem's leaders were hung (5:12) as all of their people were enslaved and their women were violated (5:11, 13). The kingdom has fallen because of its sin (5:16) and mount Zion has been ravaged and has become the home of foxes (5:18). It was a sad, deserted place, consumed by the wrath of the G-d, whom they had disobeyed.

However, the last few verses of chapter five, speak of the eternal reign of YHVH (5:19) and call out to YHVH not to forget His people forever (5:20). He asks for G-d to call His people back to Himself and they will come (5:21). Jeremiah asks for the former days of mercy and glory to return (5:21) and cries out, asking if YHVH will reject His people forever (5:22).

The scroll of Lamentations is a graphic portrayal of all the people had to suffer because of their backsliding and places the blame for all their calamities squarely upon them for abandoning G-

d. They listened to liars who encouraged their sinful breaking of the solemn oath they had made to the Babylonians, even though this oath breaking is not specifically mentioned. Be wary of anyone who tries to get you to violate your commitment to the Word of YHVH. We cannot call upon His great love, until we have abandoned our sins and begun to fill our lives with repentance once again. A sad lesson, but one which must be learned.

### Torah Portion Sermon: **Owning the Story and Making it Your Own, Deut. 1:1-3:22**

Once the people had defeated Sihon and Og and once they had dealt with the Midianites, they were ready for a second giving of the Law and its precepts, with no more distractions. They had neutralized three potential sources of threat and on the first day of Shevat, towards the end of the fortieth year since their departure from Egypt, they sat and listened as Moses helped them to own the story and make it theirs.

I accepted the L-rd 49 years ago and right away, I dove into the Scriptures, so I could make all of its promises my own. The new generation was getting ready to enter the Holy Land and they wanted to make sure that they took no negative spiritual baggage with them. They wanted to learn from the mistakes of the previous generation and not repeat their failures.

The Scriptures are full of good examples we should follow as well as negative examples which should be avoided. Moses begins his second giving of the Law with a repetition of much of what happened to the people since their first failed entrance into the land. From a relatively small group who entered Egypt in the time of Joseph, they had become a multitude as numerous as the stars of heaven and Moses wishes that they would grow a thousand times more! (1:11)

He reviews for them his establishment of a framework of leaders who could help them find solutions to any problem or question they encountered. They had leaders of 1,000 of 100, of 50 and of ten. Once they had gone up the chain of command, they were to only to bring the heavier concerns to Moses. They were to give justice to all the people, whether they were great or small. Before they left the Holy Mountain, the people were fully equipped to handle anything which might come their way. They appeared to have a bright future and seemed to be looking forward to entering the land.

Just to be on the safe side, at their suggestion, twelve spies were sent into Canaan to report back on the conditions they would encounter in the land. Instead of doing their job, ten of the spies terrified the people with the obstacles they were to face. Once G-d has spoken to us, He will make sure that there is no problem or obstacle which can block our obedience and cause us to fail. When we walk with Him, we will always be overcomers.

Despite the words of the two faithful spies, the people refused to enter the land and actually said that G-d hated them and had brought out of Egypt to deliver them into the hands of the Amorites, who would destroy them. Moses reminded them of their mighty deliverance from Egypt and how G-d had provided for them, both during their journey to the mountain and to the very edge of the land of Canaan. Their greatest sin was a lack of faith in G-d's ability to bring them the victory which He had promised to give them. How about you?

They refused to repent and after the ten evil spies were killed, they were told they had to go back into the wilderness until all of the generation of doubters perished. Rather than face this

prospect, they again disobeyed the Word of G-d and stormed into Canaan without His blessing. They were badly defeated and were chased back into the camp. They had both quenched the Spirit of G-d by not doing what they were told to do and grieved this same Spirit by doing what they were told not to. Our lives should have no room for grieving or quenching the Spirit

As we walk with the L-rd and have confidence in His Word, we will never encounter any adversary or situation that will defeat us or do us any harm. Disobedience and a lack of confidence remain the two biggest spiritual challenges we have to overcome on our pilgrimage through this life on our way Home to our Father's Home in Glory. The straight and narrow may be described as a series of choices we need to keep on making, so that we learn to do what we are supposed to do and refrain from doing what we are not supposed to do.

It is a hard lesson to learn, but even if we sometimes stumble, as long as we build repentance as part of how we live our lives, we will not be left to wander through a series of wildernesses of our own making. Coming back to the straight and narrow is the only viable solution to disobedience.

Once the faithless generation was all dead, in the 38<sup>th</sup> year of their wandering, the house of Israel was told to head towards the Holy Land. Their enemies may have been expecting them to once again try by their original entry place, but G-d sent them by a different route. They were to pass around the Kingdom of Edom (Esau) and were not to attack either the kingdom of the Moabites or the kingdom of the Ammonites. All three of these groups had already displaced people mightier than them, but their lands were not part of the land which YHVH promised to give to the children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

On their way around these kingdoms, they encountered the kingdoms of Sihon and Og, which refused them passage through their lands to their new staging ground, right across the Jordan from the mighty city of Jericho. Without any provocation, these two kings came at Israel, one at a time, because they were sure that they could defeat this new group of invading settlers.

After their victory over these two unnecessary opponents, they had to deal with the spiritual attack of the Midianite sexual priestesses. In the second rendering of the story of their travels up to this point, Moses does not mention these opponents again. This may have been because their attack occurred as the people were receiving the second giving of the Law. It may also have been deemed a shameful episode in the life of the new generation which came close to causing their annihilation, so it is not mentioned again.

Once their military action against the Midianites (south Moabites) was completed, then the two and half tribes asked for permission to remain in the lands of the defeated kings, Sihon and Og and it was granted.

Another name for the Promised Land could be the conquered land and after the conquest of this territory, it became part of the Promised Land. No one asked to settle in the land of the Midianites, probably because of shame and also to avoid any future defeat by the sexual idolatry of these people.

Now that they were brought up to date on their wanderings from the Exodus to the plains of Moab, Moses wants to give them their own chance to receive the commandments which their

fathers had violated. There is a place of no return, but neither they or their fathers had reached it.

Their fathers could have abandoned the wilderness camping and dispersed among the surrounding peoples, but they didn't. Wandering around in the wilderness with YHVH is better than anything and everything this sad world has to offer. They had learned a very painful lesson and were now prepared to obey the L-rd for what remained of their lives. They still had the memory of their miraculous departure from Egypt. They still had their memory of the lightening and thunder which shook the holy mountain and made it seem like it was dancing.

All the protection and provision which G-d offered to them was only available in the camp and this is a lesson which would be good for us to learn. The Hutterites are theologically related to other anabaptists (evangelicals who practice adult baptism, versus infant baptism), but they have a unique teaching which places them apart from all other groups. They teach that each colony is part of an extended ark and you are only saved if you remain part of one of their colonies. I am not sure if they believe that the rest of us, Jews and Gentiles, are on our way to everlasting damnation, but for them, their salvation depends on remaining part of a colony.

The truth is closer to their understanding than it may first appear. Believers, Jew and Gentile are all part of the new man and are fellow citizens of the commonwealth of Israel which is built on the foundation of the prophets and the apostles. We have both an individual identity and a corporate identity and neither one of them is either better than the other or can exist, one without the other. In fact, believers from every nation and generation of the scattered sons and daughters of Adam and Eve, are called to have a personal faith in our glorious Messiah and to be an active part of a community of believers.

No matter how crazy and abusive any community of believers may become, we need to remain on the prowl for a community to belong to, even if it takes years and years. I am aware that there are some very abusive people who try and cause trouble in no matter which community they join. I am also aware that there are abusive communities which damage and abuse those people they should be feeding and cherishing.

People who study cults divide these departures from the truth into two broad categories. There are first the theological cults who have departed from the teachings of the Bible and these would include the Mormons and the Jehovah's Witnesses. They believe some pretty strange things, but they are not necessarily abusive to their members.

There are also groups which are categorized as abusive cults, even if some of them appear to have a solid grasp of the doctrines of the Bible. They observe various forms of mind control where their members are required to blindly obey the leadership and not question either their teachings of their authority. The Moonies, the children of G-d and Scientology fall into this group, but they are unfortunately not the only ones we may to contend with.

I have known of solid, mainline evangelical church groups which behave abusively towards their members and who do not want their members to think for themselves or to question anything which the leadership teaches and requires. Our shul does not belong to this group.

When we lived in Montreal, there was a Catholic Centre which studied various cults and produced literature warning people against this spiritual danger. At first, they considered all

Pentecostals to be part of a cult, but I met with people from the centre and said that while there may be Pentecostal cults, all Pentecostal churches are not part of a cult.

I learned that there were between 50 to 100 cults who had their origin in Montreal and I encountered one or two of these strange groups. I actually rescued two young men who were part of one of these cults and sheltered them until they were able to break free.

It is not hard to identify a theological cult, but it is not so easy to identify an abusive cult. Mind control and total submission to leadership are two of the main characteristics of an abusive cult. I once attended a conference on cults given with the cooperation of the Red Deer Psychiatric Hospital. One of the main speakers was the psychologist who was hired by the US government to help deprogram the children who were rescued from David Koresh's Branch Davidian Cult.

There was a Pentecostal community in Red Deer, which I considered to be an abusive cult, but this church actually sent delegates to the conference. At one point, up to half of the patients at the Red Deer Psychiatric Hospital were former members of this group. They told people to stop taking their medication if they wanted to be healed and many who went off their psychiatric medication ended up in the Psychiatric hospital.

The Bible never teaches that you have to stop taking medication if you want to be healed. In fact, two of the most common forms of medicine in the days of the New Testament were oil and wine. Oil for the outside, wine for the inside. Some old time farmers also had a saying: cream for the outside, garlic for the inside.

Any group which says salvation is only possible if you become a member of their community is a cult. Any group which forbids the use of medication is also a cult. Some communities specialize in casting demons out of believers, but you cannot cast out the flesh, you have to crucify it. Beware of these exorcist cults because they give the enemy too much credit.

You do not have to belong to B'nai Chayim to be saved, but when you are saved G-d expects you to belong to a healthy spiritual community, no matter how long it takes for you to find it. I know of some home groups which are good communities to belong to, but there are others who either believe strange things or are abusive to their members, or both.

You do not have to believe everything I teach, in order to be part of our community, as long as you agree with our Mission Statement and our Statement of Faith. We have a well defined set of principles and values which are designed to make our community a safe, nurturing community. The high turnover rate we continue to experience troubles me, not because we are not doing a good job, but because too many leave when they encounter issues which they refuse to deal with and find very creative ways to blame us and make it our fault, not theirs.

There is still hope for abusive, toxic people and we want to reach out and help them be set free from the choking works of the flesh, even if they also have mental health concerns. We are a flock which wants to take care of its members and we want to learn from our mistakes and from those outlined in the Bible. We want to overcome all obstacles and enter into the restful promises of our blessed Messiah. Nothing less and certainly, nothing more.