

<b>Bamidbar</b>	<b>In the Wilderness</b>	<b>It's Time to Saddle Up</b>
<b>Torah:</b>	<b>Numbers 1:1-4:20</b>	
<b>Haftarah:</b>	<b>Hosea 1:10-2:20 (2:1-22 – same content, different versification)</b>	
<b>Brit Chadashah:</b>	<b>Romans 9:22-33</b>	

The people have spent a year around the mountain, building Ark, the Tabernacle and the tent of meeting. And after receiving the commandments of the L-rd, the people now need to get organized to move from the mountain into the Holy Land. On the first day of Iyar, the consecration of the priests and the construction of the Ark is finished. On what must have been a stunning sight, the hovering presence of G-d moved from Moshe's tent and hovers over the tabernacle, while the Presence of G-d takes up residence in the newly constructed Holy of Holies.

Once this happened, not even Moses could enter the tabernacle until the shechinah presence of G-d was fully settled in. This transition is mentioned in three passages of the Torah and is dealt with in two of them (Ex. 40:16-33; Lev. 9:1-24 and Num. 1:1). All of this happens on the 1<sup>st</sup> day of the second month (Iyar) of the second year after the Exodus.

In Leviticus, we are told that the priests are anointed and they prepare their first sacrifices on the main altar. Fire comes out of the Holy of Holies and consumes the first set of sacrifices without burning anything but the sacrifices. This is done to both assure the people that G-d now dwells in their midst and is setting His seal of approval over all which they have done. From the ramp of the main altar, Aaron blesses the people for the first time. Then he and Moses enter the newly inaugurated Holy Place. The glory of the L-RD has thus appeared to all the people and now everything had to be set in place for the camp to move and head for Canaan.

To facilitate the coming move, both the people and the Levites have to be counted. There are a lot of them and they are not necessarily camping in their marching order. Twelve princes, are selected, one for each tribe and they are given the task of performing the census – and reporting back their numbers to Moses and to Aaron. These leaders are listed in their birth order according to their matriarchs. First comes the sons from Leah, minus the Levites. Then come the sons of Rachel with Joseph being divided between Ephraim and Manasseh.

Then come the sons of the concubines with the sons of Bilhah, Rachel's nurse being listed as the 8<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> leaders. The two sons of Zilpah, Leah's maid are listed in between the sons of Bilhah. Levi is to be counted separately. Once the leaders are designated, the census is conducted according to the marching order of the people in their four banners. This would leave three spaces between the banners and the Levites carry their portion of the Holy Place in the first and the last space, with the contents of the Holy place coming in the middle.

The Ark itself, all wrapped up was to be carried by the Aaronites at the head of the procession, as the Presence of G-d hovered over it. When the Presence lifted, they walked. When it descended, they camped.

The camp would now be organized into four banners of three tribes each. Once they finished each march, those who carried the ark would stop and the people would form up around them and the various parts of the ark were put back together in their specified order.

Once the ark stopped, to the east, the direction they were traveling in, the banner of Judah would camp, with the tribes of Issachar and Zebulun. They were all descendants Leah's children. To the south of the Ark, the banner of Reuben camped, along with the tribes of Simeon and Gad. To the west of the tabernacle, was the banner of Ephraim, along with the tribes of Manasseh and Benjamin. Finally, to the North was the banner of Dan, along with the tribes of Asher and Naphtali.

When the Presence lifted, the Levites would disassemble the various portions of the tent of meeting, beginning first with the wrapping of the Ark and then once they were camped, the whole structure was put back together before the Ark was unwrapped. It was a precision parade which was designed to be a kind of victory parade because the motley crew who left Egypt had been transformed into the mighty, unstoppable hosts of the L-RD.

The numbers of warriors in each tribe, capable of bearing arms was counted, along with all the Levites who were capable of performing their ministry. The number of first born sons in each tribe was also counted. If this number exceeded the number of ministering Levites, then a tax was paid to maintain spiritual balance. We are not told if the strangers were also counted or were required to join the ranks of the warriors of the tribes among whom they settled. We are also not told if their first born were counted. As this group is mentioned less and less over the years, it is likely that they gradually converted and were assimilated into the tribes they lived amongst.

We need to be careful not to read things into the text of the Bible which it does not teach. When I consulted a rabbinic commentary about today's portion, I was surprised to find some very fanciful additions to the details which the account actually contains. Each of the semi-precious stones on the High Priest's breastplate was a different colour and each of the twelve was assigned one of the colours, even though the text refers to the number twelve and says nothing about which colour may have been assigned to which tribe.

In the commentary, each of the twelve tribes supposedly had their own banner according to their supposed tribal colour. And each of the twelve banners was supposedly decorated with the symbol of the tribe, which was supposedly derived from the meaning of their Hebrew name.

The camping order of the Levites who surrounded the tent of Meeting is also given with no mention of any banners for them. The text mentions four banners with each banner having three tribes. No special colours or symbols are mentioned. In the Talmudic commentary, each tribe's colour represented a character trait which each tribe apparently possessed. The same was supposed to be true about the meaning of their Hebrew names.

On our modern world, the zodiac and other kinds of astrology are common and people are said to possess character traits according to the star sign they were born under.

This is a form of superstitious nonsense, because our personalities are not formed by any star we were born under. There are four factors that contribute to the formation of our personalities: temperament, training, experiences and opportunities, but our basic birth temperament remains unchanged. It is either developed or twisted. None of the 12 tribes had temperaments geared to either their supposed colours or to the signs derived from the Hebrew meaning of their names. Their names were also never given prophetically, but as insults between the two sisters, as they battled to give their husband the most sons.

None more and nothing less. I have seen instructions given on how to make coloured banners and attach tribal symbols to them, but it is just a fanciful, traditional invention which has no foundation in the text of the Torah.

It is the number of the tribes and the number of the banners which is significant. The Talmud said that the four banners camped around the Presence, like the four living creatures fluttered around YHVH in heaven. There is no indication that this was ever the intention of the text. We need to limit ourselves to deriving meaning intended by a biblical text and not to add to the meaning which the text does not intend. We can mention various possibilities which may have been used in addition to the details of the text, but our faith should always be based on what the biblical text teaches, nothing more and nothing less.

The camp was getting organized to move and it would have been done with a lot of precision and must have been wonderful to watch as they packed up and equally wonderful to watch as they set up. Our lives need to have spiritual precision and spiritual beauty as we camp our way through the ups and downs of this life, on our way home to our Father's House in glory. How is your pilgrimage doing. Are you organized and do you know your place in the camp, which means in our midst?

**Sermon: Shavuot: The Law is a Blessing and Not a Curse**

**Texts:** *"The Law of the L-RD is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the L-RD are sure, making wise the simple. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honey comb. Moreover by them is your servant warned, in keeping them, there is great reward. For the love of G-d is this, that we obey His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome."*(Ps. 19:8, 11. I John 5:3)

As we prepare to celebrate Shavuot, I want to go over some familiar territory, so that we can give a good answer to those who falsely assume that the Law of G-d could ever be a curse. Most of this misunderstanding comes from Paul's discussions in Romans 7,8 and in the Book of Galatians. Let me be very clear when I say that I believe that the entire contents of the Scriptures are inspired and contain no error, but there are some portions which contain things which are difficult to understand and which some people twist and misunderstand (2 Pe. 3:16). These more complex Scriptures are still fully inspired, but misinterpretations of the same are not.

We have to work very hard to understand what the Scriptures actually say (2 Tim. 2:15) and not go beyond that which is written and assign any meanings which are not intended (I Cor. 4:6; Prov. 30:5, 6). A knowledge of Greek and Hebrew is helpful, not because their

full meaning can not be found in modern language translations, but sometimes there are expressions and idiomatic sayings which do not translate easily.

A major example of this is the term: the Law. In both Hebrew and Greek, it can mean both the words of Moses and also any other portion of the Scriptures. It can also be taken to mean the teachings and traditions of men and when this occurs we have to pay very careful attention to clues in the context of certain passages. The Law of G-d is never called a curse and the Gospel of our blessed Messiah does not release us from our obligation to fully obey the Law of G-d and apply its teachings to every area of our lives.

There are several concerns I want to discuss with you today, so that you are fully equipped in your walk with the Messiah and are deficient in nothing (2 Tim. 3:16, 17).

Obedience to the Word is not a means to access the grace and love of G-d, but should always be a response to it. We cannot earn G-d's favour (Eph. 2:8,9) by the performance of good works, and this spiritual necessity should be our primary and consistent response to His undeserving love. We neither try to earn His favour or try to impress Him with our good deeds. They are just our humble and grateful response to that which we know we do not deserve. Nothing we can ever do will give us the right to require that G-d bless us and our feeble efforts are never good enough to earn His undeserved favour. Our obedience to His Word remains both our expression of thanksgiving and the only acceptable way of knowing Him and walking with Him. Anything less is incredibly deficient.

Some teach that it does not matter what we do, He will still love us. They say that once we have accepted the Messiah and invited Him into our hearts, we have our personal, permanent ticket to heaven, no matter how sinful or rebellious our lives become. The theological term for this is antinomianism, where people feel that their faith somehow excludes them from the obligation to obey the law and morals which are derived from it. It certainly does not.

In the Revelation, John referred to the Nicolaitians, who taught that unrestrained indulgence was a valid response to the Gospel. Sinfulness is a violation of the Gospel and stands against what is taught in the Torah. We do not sin that grace may abound (Rom. 6:1).

This is also often referred to as cheap grace which wrongly teaches that our eternal destiny is so secure, that we can give ourselves over to all and any kinds of sinfulness, with no fear of punishment or judgment. However, it is also true that G-d's enduring love and grace mean that we are not easily lost, even when we temporarily stray from the straight and narrow. I once told a troubled native friend of mine: "sick ain't dead". But it is still sick.

On the day of judgment, all the problems and dark stains we have been unable to resolve or be cleansed from, will go up in smoke as we pass through the fire of G-d's gracious judgment (1 Cor. 3:10-15). Suffering loss is not the same thing as being eternally lost, but those who oppose the righteousness we are all called to practice are playing with fire and great loss.

**When we stand before our Good Shepherd, He will weed out all the works of the flesh which have taken root in our hearts and we shall be rewarded to the extent that we have made the fruit of the Spirit what our lives are all about. Some believers have slipped into a spiritual coma and give no sign of spiritual life. They are in grave danger of great loss, but if there is a small corner of their heart which still belongs to the Messiah, it is always better to be an amoeba in Heaven than a whale in hell.**

**People who flirt with spiritual ruin are not the models we should emulate and we should heed the words of James, when he says that faith without works is dead.**

**However we should never feel that we are earning G-d's grace by our works or that our eternal destiny is dependent on them. It is only the weight of our heavenly rewards which will be determined by our faithfulness and good deeds. The violation of all or any of the Laws of G-d is an unacceptable form of spirituality and is a sign of spiritual sickness which can cause permanent damage to our souls both in this life and in the next.**

**Israel did not obey their way out of their captivity in Egypt, they were delivered by the might and power of YHVH. They went from being slaves in Egypt to become the slaves of YHVH. The Queen Mother once said that duty is the rent you pay for living. I would say it a little differently. Obedience is the rent you pay because of the great salvation which was so freely given to you. Obedience is also the best investment which you can make for your future rewards in Heaven. In a very true sense, legalism or the teaching that salvation needs to be earned by our works is just as evil and wrong as the lawlessness of cheap grace.**

**The term Law, can mean at least four things. First it can mean the Ten Words which were given from Mount Sinai at Shavuot so many centuries ago. The people shook with fear, not so much because the mountain smoked, shook and made a great noise. They shook because the Law of G-d left no room for sin and covered every aspect of their lives from the cradle to the grave.**

**The Law can also refer to any of the content of the Torah, the Prophets, the Writings or the teachings of the New Testament. Whatever G-d said or what was said about G-d and how to walk with Him in all and any portions of the Scriptures, can also be called the Law.**

**The Law can also refer to any teachings about any subject and are really the rules to follow if you want something to be done well and good. I have heard that there is a Torah for motorbikes and I would add that following this Torah is kosher. Good manners and wise behaviour could also be called a form of the law or Torah. Keeping the speed limit is following the Law as is not breaking the stipulations of copyright. There are punishments and consequences for breaking these laws, but the highest and most essential law we should follow is the Law of G-d.**

**In the Book of Galatians, Paul is dealing with a form of legalism which taught that full obedience to the traditions of sages and scholars of Judaism was both a requirement for Salvation and was the only way to access or earn the grace of G-d. I am grateful that so many wise people have provided us with so many amazing insights into the Word of G-d and accessing their words can provide us with a deeper insight into the teachings**

of G-d's Word.

This is a situation where the law can be called a curse. Orthodox Jews are required to obey thousands of laws and the punishments for not doing so are both numerous and sometimes horrendous. There are also 420 laws which they have to keep every day. It would be impossible to keep all of these man made laws and the amount of guilt they generate is excruciating. Guilt is never a good motivator and doing things out of obligation is not the same as responding in love.

The Law can be a curse if it is referring to the traditions and rules of men and not to the Law of G-d. There are good consequences which come when we follow this law and we suffer negative consequences when we do not follow it. But endeavoring to live by its stipulations is never called a curse in the Scriptures.

When we study the teachings of Paul in both Romans and in Galatians we need to make a clear distinction between the teachings of men and the Law of G-d.

In fact, in the Book of Romans, Paul outlines four different kinds of Law which want us to become subject to. But we should understand what he is teaching or we will miss his point.

He says that the Law of G-d is good and that he takes pleasure in it, in his inner man. In other words he acknowledges that it is good and should be obeyed. He calls this the law of his conscience. Next he mentions law of sin and death, which twists the Law of G-d and makes it a weapon which is used against us to destroy us. Lastly, he mentions the Law of the Spirit and Life in our blessed Messiah. This law wrestles the Law of G-d out of the grasp of the law of sin and death and empowers the law of our conscience so that we may fulfill the righteousness of the Law of G-d.

Are you letting the Law of the Spirit and of Life empower the law of your conscience so that you fulfill the righteousness of the Law of G-d? In this segment, our disobedience is a curse and the Law of G-d is never described as a curse. In this discussion, he is not talking about the traditions and laws of men which can be a curse.

Truly, in the Scriptures, the Law of G-d is nowhere described as a curse. In Galatians, the Law is described as a curse from which we need to be delivered. But it is not referring to the Law of G-d. When the teachings and the rules of men are called the Law, this body of information and the requirements of this Law are described as a curse.

Which Law are you following? We should follow the laws of our land, as long as they do not violate the Scriptures. We should also follow good instructions when we are trying to build our motorbike or maintain our vehicle. We should always follow the Law of G-d so that we can be spiritually vigorous as we set straight paths for the healing of our wounded feet.

We should never try to follow all the laws and traditions of men which want to govern every area of our lives, as they crush us under a massive load of guilt. The Law of G-d is the only path we need to have as a light for our feet and there is no curse attached to it.

**The Law of G-d in the Old Testament does not suddenly morph and turn into a curse. Legalism has really nothing to do with what the Scriptures actually teach. The Bible is not a long series of do's and don'ts which want to cramp our style and keep us chained to an almost endless set of rules which no one can really obey. It is a source of sweet blessing which is infinitely more valuable than all the gold and precious gems this fading world has to offer. Disobeying the Law can bring a curse, but the Law itself is never a curse.**

**Obedience is a necessary sign of spiritual health, as long as it is based firmly on G-d's Word and on G-d's Word alone. Sometimes the teachings of men can enrich our understanding of the Word of G-d. At other times, the traditional obligations of the teachings of men can crush us and can become the curse which Paul was talking about. There is never any conflict between the Spirit of G-d and the Word of G-d.**

**As we come to celebrate the giving of the Law of G-d and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit of G-d, we need to focus both our celebration and our obedience on the Law of G-d. It is disobedience to the Law of G-d which is a curse. The laws of our land are also never intended to be a curse and punishment only comes when we disobey them. Avoid the false teachings of both legalism and lawlessness and build your house of faith solidly on the Rock of G-d's Word. Walking with G-d according to His Word – there is no life like it! Our Messiah rejoiced in the Word, so let us rejoice with Him.**

**Shabbat Shalom and Shavua Tov**