

Torah Portion: Ha'azinu (done by Alan)

Sermon:

As we manoeuvre our way through the Fall Feasts, we do a lot of self examination and personal reflecting. Through the whole process, we seek to be spiritually renewed and spiritually transformed so that we can see and do the will of the Father. This does not have to be a complicated undertaking because discerning the will of G-d for our lives in no way causes us to surrender our free will.

Unfortunately, some believers want to micro manage their lives to the point of asking G-d every morning what they should wear. They constantly want to hear from G-d and be guided so that their lives become a series of dramatic interventions, where no uncertainty exists. They seem to be afraid to think for themselves and want even the smallest decision they have to make to come directly from G-d.

However, learning how to handle mistakes and setbacks is a vital part of learning to walk with the Messiah. Even as I encounter opposition and have to make some hard choices, I want my life to be an expression of my unwavering faith and complete confidence in G-d. However, we are frequently confronted by choices we need to make, even at the risk of making wrong choices.

Being totally submitted to G-d and walking on the bumpy straight and narrow, does not mean that we become mindless spiritual zombies or robots who do as they are programmed, without having to think or choose.

The desire to hear directly from G-d in even the smallest decisions we have to make, may come from being afraid of making choices or taking risks. Some people will also go to any lengths to avoid conflicts and at the same time do not want to be questioned or held accountable.

This kind of super spirituality can be a kind of hiding from reality and from the uncertainties of life. It may even become a form of superstition similar to those who will not make a move without consulting their horoscope. They always want to be told what to do, so that failure never becomes a possibility.

The Bible is full of people who were put in situations where they had to make difficult choices. This is because G-d does not want to do all of our thinking for us. How we respond to uncertainty can be a measure of our spiritual maturity.

G-d wants us to learn how to think, so that we are full of faith and obedience because we have come to understand that walking with the Messiah is the best way to live (Jer. 6:16). Every day we have to make choices and voluntarily exercise our free will to discern and choose what is good and acceptable (I Thess. 5:21; Romans 12:1, 2).

The general will of G-d applies to all believers. First, G-d Wants us to avoid all forms of idolatry and fornication. This also means weeding out the works of the flesh which will always be trying to take root in our lives.

Secondly, He wants us to realize that His protection and provision will always be with us, no matter how many deep valleys we have to wade through and no matter how many steep mountains we have to scale.

He also wants us to study His Word, so that we can learn to apply its principles in our lives. Finally, He wants us to learn to submit everything to Him in prayer, so that He can guide us in the decisions we have to make. Part of prayer will always involve praise and thanks giving for the goodness of our Messiah.

You see, some 45 years ago, I decided that I wanted to get married. I was just finishing my degree in Education and watched as so many of my friends moved on and settled down. So, I was watching an old movie about a couple which falls in love, despite a lot of drama and so many misunderstandings. They decide to get married. It was a positive movie.

So, during the Ads break, I prayed and said to G-d that I would also like to get married. I was 23 and my spirituality was fairly stable and it was deepening. I wanted someone to share my adventures and all the ups and downs that life always throws our way.

As I was praying, I received the conviction that this was a choice which G-d approved of. He then asked me a question: "Sure thing, but who are you going to marry?". Good question. There were two girls that I knew well enough to marry: Patti and another girl who was a little older than me. Patti and I had just broken up for good for the third time – I have never been someone who is easy to put up with.

So, G-d asked me another question: "which one do you choose?". I thought about it for a while and then said that I choose Patti. As I did, I suddenly panicked and wanted G-d to give me a Bible verse as a confirmation. He told me not to try and "lucky dip" and accept my choice and He would bless it.

The next Sunday, Patti and I were going to introduce two of our friends to a charismatic church we liked. We met at the church and discovered that neither friend would be coming. It was the first time in a long time that I had sat next to her during a service. It felt very good to be in service with her and worship together.

After service, we went out for coffee together. We had a favourite Chinese restaurant we both liked and as we were walking, I proposed. Strangely, she did not seem surprised. The first time she saw me, G-d told her I was the man she was going to marry. She did not tell me this until after we were married. If she had, I would not have gone through it, if I were pressured into it. It never dawned on me that she would refuse and we set about making our plans.

It was the will of G-d for me to choose and I knew that I was choosing well. You see, we have to fulfill the general will of G-d for all believers, but we need to understand that part of this will is learning how to make good choices and to learn to think things through (I Thess. 5:21). As a younger believer, I was quite hyper and just wanted to fill my new life with all the good things of His Word, to make up for the 19 years I had spent stumbling around in the dark. After 49 years as a believer, this is still my main objective. I like to think that I am less hyper and more stable and steady, without having lost any of my zeal and love for G-d's Word.

I have gone through about ten Bibles and the Word remains my primary inspiration and motivation. I was very glad to find someone who shared this passion with me.

I had a lot of brokenness when I came to faith and after all this time, I am still working on some of it. But, I have learned that G-d wants us to choose our way out of darkness and set straight paths, so that our wounded feet could be made stronger and not weaker (Heb. 12:13).

I still always want G-d's approval, but it is not because I am afraid that I would not be able to stand on my own two feet. It is because I want my life to be a joyful expression of my faith and obedience, no matter what trials and tribulations He allows to wander through my life.

There will always be setbacks and betrayals. There will also be many heartbreaks and every kind of persecution and spiritual oppression. But as we apply G-d's Word, prayerfully, these less than happy experiences can become the building blocks of a house built on the rock. Our G-d will always supply you with the materials, but He will not build it for you. Spiritual responsibility means learning how to respond and make choices that will please our Heavenly Father.

It is during times of great trials and much uncertainty that we truly express our faith in our King by the choices we make. To really serve our Messiah you need to develop great courage under fire, even when a strategic retreat is called for. Sustained victory does not come without a battle, or series of battles and we must learn to fight them as we wander through this world on our way to our Father's Home in Glory.

Psalms 23 describes great peace in the midst of great trials and I would say that you cannot have this great peace, without these great trials. Making wise choices in times of uncertainty, is the surest way to ensure the persistent blessing of G-d.

Over the years, I have not always made the best choices, but I have learned that it is more important to make choices for the right reasons than it is to make the right choices. We are always on a spiritual learning curve and we always need to exercise our free will in the service of our Messiah and King.

G-d wants us to be His willing servants who have chosen to serve Him. He never wants us to become slaves who have surrendered their free will and just do what they are told, because their right to choose has been taken from them. In a sense we are His slaves, but it needs to always be because we choose to be and not because we do not have any other options.

He wants us to lead lives defined by the good choices we have made and also by the bad choices we have learned to recover from. This is part of the wonderful tension of earnest prayer, where we seek His face and ask for His guidance. We still have to choose and we still need His wisdom, but He will not always tell us what to do. We have to learn to make wise choices according to the principles of His Word.

I frequently pray for His guidance, both for me, my family and the shul – as well as for friends I am leading to the L-rd. My recovery is still being a little elusive, but I pray for the strength to keep going, because I am not yet ready to lay down my tools and take up endless shuffle board. I will be getting hearing aids soon and my glasses need to be changed, but my joie de vivre has not diminished and I greatly enjoy what I continue to do. There are moments when I would like to smack my life silly and go and live on the Queen Charlotte islands, but G-d has not finished with me yet – and He is not finished with any of you just yet!

In the coming election, sincere Bible believing people may support different parties, but it is more important why we support the party of our choice than it is what party we actually support. I have a list of issues I support and I want the party and the candidate who supports all or most of them. Support for Israel is highest on the list. And support for our indigenous peoples is also high on my list So is being pro-life, friendly to religious faith. Support for the LGBT agenda is likely to make we change who I vote for, but tolerance and not being racist are also important.

Protecting the environment and protecting the rights of minorities are also important. I am not happy about our current government, but that is my democratic right, so I vote with my conscience and encourage you to do the same.

You see, personal piety is not always a guarantee that we will always make good choices, but it does add a new level to our choices and to the reasons behind these choices.

It is G-d's will that we learn to make good choices for the right reasons and that we take the time to think things through. Encountering opposition is not always a sign that we have chosen poorly, so we need to purpose to be wise as serpents and gentle as doves, and not the other way around.

In our Messiah, we are never Called to surrender our free will as we seek to do G-d's will. Our calling is to learn to use our free will in the service of His Kingdom. Pat Boone once did a children's album with the theme: You win or lose by the way you choose.

I have examined my faith and will continue to do it for the rest of my life. I do not remain a convinced believer because I haven't taken the time to think things through. I am not just a supporter of Israel because I am Jewish. In fact, I know of some Jews who do not support Israel. It is what Israel stands for and how the state conducts its affairs that continues to have my support.

I have also encountered other religions and some pretty weird versions of the Judaeo-Christian faith and more than once, people have tried to talk me out of my faith. With humbleness and respect, I have always answered my detractors and have always wanted to maintain a good dialogue with all people whom I encounter.

There are some doctrinal positions that are popular in main stream evangelical churches which I really appreciate. There are others which make what is left of my hair stand on end. As a believer, I have never surrendered my free will and I continue to walk with the Messiah because of who He is, what He does and what He has done for me.

Deep valleys and high mountains may be part of His will for our lives that we would rather avoid. And no amount of prayer and faith will allow us to be excluded from the trials and temptations we have to overcome as we walk through this life.

I am looking forward to our celebration of Sukkoth, because we are living for the coming Kingdom and are really not of this world any more. I want to always be convinced that for me to live is our Messiah and to die is a gain. Life everlasting blows my mind away, as does learning to make good choices in a darkening world which is less and less friendly to our faith. We were born to choose. Let Him guide you as you learn to choose.