

Nitzavim **You Are Standing**
Torah: Deuteronomy 29:10(9)-30:20
Haftarah: Isaiah 61:10-63:9
Brit Chadashah: John 15:1-11

This is the last regular Torah portion of 5781. The last three chapters of Deuteronomy are read as part of the High Holy Days and Sukkoth readings. Moses is giving his final exhortations and really wants to motivate the people to serve the L-RD with all their strength and never be pulled away into criminal idolatry. He says that the whole camp is present to hear his exhortation, including the Gentiles who lived in their midst. These would be either converts or sojourners.

All of them are to enter the covenant with an oath, so that YHVH can be their G-d, as He promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He is also addressing his remarks to future generations whom he says are also present there. So if you ever wondered where you are mentioned specifically in the Bible, it is here (Deut. 29:14, 15).

He warns them against five kinds of criminal abominations and does not want anyone to harbour bitterness against anyone else (29:18). The people are warned that just doing your own thing will never bring them any peace and he goes on to say He will bring endless woes on the man who just does what he thinks, instead of obeying the Word. When this occurred, future generations will be stupefied by His great wrath.

In 29:29, G-d is saying seven things through Moses. First, we should not expect to understand everything about G-d, because there are secret things which He will not reveal. We cannot lay claim to these secrets, because they belong to G-d. Also try as we might, there are no mystical keys or special formulas which we can use to get at these secret things.

However, what He has revealed is for us and our descendants forever, with no expiry date. Furthermore, what He has revealed needs to be put into practice, wholly and not partially. He is not referring to any other document, but is talking about Moses teachings and the principles of the Torah. Finally, this amazing verse asserts that finding G-d's will is not complicated, we just have to look into His Word and put it into practice.

If YHVH has to scatter us because of our disobedience, He will seek us out at the ends of the earth, return us to our ancestral home and make us more numerous than our fathers. He will also circumcise our hearts and those of our children, so that we will serve YHVH with our whole being. He will drop curses on our enemies when we return to full obedience. He will also prosper us and take pleasure in blessing us, when we return to Him and obey Him with our whole being.

Deut. 30:11-14 is used differently in the New Testament, but even there it has a valid application. Moses makes four points about the commandments. First, he says that they are not beyond our strength, nor out of our reach. They are not found in Heaven so that we have to ask some to go up there and get them for us., Also they are not on the other side of the sea, so someone has to go and get them for us to put them into practice. They are very close, even in our heart and our mouth, so that we can put them into practice.

In the New Testament, we encounter Paul teaching that the Law is a curse and too heavy for us to bear. He is not referring to the teachings of the Torah, but to the thousands of traditions and rules that have ground up around it and which are impossible for us to keep them all. The Torah is not like that, because it is a straightforward call to believe and to obey as we avoid all and any forms of idolatry and fornication.

The Torah, even with its secret things, was designed for the human psyche and it describes what maximum fulfillment looks like. It also graphically describes what complete degradation looks like. G-d is placing two choices before us. We can either choose life and good or seek for death and evil. And we must choose, because not making a choice is a choice and places you among those who seek death and evil.

He emphasizes that obedience to all that which the Torah prescribes will bring blessing and cause the people to multiply in the land. This is provided the people do not stray and bow down to serve other gods. If this were to occur, the people would perish and not prolong their days in the land they are going to possess.

He reiterates our need to choose, but this time we have six choices. We can choose life and good or death and evil, which is really a choice between blessing and cursing. Our life depends on loving YHVH and obeying His Word. When we obey, we will prolong our days in the land and dwell in the land which YHVH promised to give to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Moses is quite eloquent and makes it really clear what the consequences will be, both when we obey and when we disobey. It is not a matter of luck or the product of any supposed control we can exercise over G-d. There is no room for negotiating a watering down of any of the commandments. It will always be an all or nothing proposition.

As the people obey G-d and see the wonderful things G-d will be doing for them, they will lose any desire to serve other gods and will eventually understand that not only is our G-d the best G-d, but that there are no other gods but Him. The sophisticated and seductive idolatry and fornication of the present inhabitants of Canaan is to be eradicated because it is the principle cause for the coming police action.

If the people succumb to any of this criminal paganism, G-d will exercise and even more violent police action against the offenders. There is never to be any middle ground between the Torah and paganism, even in our world which is becoming increasingly bullied into adopting the foul politically correct agenda. Our world is saying increasingly that when it comes to religious belief, no one is wrong and everybody is right.

This so far from what the Torah and the Gospel teach, that even at the expense of suffering increased persecution, we must never deviate from the Word. We must also never let anything of the pagan world take root in our midst. We would never promote any form of violence against those who do not share our faith, but we will also never let our guard down, because we are moving in a different direction and living for different beliefs and values.

We are heaven bound pilgrims, sojourning through this world as strangers and pilgrims and our show of courtesy and respect for those who do not share our faith, is in no way an invitation to adopt anything which goes against the Torah of G-d. We will always be salty light that is calling them to abandon their darkness and join us on our journey to Glory.

Sermon: The Fall Feasts: Are You Ready to Celebrate?

This year marks the 26th time I am going through the Fall Feasts and I am looking forward to our annual fall spiritual house cleaning. Our world is constantly trying to get our attention and is trying to distract us from our biblical spirituality. So in three sections, we will do a thorough heart and soul search, as we get ready for another year in the Messiah, and as we also prepare for our powerful Canadian winter.

When I took my first shul, there were not too many Messianic Resources available and I never wanted us to develop into a watered down version of Talmudic spirituality with its intricate, long and complicated Fall Feasts services. I wanted to present a rich, beautiful expression of our faith in our glorious Messiah and not feel that somehow we were missing out of a traditional Jewish observance of the High Holy Days and Sukkoth.

So I accessed a wide variety of Talmudic sources and determined that any observances we practice were both biblical and focused on the Messiah. Some features of what goes on in traditional synagogues is a good expression of biblical truth, but there is so much tradition and so many ceremonies which have little or no basis in the Scriptures. I did not want to lose any observances which reflected our biblical faith in the Messiah of Promise, so I put together a Makzor (liturgical Guide) to make our celebration of these special days as enriching as they deserve.

As you know, there are seven biblical festivals and two historical observances. In Talmudic shuls there are also dozens and dozens of other observances which reflect the history of the Jewish experience, rather than reflecting the Word of G-d and the message of His Messiah. There are actually five New Years in modern Judaism and four fasts which are mentioned in the Bible. There is first the New Year in the L-rd, which is also the new year for the kings. In between Passover and Shavuot, there is also a new year for scholars, followed by a new year for the year and another for the trees.

We are celebrating the New Year for the Year, which is also called the Festival of Trumpets. There are three spring feasts of the L-rd (Passover, Unleavened Bread and First Fruits), one summer festival (Shavuot) and finally, three fall festivals (Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and Sukkoth). Chanukah occurs midwinter and Purim happens just before spring.

So I have developed a Messianic Jewish approach to the fall feasts which is outlined in the pages of our Makzor. If you want to slip in to a Talmudic shul and see how they celebrate the Fall Feasts, prepare to spend a very long time in intricate services, with almost endless chants and any number of special traditional prayers. Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are when the synagogues are jam packed and while there is always a little room for visitors, most people have to pay for their seats – anywhere from \$6-800 for an individual seat to \$2-3,000 for a family. We do not charge for any of our services and instead of endless fundraisers, we are supported by the regular tithes and offerings of our members.

Even with our Makzors, we do not always do our services the same way each year, but they do contain all of the basics which are derived from the Bible and from elements of a traditional synagogue service which reflect aspects of biblical truth. And even though each community must of necessity develop its own set of traditions, we will continue to draw a clear line between what the Bible teaches and how it has been applied over the years.

There is very little that is spontaneous in a Talmudic synagogue because they have so many rituals and prayers to go through. In many churches the opposite seems to be true as some believers feel that being spontaneous is the only way to be lead of the Holy Spirit and that planning ahead puts us at risk of quenching the guidance of the Holy Spirit. While they feel that they are being spontaneous, they usually end up doing the same things the same way with very little variety or change.

For us, the truth lies in between being spontaneous and planning ahead. After the destruction of the first temple a synagogue form of worship was adopted with four elements: prayer praise, preaching and fellowship. All churches of all denominations base their services on this simple model. As long as these four elements are present, there is no one order of service or level of spontaneity which needs to be followed, as long as all things are done decently and in order. The same needs to be true when it comes to how we are going to handle our Makzors.

There are basically three groups of services in the Fall Feasts. There are three for Rosh Hashanah, four if you include Shabbat Shuvah. And during these three services we perform three rituals and have two special readings. We also bless our children at various points during our services.

On the Eve of Rosh Hashanah we bid farewell to all unfinished business we have not been able to get to, over the previous year and with the Hatarat Nedarim certificate we are set free to start the New Year off with a clean slate. During this same service we also have two special readings: Unetane Tokef, which describes the awesome majesty of the day and Hineni, where we open ourselves up and welcome divine scrutiny. During the Erev service, we this year we will also be presenting the Aleinu (It is Our Duty) chant to see about including it as a regular feature of our regular Siddur service.

During the Rosh Hashanah services, we recite the three sections of Avinu malkeinu prayer and recite the three sections of the standing prayer (Shemoneh Esrei).

In the morning service, we will celebrate our first Shofar blowing liturgy and cover the three main themes of Rosh Hashanah (sovereignty, remembrance and judgment). We will also introduce you to our version of the traditional New Year's greeting. It is traditional to make honey and apple slices available after each service, but because of Covid restrictions, we will put together special packages and hand them out on Shabbat Shuvah.

In the concluding Rosh Hashanah service we will celebrate a second Shofar blowing liturgy and introduce you to a series of readings for the Ten Days of Repentance between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Along with a discussion about the Day of the Lord and the coming Judgment, we will perform our annual Tashlikh (casting off of sins) ceremony.

After ten days, we come to our four Yom Kippur services. Because we take our biblical spirituality so seriously, this is a very intense time of the year with over 18 special services!

On the first evening of Yom Kippur, my daughter will perform Kol Nidre (All Vows) and we will recite the first of two Pesukei D'Zimrah (verses of pruning). Before we chant the Shema, we recite some traditional blessings of the this special prayer. After we recite the seven sections of the Al Hayt (for these sins) prayer, we go home to get some sleep before a very busy day!

On the morning of Yom Kippur we recite our second Pesukei D'Zimrah and run through the Al Hayt for a second time. I usually ask for volunteers to read the blessings between each section of Al Hayt so that I do not lose my verse with so many readings. Then I give my annual sermon on the Avodah (work) ceremony when the High Priest made His annual entrance into the Holy of Holies.

We come back in the afternoon for a discussion of authentic repentance and our annual pilgrimage through the Scroll of the Prophet Jonah. At the concluding Yom Kippur service (Ne'illah or locking) we discuss the meaning of practical holiness and examine several portions of the Sermon on the Mount. We reaffirm our confidence in His forgiveness and the service ends with a long, single blast of the Shofar.

During the time between Yom Kippur and Sukkoth, we put up our Sukkah, which will be in our back yard (11634 111A Avenue). Most of the services for Sukkoth will take place in the Sukkah tent and we encourage people to bring both decorations and snacks. A few extra outdoor chairs would also be helpful.

On the Eve of Sukkoth, we meet in the Sukkah, light the festival candles and bless our children. We also bless the Sukkah and welcome the seven special guests (Ushpisin). We discuss the meaning of the festival as we purpose to have nothing but joy over the eight days of this festival.

One Sukkoth morning bless our branches (Lulav) and perform our first branch waving ceremony. We also recite the first Hallel (Ps. 113-118) and discuss the meaning of these special Psalms. We also read various portions from the Bible which deal with Sukkoth and bless our children again.

On the evening of Sukkoth, we bless our Lulav (branches) and have a second waving ceremony. We bless our children again because they and all of you are so important to our community. We sometimes sing a few familiar songs and then discuss passages which deal with the meaning of the festival. It is a reminder that all of our life in this world is temporary and we are really on a generational pilgrimage to the Coming Kingdom, which is our true home. We dwell in tents and engage in vigorous Bible Study. We also pray for seasonal rain.

Once or twice a day over the next three days (Sept. 22-24) we meet in the Sukkah from 3-5 pm and 7-9 pm. We eat snacks and study your favourite portions of the Bible – or portions you would like to have explained. On the Sabbath of Sukkoth, we have a regular service with a special Torah portion and our annual discussion of the Scroll of Lamentations.

This is so that we can temper our joy with wisdom and not feel that we have arrived at home or that all of our troubles will suddenly be over. We take a break from fussing and indulge in some energetic rejoicing. Life should always be more about rejoicing in the provision and protection of our Messiah, than it is about the trails and tribulations we have to go through. He will never leave us nor forsake us, so we always have something to rejoice about, even if we feel that everything else is going wrong in our lives!

We are back in the Sukkah for three more days – 3-5 pm and 7-9 pm, because the fun is not over yet. If it gets cold, bring blankets. We will have some light and a heater. I am interested to see how creative people will get in bringing snacks which your beloved rabbi can eat!

Sukkoth ends with two special days which wrap up the festivities and an additional day, Simchat Torah where we roll the Torah back to the beginning and promenade it around the sanctuary. We will celebrate Simchat Torah (rejoicing in the Torah) on Saturday October 2nd because it is not part of the biblical festival of Sukkoth, but it is a nice ending to our celebrations as we embark on a new Torah Cycle and are back in the beginning of Genesis.

The seventh day of Sukkoth, Monday, Sept. 27th, is called Hoshana Raba (Great Salvation) and we examine various aspects of this marvellous reality. We will be in the Sukkah both from 3-5 pm and 7-9 pm because when it comes to the wonder of our great salvation, there is always a lot to study and talk about. We will give a brief summary of human history from a spiritual, biblical perspective and also deal with the seven redemptive names of YHVH.

On Tuesday, Sept. 28th it is Shemini Atzeret (The Eighth Day) and we will examine the meaning of eighth in the Bible. We will also meet both from 3-5 pm and from 7-9 pm. Do not worry if you cannot make it every day for both services, but children are always definitely welcome, along with any visitors you show up with. We will also talk about the Great Gathering at the end of the world.

During the Simchat Torah sabbath service, we will read the first and last verse of both the Tanach and the New Testament in as many languages as we can muster. We will also read through the last chapter in the Torah. We will each take turns promenading the Torah once around the sanctuary, so not everybody will likely have a turn, but you can dance where you stand and reach out to it as it passes you.

This is both the busiest time of the year and one of the most exciting. Make plans to invite guests and to attend as many extra services as you are able. Healthy, dynamic spirituality will always be our highest priority and the focus of everything we do as a community of Messianic Jews and Gentiles.

Don't be afraid to ask questions. It is important to know why we do what we do and why we do not do what we do not do. The Bible is a rich source of spiritual information and we want to make sure it remains the centre around which our lives revolve.

We cannot know everything, but we need to know what is expected of us and what we can expect of our mighty Messiah. Life in Him is always exciting and never boring. The more you plunge into His Word, the more stable and blessed you will be.

As we go through the annual Torah reading cycle for another year, may our lives again be filled with His Presence and the light which shines out of His Word.

After such a thorough spiritual house cleaning, we can expect another good year as we journey through this life towards our Father's Home in Glory and as His coming is drawing near, so let me end with a good Jewish proverb^{5b}.

It is not so important that you recognize the Messiah when He comes. It is more important that He recognizes you. How well known are you to our beloved Messiah? How much of your life, with all of its hopes and fears, have you surrendered to His Grace? May we learn to always be faithful, patient pilgrims as we navigate the storms and the doldrums of this life for one more year. Shabbat Shalom. Shuvah Tov.