

Several times a year, the regular weekly Torah Portion is replaced by a festival reading and today we have both a festival Torah portion and an examination of the scroll of Shir HaShirim (Song of Songs). The Torah Portion is Deut. 14:22-16:17 and deals mainly with the three pilgrimage festivals, when the people brought their agricultural tithes to celebrate before YHVH.

The priest main income was their portion of the sacrifices which were offered all year long. However, the agricultural tithe were to be eaten by the people before the L-RD. They were also to bring the first born of their larger and smaller livestock, along with their wine and their oil. When they came and celebrated the bounty of YHVH, they were learning to fear Him, because they understood that everything they have and all their increase comes from YHVH.

If they lived too far from the yet to be selected place where YHVH is going to make His name (presence) reside, they could exchange their tithe against its value in silver, travel to the Tabernacle and then buy all the food which their heart desired and everything which gave them pleasure. This included strong liquor and wine. They were rejoice with their family and not forget the Levite who was to be living among them and had heritage which could be farmed and harvested.

Every third year they were to place their tithes on their doorsteps so that the Levite, the stranger, the widow and the orphan could eat and rejoice before YHVH. This was a requirement so that YHVH could bless the work of their hands. We have to be responsible with our finances if we want YHVH to bless us.

The next chapter begins with a discussion of the release of Hebrew bond servant during the sabbatical year. With obedience, there were to be no poor people in their midst, even though there would always be poor people among them. This is not a contradiction, but an explanation of how they could be the hand of the L-RD to bless the people who became poor in their midst. Doing this they would be lenders and not borrowers and dominate over many benevolently nations. They were to give freely and not to regret it in their hearts.

If a fellow Hebrew became so poor that he sold himself to you, he was to be well treated over six years and the seventh he was to be set free. He was not be sent away empty handed so that his poverty would return, but with gifts so that he could get back on his feet again. If he wants to remain a permanent bondsman, you were to pierce his earlobe as sign that he willingly became a permanent bondsman.

The chapter goes on to discuss consecrating the first born of your livestock to YHVH, which was to be brought before YHVH and eaten along with your whole family. If it was deformed, it was not brought before YHVH, but eaten at home. Ritually clean people and ritually unclean people could eat it with you, but not while it was still alive. The life is in the blood, living animals have to be killed before they are eaten.

Sometimes, Deuteronomy does not have details which are found in Exodus and sometimes it also contains details which are not given in Exodus. It was a review as the new generation was given the Law on the plains of Moab. When you put the two givings of the Law together, you have a complete picture of the Law.

The next part of Deuteronomy 16 deals in more depth with the three pilgrimage festivals when all the people had to gather before YHVH. We learn that Passover is celebrated in conjunction with the first of the annual grain harvests, which is Barley. Along with the Seder meal, there were also sacrifices of large and small livestock which were offered. Observing Passover is. After the Seder meal, there is a seven day period to be a lifelong commitment where we are commanded to eat unleavened bread. There is to be a solemn gathering on the first and on the seventh day.

Though it is not specifically mentioned, we know that the first full day of unleavened bread (15th of Nissan is both the Festival of First Fruits and the beginning of the annual 50 day countdown to Shavuot (Pentecost). The Festival of Shavuot is also called the festival of weeks. This always coincided with the first Wheat Harvest and perhaps even a second Barley Harvest. The growing season begins much earlier than it does in Canada and lasts much longer than it does in Canada.

At Shavuot, the people were to gather unto the L-RD at the place which He shall choose and they were to rejoice with every member of their extended community, including the Levite, the Stranger, the Widow and the orphan. At harvest times we are generous to remind ourselves both of G-d's protection and provision and that we were once slaves whom He delivered from Egyptian bondage.

At the end of the third harvest, where both fruit and grain were harvested, they were instructed to gather before YHVH for the seven plus one day Festival of Sukkot, not only were they to dwell in tents, but they were to share their bounty with all members of the community and to deliver themselves entirely over to rejoicing. While Orthodox Jews are rarely heavy drinkers, if they drink at all, the rabbis recommend that the people get drunk twice a year, first during the seven days of Sukkoth and then at the Festival of Purim. There is nothing wrong with alcohol in and of itself, it is the abuse of alcohol which is a problem.

We do not serve alcohol at any of our gatherings because we have people among us who are struggling with alcohol addiction, but in your own homes, there is no problem with alcohol consumption as long as it is done responsibly. Many traditional churches and synagogues use alcohol in their services, but none of them encourage heavy drinking. Non alcoholic wine is also available. Just to be on the safe side, we only use grape Juice, both for our kiddish blessing and for our celebration of the L-rd's Table.

During the Festival cycle, which is also a harvest cycle, the important thing is to rejoice in the provision and the protection of YHVH. He has also delivered us from the slavery of this world and rejoicing is the right and the privilege of free people. Learning how to rejoice is an important, satisfying spiritual discipline.

At the end of our portion, Passover is called the Festival of Unleavened Bread and Shavuot is called the Festival of Weeks. We are not to appear empty handed during this celebrations, because G-d will always meet our needs, both during the lean times and during times of great abundance.

Just as the wilderness generation was preparing to enter Canaan, they are reminded to live a free people, whose lives revolved around G-d and His provision. We are not just former slaves, we are a free people blessed and protected by YHVH.

Sermon: Shir HaShirim, the Song of Songs (also known as the Song of Solomon)

Shir HaShirim is one of the least read and most misunderstood books in the Bible. Because of its explicit sexual content which promotes polygamy, rabbinic commentators see it as an extended allegory which tells the history of Israel from the beginning to the arrival of Messiah. There is no real allegory in the Bible. Allegory is a form of symbolism where what is said means something entirely different. The most famous allegory is the Pilgrims Progress. It is an interesting book, but none of this kind double meaning symbolism appears in the Bible.

It is really a beautiful ode to polygamous sexual love. It contains symbols which are used to describe both the handsomeness of Solomon and the beauty of his new lover. In the Song, other women want to join her and become lovers of Solomon. We need to understand a very important point here. Neither premarital or extramarital sex is being promoted in the Song. All and any women who became Solomon's lovers, married him. From the Bible, we know that Solomon had 700 full wives and 300 concubines. Concubines were a kind of wife who did not have the full privileges of a full wife.

We understand that we are the bride of Messiah and the Song is in the Bible to show how passionate we should be for YHVH and how passionate He is for each of us. He loves all of us and each of us as if we were the only one. Now I want to introduce a term that I will use carefully. We are part of Messiah's celestial harem. We do not become part of a collective, where a single consciousness exists in many bodies. We remain individuals who are united together as an echad (oneness) in much the same way as the trinity of G-d.

When His kingdom is set up on the new earth and among the new heavens, we are truly married to Him, but it is not in a physical sense as when the two genders unite sexually in this life. Sex and marriage are the closest things we have to describe the wonder and the joy of our eternal union/bond with the King of Kings. As the Bride of Messiah, we do not all become female, nor do we spend eternity taking turns having sex with G-d.

Gender is only a temporary measure for this life and since both genders equally reflect the full image of G-d, in our Messiah's kingdom, there is neither male nor female (Gal. 3:28). We become like the angels who do not possess gender and who do not marry or participate in any kind of sexual reproduction (Matt. 22:30).

When the Bride of Messiah is finally fully manifested, I cannot tell you precisely what that will look like, except to say that it will be wonderful beyond your wildest dreams. There have been at least two literary attempts to describe the wonder of Heaven, one by Dante (the Divine Comedy) and C. S. Lewis (The Great divorce). For those who try to go further and get more precise, I invoke Deut. 29:29 (the secret things belong to G-d).

In a rabbinic synagogue, the Song is chanted and it is used to describe the passionate love which our Messiah has for us, over and above all the pain and horror we may experience in this life. The everlasting love of G-d is the greatest reality in the universe (John 3:16) and that throughout all generations. Believers are truly never lost nor forsaken and once our journey through this life is over, we rest in the arms of our Saviour, until we wake up and resurrect to life everlasting on a new earth and in the new heavens. The Song speaks of the depth of this passionate love Messiah has for us and it is not partial and will never grow less or wear out.

In Him, we can overcome all that life throws at us, whether we are being slowly bombed into oblivion by the Russian artillery or we are peacefully resting beneath our olive tree, without a care in the world.

Our world can be very distracting as we deal with the cares, the riches and the pleasures it has to offer (Luke 8:14). And in our part of the world, materialism is our biggest enemy, along with all the lies of evolution. Too many believers have been sucked in by the errors of the prosperity Gospel. Wealth and health are not always signs of G-d's favour, just as poverty and sickness are not always signs of His displeasure.

The amount of personal wealth worldwide is increasing at an amazing rate and the amount of knowledge we possess is doubling every two years. It is now impossible for one person to absorb all that is known. Proverbs talks about three kinds of mental functions: knowledge, understanding and wisdom. Knowledge deals with facts, while understanding understands how to use them. Wisdom deals with both meaning and purpose.

In my short life I have read thousands of books, both professionally and for pleasure. By comparison, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle did not know very much, but they are considered some of the wisest people who ever lived. Even though our race has produced an amazing collection of great minds, what really matters is knowing the only true G-d, the G-d of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and the Father of our beloved Messiah. Having this faith, gives us a perspective that exceeds all the power, the money and the wisdom that mankind has ever generated.

As we wander through the annual Festival Cycle we are celebrating both this personal knowledge and the passionate love He has for each of us – and the passionate love we are called to have for Him.

Yeshua did not come into the world to be the smartest, the richest or the strongest man who ever lived. He came to confront the devil, the world and the flesh over a 33 year period and without succumbing once, He took this perfect, sinless offering to the cross. He paid the price for the sins of mankind in His body and His divine nature takes this complete victory and applies it to all believers in every generation of mankind. Socrates never did this, neither did Plato or Aristotle. Confucius, Buddha and Mohamed did not do it either and could not perform this supreme supernatural act of redemption which brings us salvation and life everlasting.

The Swedish philosopher/theologian, Emanuel Swedenborg, was likely one of the most intelligent men who ever lived. As he was setting his own religion, he learned to speak over 90 languages and invented countless gimmicks. His religion is ever the best yet hard to understand and with it he tried to explain the origin and meaning of life. He did not succeed because the Word and the Messiah, the best attempt are little more than stumbling around in the dark, making incredible, but wrong guesses.

At Passover, we celebrate the wonder of a completely integrated understanding of life/destiny as the origin, the purpose and the final conclusion of life is discussed.

Through the medium of polygamous sexual love, the Song of Songs is a powerful, passionate expression of Messiah's love for us. The book also requires that we also have a powerful, passionate love for Him.

He loves Each of us as if we were the only one who matter to Him and He loves all of us without partiality or favouritism. The book is a powerful love poem or saga with some of the most amazingly intense symbolism in the Bible. Most of it is not hard to understand and the description of Shunamite's beauty is quite eloquent and intense and should help us to understand that the Messiah considers each of us just as beautiful.

We must not confuse the physical beauty of Solomon and his lover with the great spiritual beauty both we and the Messiah possess. There are some very explicit descriptions of intimate, sexual love and rather than being shocked or embarrassed, we need to see that the Messiah loves every part of us and finds us very exciting. He finds no believer boring and He finds no part of us or our lives boring. He wants to intimately explore every part of us and this level of spiritual intimacy is deeper and much more intense than the polygamous sexual love which the Song Describes.

I came to faith 51 years ago as a very confused, broken young man who was struggling with drugs and depression. There were many corners of my heart where great darkness lurked and I knew I had the potential of becoming a very evil person. There were many who had hurt me that I hated and despised. Now that I am a believer, I do not know how I made it through even a single day before I came to faith.

Then something amazing happened. When I gave up and offered myself to G-d, a tiny speck of peaceful love came into my life and the darkness began to recede. I had become a born again new man with everlasting life and the promise of a bright future in the Messiah. Don't get me wrong, I was and am still sinner, but now I am a sinner saved by grace. He never lets me be cornered without always providing a way of escape and when I do blow it and seek for His forgiveness, He forgives me and also cleanses me from all unrighteousness. Forgiveness releases us from our sin, while cleansing/atonement cleanses us and prevents the power of sin from getting foothold in our lives.

I no longer feel the dark hatred I was harbouring in my heart. I forgave everyone who had ever hurt me and am still doing the same today. I was reconciled to my parents and to my siblings and my friends could not believe the amazing change that party animal Mike had undergone. Many did not think it would last long, but the love and joy of my Messiah is just as strong and intense in my 51st year of faith as it was the night I gave me heart to the Saviour.

You do not have to have such a radical, intense experience when you come to faith, but there is no one so lost and broken that the Messiah cannot find, redeem and restore. You may have noticed that I am somewhat of an intense person. As a believer my nickname was crazy Christian and there were not many who could keep up with me. You will be glad to know that I have settled down considerably, but the intensity of my passionate love for the Messiah is still there.

I can relate to the intense, passionate love of the shunamite for Solomon because I feel just as wildly in love with my Messiah. How about you? Sexuality is an intense, satisfying expression of affection, but it pales when compared to depth of love and affection which I feel for the Messiah. It is true that some believers grow cold and even abandon their faith, choked and withered, as they let the birds of the enemy eat away at their faith. Never hold anything back from the Messiah. I had millions of questions but the Messiah has answered to the limit of my ability to understand. Let Him always do the same for you.

In a real, symbolic sense each of us and all of us does belong to the celestial harem of the Messiah. The beautiful descriptions of polygamous sexual love are symbolic references to a greater reality. How passionate are letting this reality become in your life. Compared to the heavy weight of glory waiting for each of us in the life to come, even the graphic, intense expressions of sexual love, pale by comparison.

We are not actually going to spend eternity, each taking our turn to have sex with G-d. Our bond with Him far exceeds the sexual bond which exists between a man and a woman or that which exists between a man and many women. It is one of the best descriptions of Messiah's passionate love that is found in the Bible, but it is a symbolic description of great, passionate intimacy and is not meant to be taken literally.

In the Song, as the Shunamite's love for Solomon intensifies, other women also want to become His lovers and there is even a child who has to become a woman before she joins the throng. For us, we want to recruit others so that they can join with us to experience the joyful, passionate love which we have for our Messiah. In a very real sense, we all become the Shunamite and are the focus of Messiah's entire attention and His full passion.

The Bible uses some powerful symbols and some amazing examples to explain many of the spiritual mysteries of G-d and of our walk with Him. This Ode to polygamous sexual love is one of them. In the past some Christians and even some Jews have sexualized their faith and have participated in some pretty perverted sexual practices with each other. This is never what we are called to and this is not what the Song of Songs is encouraging us to do.

Our bond with the Messiah remains a great mystery and our bond with Him when His kingdom comes is an even greater mystery. But His passionate love for us is practical as His provision and protection guide us through this life. And our passionate love for Him that gives Him and His Word complete access to every corner of our hearts and lives is also very practical. We can never reach the bottom of His great love for us and we can never exhaust the grace which He extends to us.

Never let your love for Him to grow cold. Never let your passion diminish. A healthy, biblical spiritual intensity is both where we should be living and how we should be living. Do not take the sexual symbolism of the Song too far and if it embarrasses you to read it, please understand that there is nothing about you which embarrasses the Messiah. He wants to be a part of every part of your life, at every stage of your life, even through all the many ups and downs we will all encounter as we learn to walk the very bumpy straight and narrow.

The bond between a husband and wife is a kind of oneness, but we never become one with G-d. We become one together in the coming Kingdom, under the loving headship of our beloved saviour. G-d remains a changeless plural singularity/composite unity that we will never be part of. In a very real sense, we will remain part of His celestial harem and spend eternity basking in His passionate, intense love for each one of us.

There is an actual reality behind what the Song symbolizes. We need to remain part of this reality in this life, as we look forward to the even greater reality which shall be ours in the life to come. Heaven and our eternal walk with the Messiah will be beautiful and wonderful beyond anyone's ability to adequately describe it. Solomon did a decent job in his description of it a celestial polygamous. I can hardly wait for the real thing to burst forth.

