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| Ha'Azinu | Give Ear | Moses' Legacy |
| Torah: | Deuteronomy 32:1-52 | |
| Haftarah: | 2 Samuel 22:1-51 | |
| Brit Chadashah: | Romans 10:17-11:112; 12:19; 15:9,10 | |

We have come to the end of the annual Torah Reading Cycle. Deuteronomy chapters 32-34 are concluding remarks which bring the story of Moses to an end. He has been with two generations of the people for some forty years and even though he has been very careful to teach the people all that YHVH gave him for them, he knows that there is still a lot of work to be done before the people are ready to abandon the folly of paganism and really embrace the Word which they have received through the ministry of Moses. They are fully aware of how they should live and what will happen to them, both if they obey the Word they have received, and if they rebel against it.

In the previous portion, Moses said that he knew that the people would be even more rebellious to the L-rd after his death than they were during his lifetime (Deut. 31:27). He is not being pessimistic, he is being spiritually realistic. He wants to teach them a song that is both a warning and a confirmation of the love and care which YHVH wants to show to the people. Deut. 32:1-43 is that song. They are ready to enter the land and Moses' final remarks make sure that they know who YHVH is and what is required of them.

I want to discuss some of the highlights of this portion with you, as we move out of the season of soul searching and repentance and get ready to rejoice, before we begin another Torah reading cycle. We need to understand that we have the same potential for blessing and discipline and that the goodness of YHVH does not dry up, even when we are not walking the way we should be. We need to use the example of what the people encountered both as a comfort and as a warning, because YHVH takes us seriously and wants to wean us away from the influence of carnal paganism and not let it negatively impact our lives.

YHVH is both very patient and uncompromising and we need to decide if the coming year will be a journey of guidance and blessing or a year where we will have some difficult spiritual lessons to learn. In the past, I have said that with the L-rd, there is no room for part time believers or for partial believers. If He is not our centre, then we will spin out of control as we let both trials and temptations make our lives a misery. It doesn't have to be that way and it should be our intention to dwell under His protection and His provision for yet another year. His kingdom is coming and when we walk in the light of His Word, we can anticipate this marvellous event and not grow weary, no matter what the coming year brings our way.

Lets look at some of the highlights of this portion.

Moses calls the earth to be a witness to his words (32:1) and he wants them to rain down on the people. Rain comes from the sky, and he is saying his words come from Heaven (32:2). He says both that YHVH is flawless (32:4) and that YHVH is not responsible if the people backslide, because He has done everything to meet all their needs (32:5,6). Taking full responsibility for our own spirituality means that we do not have to make excuses and keep going around in circles. YHVH wants to teach us how to make spiritual progress as we grow in both our faith and in our obedience.

YHVH will carry us on His wings (32:11) and will lead His people into a good land full of all sorts of abundance (32:14, 15). Moses also says that YHVH alone has done all of this and that there was no foreign god with Him (32:12). He says that once Israel has grown fat, without a good reason, they will turn to foreign gods they have not known and who are for them recent arrivals (32:17).

It was YHVH who gave birth to Israel and when they forget Him or abandon Him for idols and false gods, He will hide His face from them (32:20). He will also send against them a foolish people who not even a nation and they will be part of the punishment from YHVH (32:21).

Instead of protecting them and providing for their needs, YHVH's wrath will burn and reach even to the dwelling place of the dead (32:22). He will send hunger, pestilence and wild beasts against the rebels (32:24). On the outside, they will be devoured by the sword and on the inside, they will perish from terror, even the young men and ladies and the breast feeding babies (32:25). YHVH will carry them away like a breath and their memory shall disappear from among mankind (32:26). Moses is warning the people of the horrible consequences which await them if they do not walk with YHVH. It does not have to be this way if the people keep on walking with YHVH and listen to His Word.

If they come to their senses, one shall chase a thousand and two shall chase ten thousand (32:30). If not, it will be them who are running and they shall be treated like Sodom and Gomorrah (32:32). Their grapes shall be poisoned and their vines shall be bitter. Their wine shall be like the venom and cruel poison of snakes (32:33). This is a very graphic description of the wrath of YHVH, which will be as thorough as His blessings were. YHVH doesn't deal in half measures.

He will take pity on His servants and ask them where is the support and the blessing of the false gods they have chosen (32:36-38). They have to realize that YHVH alone is G-d and that He has the ability to bless and the ability to punish (32:39). Also, He lives forever and is not going anywhere. He will take vengeance on His enemies and will devour and punish all those who hate Him (32:40-42). Even though it is a severe warning, it is both poetic and quite descriptive.

He calls the nations to sing the praises of His people because He will take vengeance on those who shed the blood of His servants. He will also make atonement for the land (32:43).

Moses pronounces all these words before all the people as a call for the people to observe and to put into practice all the words which have been spoken to them (32:44-46). It is not a light thing, it is their life (32:47) and it should be our life too. I want to sow the Word of YHVH in the garden of my heart and my life, so it does not become overgrown and choked and need to be weeded. When the people walk with YHVH, He will prolong their days when they enter into the land to possess it.

The portion ends with Moses climbing up Mount Nebo so that he can get a good look at the land which YHVH is going to give to the people. Moses was told that he was going to die on this mountain, just as Aaron died on Mount Hor. Before he dies, he still has some blessings to pronounce over the people, but his ministry is drawing to a close and he is leaving the people fully equipped and fully warned for the next stage of their journey. May we always let YHVH equip us with everything we need for the next stages of our lives.

Sermon: The Discipline of Rejoicing: Phil. 4:4-9

When we walk with our Messiah, we will always have something to rejoice about, no matter what the coming year brings our way. When we look at all the trials and temptations that barged through Paul's life, we may not at first understand what kind of rejoicing we are being called to. As we rejoice our way through Sukkoth, we need to make rejoicing in the Messiah one of the top priorities for our lives.

We always need to remind ourselves that we are Kingdom bound and that our Messiah will never leave us or forsake us (Heb. 13:5). When we are troubled by something, we do not just close our eyes and click our shoes together to make all of our troubles disappear. We look up and rejoice for all the good things the Messiah has in store for us, both in this life and in the one to come.

We need to learn not to worry about anything, but to turn everything over to the Messiah. This is not an easy task, but it is our calling. His Word provides us with all the strategies we need to face the whatever's of this life and we have to learn to see things from a heavenly perspective. This does not mean I have to be happy for any troubles which roar into my life and that I convince myself that this is best of all possible worlds. It does not mean that I ignore problems and do not work to find solutions.

It means that I must never be in a place where I think that this world is all that my life has to offer. We need to constantly remind ourselves that we are citizens of the world to come and that we serve an amazing G-d who is both beautiful beyond description the almighty Creator who holds the entire universe together.

When John was being held prisoner on the Island of Patmos, he was not blinded by his temporary troubles. YHVH sent him great visions so that he could know that, when all was said and done, YHVH was in final control. His Kingdom is unstoppable and the reality of this Heavenly Kingdom, makes the feeble world we are passing through seem less real than a dream, even if our lives may seem like a nightmare.

There will be many enemies and many obstacles that want to destroy us and cause us to live in a constant panic, but being conscious of the coming Kingdom, will give us a peace which is always greater than anything which comes our way. Paul had more than his fair share of troubles and he knew that there were more to come. David spent years hiding from Saul, but he did not focus his attention on his troubles.

He kept his eyes glued to the Good Shepherd and watched as his needs were met, even in the midst of some of the worst storms anyone could wish to encounter. The L-rd is able to make His voice heard above all the noise of this darkening, foolish world (Prov. 1:20-24). We have to learn to hear His wonderful voice above all the dark and foolish noise that comes roaring through our lives.

As we learn to always be rejoicing, His voice becomes easier to hear. To always be rejoicing does not mean that we spend every waking hour singing His praises and praying at the top of our lungs. It means we never lose sight of what eternity has in store for us and that instead of getting discouraged, we are constantly on the look out for the ways of escape He will always provide for us.

We may still experience great pain and loss, but if we learn to always rejoice, we will never be stuck in pain as if it was our permanent destiny. Now I will freely admit that I sometimes struggle with the concept of always rejoicing in every circumstance, because there may be times when we will have to mourn and suffer loss. As the Kingdom approaches we will be in greater spiritual danger and there may come a time when we are imprisoned for our faith, like those believers who suffered under Hitler and Stalin. But where we are should never be who we are or where we will end up for all of eternity.

We can rejoice when we are weeping and are in great sadness, just as we can rejoice when everything is going our way and there is not a cloud in the sky. At times we may spend more time weeping than we do laughing, but we should never waste time worrying or being anxious about anything. We need to commit everything to the L-rd by prayers and supplications and when we do, at least three things will happen.

We will be shown a way of escape, even if it means languishing in a prison for years. And sometimes that way of escape will just be the assurance that G-d is with us as He gives us the strength and the courage to endure. As well, rejoicing helps us to maintain a heavenly perspective and we can sing in prison and not become hypnotized by the pain and the fear we may be dealing with, because we know where we are headed.

When the Romans were crucifying believers, both Jewish and Gentile, it sometimes occurred as a public spectacle in places like the forum in Rome itself. This was both a warning to people not to become believers and an attempt to crush believers and make them abandon their faith, before they were caught and crucified. This method of oppression was not very successful, even though it may have worked on some of the people.

Once, a Roman historian walked around the forum, watching believers dying on their crosses. He was not impressed by their courage or by the fact that they were not screaming out curses to their tormentors or pleading loudly for mercy. The forum in Rome had already seen many brave people face their death, without cowering in fear, even when they knew they were about to die. What was impressive about the believers is that they appeared happy as they suffered and waited for death to come.

Do not misunderstand me, they did not find their pain pleasant and they were not grateful for the agony they knew would eventually kill them. They were happy because the L-rd was with them every step of the way and would take them into His arms forever when they died. Suffering is never pleasant and it is not something which we are required to smile and laugh about. It is not even wrong to cry out in agony as the pain slowly breaks our bodies and takes our lives.

But the Messiah can help us to rise above both what is happening to us and where we are. We need to be reminded that we are on a path to eternal glory, even if we have to pass through fire and be tortured before we get there. Rejoicing means that we turn our anxieties over to the Messiah and refuse to let them turn us away from Him.

If we learn the discipline of surrendering our fears and worries to YHVH, they will never destroy our faith in both the protection and provision of the Messiah. Paul says that the peace of G-d will keep our hearts and minds through any of the valleys we stumble through and any of the storms that try to push our faith off the rock of His Word.

I have heard some people say that you have to be happy about everything that happens in your life and this is not what Paul is attempting to say in our passage this morning. He is saying that the reality of G-d and the coming Kingdom are greater and more real than anything which happens to us. And when we turn our anxiety and pain over to Him, He gives us a peace that surpasses understanding, even if we do not always understand why sometimes bad things happen to good people.

You have often heard me say that the secret things belong to G-d and I would add that we will not always understand why some things happen to us through not fault of our own. The Ukrainians did not do something wrong which G-d is letting the Russians punish them for. Most of the Russian soldiers are not happy about invading the Ukraine and killing innocent people. I do not know why hurricanes are permitted to kill so many people and cause so much destruction. There is probably no answer which we would be happy with, but there is a peace of G-d which passes understanding which will keep our hearts and minds in the Messiah.

Instead of becoming consumed by anxiety or filled with anger and bitterness, Paul is showing us a different path to take and it is a double path. We are to rejoice in everything and turn everything over to our Messiah in prayer. We may be hurt deeply and even become profoundly sad, but over and above what is happening to us, there is a deeper reality which can sustain us until it is our turn to sleep in the dust. We are heaven bound, with a Saviour who wants to walk with us every step of our journey through this life.

His peace surpasses understanding because we know we can always trust our true Parent. When David Wilkerson was reaching out to the gangs of New York, a violent gang member said that he was going to cut him into pieces. David replied that if he did, every piece of him would say that he loved the gang member. He did not put it into any of his book, but he did get stabbed more than once. But he knew that until it was his turn to sleep in the dust, the peace which passes understanding, would sustain him and give him joy, no matter what he was going through. How about you?

I do not wish for any of you to get sick, get mugged or even murdered. I do not wish for any of you to be betrayed by your friends and your family. I do not wish for any of you to lose your job and not be able to feed your family. In fact, no one can be absolutely certain about what the Messiah will allow to come their way. I constantly pray blessings over all of you and over your children, but more than that, I pray that you surrender all of your fear and anxiety to YHVH and always be rejoicing in Him. This is how He will give you His peace which passes understanding and you shall become more than a conqueror no matter what you have to face.

But this is not the end of the story. There is much beauty in our world and in the skies above us and we should rejoice in the wonder of all YHVH has made. There is another everything which Paul introduces and I want to end of time together with a discussion of it. We are not to worry about anything. We are to always be rejoicing. We need to turn everything over to the Messiah as we let His peace sustain us, even when we do not understand the reason why some things are happening to us. This is an amazing task which we are fully equipped to handle because the Messiah will walk every step of the way with us. It may take us time to work through some things as we are learning to surrender them to YHVH in prayer, but we are heaven bound pilgrims whom He will never abandon nor forsake. Great things are coming our way, either in this life or in the one that is to come – or in both.

We are to concentrate on all that is true, even if we do not fully understand it. We are also called to speak the truth and it becomes easier to do if we are focused on all that is true. We are also called to focus on everything which is honourable and not be overwhelmed by the dishonour and the lies which our fading world is filling up with. I am not often happy with the election results we are forced to live with, but I will never let any of it separate me from my honour. We are held to a different and a higher standard and have a different destiny than the one which our feeble, frail world has to offer to us. What are you focusing on?

Paul goes on to say that we should also be focused on that which is righteous and by application, we should always be practising righteousness in all of our dealing with each other and with our world. We want to be those who are working at healing the woes of our world and not become those who working for its destruction.

I am also troubled that there is so much impurity in our world, but that is not what we are called to focus on. Many people I encounter use impure speech and want to talk about things which are shameful. We should not be afraid to speak out against all and any forms of impurity, but we should never allow impurity to become our focus.

Paul moves on to encourage us to focus on everything that is pleasing and worthy of our affection. He will make sure that we are able to do this, even in the darkest corners of our world. He will not allow everything which is nice to be taken from our lives. Our people were tortured, starved and killed in the ghettos and prison camp. When it was possible, our people rose up in rebellion against those who were tormenting us. But even in the pain and suffering of the camps, our people found friendship and comfort. They could kill our bodies, but our souls belonged to someone else and were off limits. Make sure you are focusing on that which is pleasing and worthy of affection in your life.

Next, Paul tells us that part of rejoicing and letting His peace keep our hearts and minds in the Messiah, involves also focusing on everything which is commendable and worthy of our approval. It is a good thing to express approval when people we know say and do commendable things. Children always learn better when they are encouraged and appreciated than when they are criticized and ignored. What commendable things and commendable people in your life are you focusing on?

We should also be focusing on all that is virtuous and worthy of praise. There is a degree of overlap in Paul's descriptions of what we should be focusing on, but if we want His peace to sustain us even beyond our ability to understand, we have to focus on heavenly things and on things in this life which are worthy of our attention. Our world is sinking more and more into the darkness of immorality, but this tragedy should not be our principle focus.

We should focus on all that we have learned and received as we walk with the Messiah. We should also focus on all that we have seen and heard as we walk with YHVH and dive into His Word. As we come to the season of Sukkoth we want to let the Messiah help us learn more and more about the discipline of rejoicing. When we do rejoice and when we learn to surrender our anxieties in prayer to YHVH, then our hearts and lives have space both for the peace of G-d and also for the G-d of peace. When we surrender our anxieties to Him, He gives us His peace. When we learn to focus on the things which matter to YHVH and His Messiah, we are ready to walk with the G-d of peace. I want both the peace of G-d and the G-d of peace to be active in my life. Shabbat shalom, campers and Shavua Tov.