

Vayakhel/Pekudei**And He Assembled/Accountings of****Ready to Move On****Torah:** Exodus 35:1-38:20/38:21-40:38**Haftarah:** Ezekiel 36:16-38**Brit Chadashah:** Heb. 9:1-11/8:1-12**Shabbat Parah:** Numbers 19:1-22**chazak, chazak, v'Nitchazek**(p. 101, 103) Psalm 61 **45** Jewish Hero: Oholiab, the skilled craftsman

Today we come to the end of the second book of the Torah. It is a double reading and it deals with the final preparations for the Presence to come down the mountain and dwell in the midst of the people in the newly constructed Ark, which sat behind the veil, within the tabernacle. It is a watershed moment because it occurs after the shameful episode of the golden calf and just before the Children of Israel celebrate their first Passover in the wilderness.

They have spent nearly a year camped around the holy mountain where all the contents of the Book of Leviticus (27:34) and the first 9 chapters of the Book of Numbers were given. On the first of Nisan in the second year since they left Egypt, the tabernacle was put up (40:17) and the glory filled the tent to the point that not even Moses could enter (40:35) and a pattern was established which was to last throughout their wilderness wanderings.

As long as the cloud was upon the tabernacle, they stayed put. Whenever the cloud lifted, they formed up behind it and followed it until it stopped. After the tabernacle was set up and the cloud came to hover over it, nearly the first thing they did was to celebrate their first Passover in the wilderness. On the 21st day of the second month, the cloud lifted and they made their first journey from the mountain to the wilderness of Paran (Num. 10:11-13). It was their trial run and they developed a blessing which is still used today when we take the Torah out of the ark and when we put it back in:

Arise oh L-RD and let Your enemies be scattered and let those who hate You
flee from before Your face.

Return oh L-rd to the myriads of the thousands of Israel.

At their first camping place from the mountain, when the mixed multitude and the children of Israel together grumbled about the manna and asked for meat, two things happened. The Spirit of G-d descended upon the 70 elders (the second Pentecost in the wilderness) and the people were covered with meat about a meter high and stretching for a day's journey all around the camp and the least of them gathered 80 bushels of birds (a bushel was about the maximum a donkey could be loaded with) or just over 2,000 kilos.

Those who lusted after meat were struck with a plague and were buried (along with the rotten meat) and they made their second and third journeys and arrived at the intended launching place for their conquest of the Holy Land.

I see three lessons from this as we celebrate our midway point in this year's reading of the Torah. First, the people were equipped with everything they needed and they received all the

guidance they needed, so that the only uncertainty they encountered after they left their year's training was self-generated. They were not uncertain about the L-RD, they were uncertain about themselves in the L-RD - they were uncertain about their willingness to trust and obey and we face the same challenge today.

The second lesson is that despite their rebellions and their detours, the presence of the L-RD still hovered over the Ark - G-d is not scared away by our folly and His presence still hovers over His Word. Moses put the two tablets of the Law into the Ark and the powerful presence of the L-RD filled the holy place.

If His presence is not in our lives and if our teeth are filled with whatever equivalent to lusting after meat which they had, it just means that we are depriving ourselves of the presence, not because it goes away or diminishes, but because we have moved away from it in our lives.

The Bible is a stubborn book which wants to change us and renew us but which we cannot change or diminish. Our spiritual health and progress depends on how willing we are not to fill our teeth with lusting and complaining (and the drivel of whatever side tracks the enemy is trying to distract us with) and receive His Word and truly live on every Word which comes out of His mouth.

The third lesson comes from Shabbat Parah and the prophetic portion and the New Testament portions. It involves His ability to not just forgive us when we return to Him, but also to cleanse us, restore us to fellowship with G-d and renew our faithful obedience to Him through His Word.

This is so that whatever folly trips us up is removed and cancelled and we are once again (repeatedly) able to get out of the gutter, wash off its defilement, climb back on to the straight and narrow and get on with the only business that is worthy of a believer's attention in this life: to serve G-d (through our blessed Messiah) and to keep the commandments, which is the whole duty of man.

We will always be equipped with everything we need to walk with Him and He will not call us to move on until we are fully ready. In learning the difficult but essential lesson of faithful obedience to His Word, His presence does not diminish or hide, it continues to hover over His Word and will stand like a beacon to lead us back to walking with Him in the midst of all the folly and darkness of this spiritually floundering world.

When we fall and spend some unfortunate ditch wallowing time, He is able to do more than just lift us out of the ditch. He is also able to forgive and wash us as clean as if it never happened so we can learn to defeat the power of sin in our lives and get on with the only real reason for living.

This reason is walking on the straight and narrow path through all the valleys of the shadow of death we have to navigate in this life until we are at our Father's Home in Glory - or until His Kingdom is established and blasts away and overcomes the colossal futility of this life and gently leads us to our peaceful home in eternity.

The prophetic portion says that He will wash us with water, remove from us our heart of stone and give us a new heart which will make it possible for us to follow His ordinances and

observe and practice His Laws.

The New Testament portion says that our L-rd has taken up residence in the Heavenly Tabernacle (of which the earthly one was but a model) and is able to guide us, provide for us and to cleanse us wherever we are and with whatever we are going through, just as surely and powerfully as the hovering presence guided Israel from the wilderness mountain to the Promised Land. And this He will do daily and constantly because His presence still hovers over His Word and empowers those who walk according to its teachings with faithful obedience and steadfastness.

Faithful obedience and steadfastness are still our duty and our calling just as surely as protection, provision and cleansing remain how He will work in our lives, daily and constantly until our pilgrimage is over. In today's double Torah portion the people were finally ready to move on. In the Shabbat Parah portion, they were also provided with a cleansing mechanism (atonement water) to overcome all and any defilement in their lives.

In the prophetic portion this water sets us free from a stony heart and gives us both the desire and the ability to return to walking in faithful obedience AND will keep on bringing us back to the place of faithful obedience until we are willing to steadfastly embrace it with even greater drive and passion than we had when we ran away from it (and our mouths were filled with the rotting quail of this life).

The New Testament portion says that this kind and depth of spirituality is available to all mankind everywhere because of the victory which our Messiah won and which He wants to teach us to experience in our own lives, time and time again until we get it right and until the Kingdom comes.

Are we ready to move on? John and Jennifer are ready to move on. Our community has no other calling and there is no other empowering or equipping worthy of our attention in this life. We were redeemed to walk in faith in His promises and in obedience to the stipulations of His Word. All the rest don't make no never mind.

Are we ready for the blessing ritual for the end of the Book of Exodus?

Join me:

Chazak, Chazak, v'Nitchazek

I will not keep you long this morning as we prepare to help John and Jennifer celebrate their wedding amidst cries of joy and acclamation. But I do want to read a passage in the New Testament which stipulates that aggressive redemptive love wants to motivate us to allow Him to thoroughly cleanse the house of our heart whenever it becomes cluttered with the works of the flesh and not with the fruit of His Spirit in our lives:

Let all bitterness, all animosity, all wrath, all wrangling (brawling), all slander and every kind of malice disappear from the midst of you. Be good to one another, compassionate (tender hearted), forgiving each other reciprocally, just as G-d has forgiven you in the Messiah. (Eph. 4:31, 32)

From a considered reading of the Scriptures, we discover that at various times and in various ways, we will all drive each other crazy, get mad at each other and say and do hurtful things - and we may even speak evil of one another and slip into wrangling and brawling and go through periods where our hearts will fill with malice towards each other.

It is how we deal with this interpersonal conflict which will determine whether or not it will cause us to self-destruct and crumble into a life filled with unfortunate grudges and angry habits that mean we do not play well with others. Why? Because so many believers have done us so much wrong that we feel entitled and fully justified in withdrawing from such troublemakers rather than making the effort to make things right. So we grumble and gossip and justify cherishing our rage and hurt, rather than letting it go and embracing the forgiveness which hunted us down, so we could repeatedly extend it to each other in the L-rd.

There is a spiritual trap we need to learn to avoid falling into - the grumpy pouting where we stumble and grumble endlessly from failed relationship to lost friendship. And this is simply because we have not yet learned the practice of aggressive redemptive love which can set us free from this lonely life of keeping extensive accounts of all the wrong people keep on dumping on us. Instead, we need to be learning the only way out of this quagmire (carnal swamp of endless vendettas). I do not want to end my days chewing over the stale bits of anger and rage while love and forgiveness are waiting to heal me and set me free from myself and from the hatred and rage which I have so wrongly embraced.

Sure I want G-d to forgive me, but surely He knows how horrible people have been to me and until they admit it and come crawling back to me and make things right, I am going to refuse to forgive them and G-d will understand. No, He will not understand, He will do something infinitely worse - He will cease forgiving us whenever we cease forgiving each other.

The spiritual freedom He wants to teach us to embrace is based on three defensive spiritual strategies: being good (even when others are not good to us), being compassionate (even when others show none to us) and forgiving each other (whether it is our fault or theirs) - why (and here is the clincher)? Just as G-d has forgiven us in the Messiah, so we have to forgive each other - nothing less is acceptable before our King who so kindly and thoroughly forgives us.

Now the forgiveness of G-d sets me free from my sin and shame, the power of death and the enemy which is rampant in our darkening world. Learning to forgive as I have been forgiven sets us free from the sin and shame which wants to ravage us - and from the power of death and sin and the enemy in our midst.

Two more passages come to mind in this brief meditation:

I Tim. 5:22 and 2 Tim. 2:24-26.

There is a need for spiritual discipline and we have to have firm and well-articulated reconciliation processes in place in our midst, but we need to remember their sole purpose will never be punitive. They will exist to exclude those who refuse to forgive as well as those who refuse to be forgiven. The practice of sin is horrible and is sadly contagious, but the cure is twofold, never less and never more: we have to be forgiven and we have to forgive, seven times seventy times a day, 365 days a year and at every stage of our lives and with all the

people in our lives. For in a very real sense this is the whole duty of believers towards believers and even towards those we have to exclude from our midst.

Our primary mutual spiritual duty is to forgive each other with as much force and thoroughness as we have received forgiveness. We have to let this aggressive redemptive love set us free from the biggest and most subtle spiritual danger we will ever face - the refusal to forgive and work things out with each other, just as He works things out with us.

The choice is ours as neither He nor His Word will budge. We can be set free thoroughly or we can be thoroughly entangled. We will all repeatedly need to both exercise and receive this grace and we have to be just as good at receiving it as we are at extending it. It is our front line spiritual duty among other believers and can be our greatest testimony to a world full of conflict and strife which wants to set up shop in our midst. It can also be the greatest and saddest breach of our credibility, when we refuse to forgive and yet still require the L-rd to forgive.

At B'nai Chayim, this kind of conflict and strife is neither wanted nor welcome. We want to remain recipients and practitioners of aggressive redemptive love so that the house where we live together is thoroughly and regularly cleansed by our goodness and our compassion and by our refusal to stay angry or be filled with animosity, slander or brawling.

May His forgiveness fill us with forgiveness so we can live and be controlled by His aggressive redemptive cleansing love in our midst, repeatedly and steadfastly.

Let's pray.