

20 Shevat, 5776 (30/1/16) **The Essence of Acceptable Spirituality** J. M. Terrett

| Yitro           | Jethro (Abundance) | Essential Goals and Objectives              |
|-----------------|--------------------|---|
| Torah:          | Exodus 18:1-20:26  | authentic (changeless) holiness defined     |
| Haftarah:       | Isaiah 6:1-7:6     | the temple touches the edge of His holiness |
| Brit Chadashah: | Matt. 5:8-20       | fulfilment accomplishes His purposes        |

This week's Torah portion outlines the double objective of our G-d. He wants us to be an organized, discerning community whose knowledge of the supernatural translates into reflecting the holiness of G-d, spiritually and morally, because these two functions remain inseparable and integrated. G-d does not want us to misunderstand who He is as we learn to rest in His completeness. G-d wants us to acknowledge His image in each other, as firmly and fully as we acknowledge Him. He is the Creator, separate from His creation, who requires spiritual devotion to Him and moral devotion to each other.

Walking with the King of Eternity is not a complicated undertaking and **it involves three levels of activity: towards Him, towards the generations and towards each other.** None of the activities can be isolated from the others and this integrated approach to spirituality is powerful in its simplicity and as we celebrate Yitro (abundance), I want to briefly examine each of these three aspects of authentic spirituality, so that our world is shaken free from this life and is ready to embrace the power of the world which is to come.

Jethro got the camp organized around a generational conversation where people learned that every aspect of their lives needed to come under the scrutiny of their faithful obedience to His Word. The whole point of our lives is to figure out how to apply His word into every situation we encounter on our way from conception to the grave because no matter what we encounter, be it ever so good or ever so horrible, is only fodder which we need to offer back to Him so that no area of our lives is allowed to function outside of our faith and our obedience.

First of all, there are four aspects of who He is that we must acknowledge or our devotion is void and futile. There is only one G-d, not a collection of deities which affect different areas of our lives. There is no god of the heavens who is different from the god of the seas and there is no god of the harvest or of battle or of fertility. There is only one G-d, the creator of all things who holds all things together by the power of His Word and His primary function in our lives is deliverance from the power of the darkness of this age, of the Egypt of this world.

There are two categories of spiritual abuse which must be avoided if we are to remain in fellowship and be connected to the one G-d. We cannot confuse the Creator with any aspect of His creation and we are forbidden from taking His name in vain as if He were some kind of servant or application that we could access to enrich our lives as if He were our spiritual sugar daddy, ready to do our bidding like some kind of inanimate force we plugged in to.

Neither the sun, nor the moon, nor the infinite expanse of creation, equal or even approximate the wonder and power of our Creator. If ever we confuse the Painter with the painting, our knowledge of the King will be flawed and finite. Our view of the world needs to be theomorphic and not anthropomorphic. We need to see ourselves and the universe as

reflections of His singular unified glory and not take any aspect of our selves or of creation and try to impose it on the infinity of G-d. Our G-d needs to be bigger than ourselves and bigger than our world (our problems, our hopes, our dreams). He is a definite person, not an impersonal force. We should never try and limit Him by making images which approximate that which is infinite and limitless.

Also, He is above being manipulated and should never be used as a means to accomplish all or any personal objectives. Taking His name in vain means trying to use His influence to make our lives somehow better or to give us the edge over our competitors as if we were the lord and He were the servant. It does not refer to vulgar language, it refers to the vulgar use of our faith like magic where He is reduced to a force or an appendage we can control or manipulate like a lucky charm as part of the plan instead of the object of all plans. Our lives need to be all about trusting Him and applying His Word to our lives in total submission and obedience and not about discovering our private source of personal power. Our faith does not turn us into super heroes, it is based on a submission to the Eternal G-d whose purposes are so far above our little lives that we need to live in constant awe of Him and not try to get the best deal from Him.

All of this culminates in what needs to be our regular response to His completeness and that involves the Sabbath. We serve a complete, whole G-d who has finished creation and we need to rest in His completeness and in His infinite power. Rest is an acknowledgement of His perfect, whole, finished and complete divinity. Not only will He deliver us from whatever Egypt's come our way, He will bring us to a place of resting in Him so that our lives reflect His glory and testify to His power and wonder. Learning to rest in Him is one of the most difficult, but most essential spiritual disciplines we need to embrace.

Once we have settled who He is and what He is like, we can move on to acknowledging a reality which allows us to see that we are only a part of all that He is doing in this world – we have to cherish and respect the generations. He has already warned us about His disciplinary intervention (third and fourth generation) and His blessing imperative (to a thousand generations) so we need to honour those who have passed on Adam's blood to us.

The worst thing about parents is that most of us end being parents and our temperaments and our life potential is often defined or limited by the ones who brought us into this life. David went from being a singing shepherd to a victorious king, but he failed to inspire the same level of dedication which defined who he became as a person. Parents give us life, just as we will pass on life to our children and it is this passing on of life we honour.

Our parents may be wonderful people or strange people, but as long as we honour the life they gave us, we will pass on honour and not abuse or anger or dysfunction. We are all pilgrims on the same journey from conception to the grave and beyond.

The final section of our spiritual bill of rights deals with how we should relate to each other, once we have figured out who G-d is and have learned to honour the life which was given to us. As a matter of fact, any deficiency in how we live our lives can be traced to a deficiency in one or more of the three categories which the ten words outline. This last section should be seen as a double therefore which acknowledges the infinity of G-d and the wonder of the life which He has allowed us to experience.

These five imperatives are inescapable features of authentic spirituality and a violation of any of them is equivalent to a violation of all ten. They are a package deal, not a buffet from which we can pick and choose. They describe an integrated approach to human relations which our Messiah summed up by using a passage from Leviticus which calls us to love your neighbour as yourself.

We were born as part of a committee decision and the life we received is sacred, even if it only has a short shelf-life. G-d smote the first born of Egypt and called upon His people to conquer the land of Canaan, so this commandment does not mean that life should never be ended prematurely. It means that life from conception to the grave is sacred and this sacredness is first expressed by forbidding murder. As life is a gift from G-d and as all life eventually returns to G-d, it is only G-d who can decree the end of a life, or sometimes require that we protect defenceless life by ending the life of those who would attempt to wrongly take ours or those in our community we should protect.

Murder involves the illegitimate ending of a life which does not acknowledge the sacredness of this gift which we have received to honour and to cherish. However, not only is life sacred, but the means by which this life is conceived is also sacred. Sexuality always contains the potential of transmitting life and should only be expressed between a husband and a wife. Adultery attempts to enjoy the pleasure of sex outside of the responsibility in which it should only be expressed. We live in a society which says that sexual pleasure is a sacred right that is only limited by the nebulous concept of consent.

Outside of marriage, sex becomes an addictive pleasure and a form of physical idolatry, in the same category as obesity and drunkenness. G-d ordained many things in life for our pleasure, but they have to be experienced within the boundaries which He established. They are never intended to limit our pleasure, but to help us focus on intended purposes so that the right category of passions drives our lives, and not those which will cause us to self-destruct.

We can never own anything permanently and are always at best only temporary stewards of the things we acquire and use, so we need to see ownership as negotiated, free from theft or violence or even fraud. Sadly, the same gold which the Pharaohs acquired by violence and tribute is still being traded back and forth, sometimes through valid commerce, and too often through violence and theft. You can acquire something by discovery, by natural increase or by commerce, but whenever you confuse temporary stewardship and divine ownership, instead of being blessed by the L-rd of all, you will try and get all you can, even though you can never keep it for very long.

Lying is a complicated sin, but is best understood from the Scriptures as either portraying that which is false as if it were true or not speaking that which is true when it should be spoken or defended. I like the term false witness, because a witness is someone who tells what they saw or did or saw someone else do or say. A false witness falsifies what should be a valid testimony. This is not referring to creative fiction and parables, but to the intentional altering of what we know is true for whatever reason we may falsely assume we have the right to do.

Sometimes, we need to hold our peace and not say things which it is not our place to share, because in the final analysis, gossip is just a form of lying, because we are telling the truth under false pretences. If we are not sure, we need to say so and before we pass on what we have heard, we need first to be sure that we have validated our source and next determine

that passing on this information is something we have a valid right to do. Bearing false witness can involve telling the truth selectively or maliciously or even making accusations which offend or harm the people we are talking about. Please understand where I am coming from when I include various forms of conspiracy theory and racism in this category.

We need to be very careful not only about what we say, but also about how we say it or how we abstain from sharing when it is not our place to do so.

The last of these five principles of positive human relations involves the green monster who destroys our ability to enjoy what we have and holds out the carrot of what others possess as the only source of satisfaction which we shall never attain. Covetousness and envy are similar problems and if you have to have what you do not have in order to be happy, you can never be happy with what you have.

This does not mean that we should not desire to acquire bigger and better things; it speaks to our motivation and to the sin of materialism. The world is full of great works of art and many wealthy people have built up incredible collections of precious things. However, since we can never possess anything for any longer period of time than the brief span of our lives, we should never strive to acquire that which others possess as if possession was the only way to appreciate and enjoy the good things of this life.

I have seen pictures of some of the great works of art and I have heard some of the world's best music and even tasted some of the world's best food, but I am glad that I do not live in a golden palace I had to spend my life's energy protecting and cleaning and repairing. I am not looking for the perfect vacation, the fanciest car or the best threads as I strive for a designer body in order to provoke envy in those who are materially less fortunate. Paul said godliness with contentment is of great gain.

I want to use my possessions to express my faith and obedience, because it all finally belongs to Him and life is not a competition where we try and keep up with whatever Jones threaten to have more and better things than we have in our possession.

Instead of aiming to boost our GNP or GDP as the primary measures of a good life, we need to pursue happiness and contentment because how we possess things will always be more important than how much we possess.

Three categories of interaction define the will of G-d for all mankind throughout the ages. We first need to understand who G-d is and avoid trying to manipulate Him or use Him as our edge or our ace in hole. We need to see ourselves as the children of father Adam and mother Eve and pass on life with respect and honour. In a very real sense, how we relate to each other is as important as how we relate to G-d and to our families, because acceptable spirituality will always be integrated where each of the ten represents an area of our lives which we need to focus on as we express our faith and our obedience so that no part of our lives has any darkness lurking in its shadows.

Moses' father-in-law showed him how our lives need to be a discussion where we determine (judge) how to apply His Word into every area of our lives. After the giving of these ten principles, Moses was to receive an entire section of situation specific jurisprudence so that we can see our lives through the lens of the Ten and measure what is really important by that

which is really important.

Judaism has amassed some 20,000 commandments and much of what is practised in the various segments of Christianity functions with the same level and kind of legalism which misses the whole point of the ten. They are indivisible and define the only kind of spirituality which our L-rd and Creator finds acceptable.

The mountain shook and the people quivered, not just because of the spectacle of the noise and the light, but also because of the aggressive simplicity to which they were being called. G-d did not just want part of their lives. He wanted to be their lives through His Word and this is still the unavoidable thrust of the entire New Testament. Our G-d delivered our people from Egypt to become His servants and none of His commandments are grievous or unreasonable.

Our Messiah delivers us from the Egypt of this world so that we can also be His bond servants so that all we are and all that we do and all that we have and everywhere that we go will reflect the matchless wonder of His love and His grace. When we take His Word and His commandments and apply them scrupulously to our lives, we find true happiness and satisfaction and wherever we wander becomes a version of the Promised Land and gives us a taste of the garden from which our ancestors were excluded and towards which we are walking, generation by generation, to the Jew first and also to the gentile.

They are a source of great abundance – yitro gadol. Is your life full of His abundance? How great is that abundance? The way of the L-rd is light, salt and great love and forgiveness, no matter where we are and no matter how much we have – and it will enrich all that we do with the only flavour which matters – an eternity in His love.

Shabbat Shalom. Patience, mishpocah, Purim and Pesach are just around the corner!