

Vayera

And I Appeared

When Thing Begin to Heat Up

Torah: Exodus 6:2-9:35. This is the fourteenth portion for the year and deals with the first seven of the ten plagues which came upon Egypt because of the hardness of Pharaoh's heart in refusing to let the people of Israel go free and leave the land. The plagues shift from terrestrial plagues (1-6) and celestial plagues (7-10). Pharaoh was being shown who is really boss and the people witness the war of the gods, where YHVH defeats all the resistance Pharaoh can throw at them, month by month for a whole year.

Haftarah: Ezek 28:25-29:21. This portion deals with the judgment of G-d against Egypt during the time when our people were taken captive to Babylon. It speaks of an Egyptian captivity at the hands of Babylon where the remnant of Egypt which is allowed to return to their land will no longer be a powerful nation.

Brit Chadashah: Rev. 16:1-21. This chapter deals with the seven plagues of G-d which will be exercised upon the earth as part of the scenario leading up to the return of the Messiah. It was written at a time when Rome dominated the known world and gives a picture of the destruction of the kingdoms of the world which stand in opposition to the Kingdom of G-d through His Messiah.

Meditation: As believers, we need to acknowledge the final sovereignty of G-d, both over the events of our personal lives and over the eventual course of events in the world around us. There is a spiritual warfare being waged between the power of the coming Kingdom and the forces of this darkening world. Just as the events in Egypt were lining up to a final confrontation between the gods of Egypt and the only true G-d, so events in our world are lining up for a final confrontation between the false gods of our world and the only true G-d.

Sometimes things have to get worse before they can get better and as we see our world move towards one global system which is turning its back on faith in a supernatural G-d, we need to understand that this is not a defeat either for us or for our faith.

Pharaoh fought hard until all of his false gods were defeated and there was no other alternative than to let the people go. We live in a world where the god of this world is fighting as hard as he can to extinguish the light and cover the globe with a universal darkness one more time.

The true light of G-d cannot be extinguished because it shines from one end of the cosmos to the other and if people are blind and turn away from it, they will see their false gods defeated just as firmly and finally as the gods of Egypt were. As things continue to heat up, we have to determine to stay in the light and not be dragged into the darkness, no matter how attractive the enemy makes it sound.

Our faith in the G-d of the Bible is the shelter we need to maintain in our darkening world. We need to be able to dialogue with those who do not share our faith so that they may escape out of the darkness of this present age. The kingdom of G-d is an everlasting kingdom which will one day break forth and wash away all the false arguments and twisted myths which our world continues to formulate. The opposition of Pharaoh was a futile attempt

to block the purposes of G-d, both for Israel and for all the nations and generations of mankind. May we never be intimidated or hoodwinked by our world's futile opposition to the everlasting kingdom of our blessed Messiah, whether this opposition is moral (immoral) or concerns the truth of the Bible and tries to undermine our faith.

The G-d of eternity is in charge of our world and even as things continue to heat up, we need to make sure that we live our lives as members of the winning side, because just as our people were delivered from slavery in the land of Egypt, we will also be delivered from slavery to the Egypt of the world, among whom we dwell as strangers and pilgrims and not as permanent residents. Things are heating up, which side are you living for? which side are you cheering for?

Siddur reader: Julie (page 169) **Ps. 46.** Jewish hero: Oholiab. Torah carrier: Jack. L-rd's Table

Sermon: What Does Membership Mean For us?

Passage: ***If therefore you are resurrected with the Messiah, seek for those things which are on high, where the Messiah is seated at the right hand of G-d. Attach yourself to things which are on high and not to those things which are on the earth. For you are dead and your life is hidden with the Messiah in G-d. When the Messiah, who is your life shall appear. You shall also appear with Him in glory.*** (Col. 3:1-4)

As we pass the half way point in our frigid Canadian winter, I would like to give you a series of messages about the meaning of membership in a Messianic Jewish context. We are a very unique ministry with a very clearly defined mandate to be a light to both the Jewish community and to the Gentile community. There are elements of who we are which appear strange to our Jewish brethren, because we worship in a synagogue and follow a Torah based lifestyle. There are things which appear strange to our Gentile brethren for precisely the same reason. If we are believers in the Messiah from Nazareth, why do we continue to live a Jewish lifestyle?

A lot of what we do is explaining that the Gospel is the power of G-d for salvation, to the Jew first and also for the Gentile. You see we belong to the universal body of our Messiah, which is composed of both Jewish and Gentile believers and the context we choose to function in is Jewish, and which welcomes both Jews and Gentiles to explore the Jewishness of our faith with us.

Part of this identity which we maintain, involves becoming a member of the community and using our resources to both help the community function and also to be helped by the community to function.

In more traditional synagogues, membership means paying an annual fee during the High Holy Days in the fall, whether or not the members show up during the rest of the year, except for other special occasions like weddings, Bar Mitzvahs and funerals. This annual fee is anywhere from as much as \$600 a person and as much as \$2,000 for a family. It is referred to as paying for your seat for the festivals and many who pay this fee do not feel the need to be committed to many of the other features of the spiritual community they are becoming a member of.

This is not how it works among us. First of all, we believe the Scriptures teach regular tithing, rather than calling for an annual fee which is not based on our annual income. As I take you through this series, we will examine many of the features which the Bible teaches about our membership in the body of our Messiah, so that we understand what it means to express our permanent membership in the eternal body of our L-rd in our local setting.

Today I want to talk to you about four characteristics of the kind of membership which we believe the Scriptures are calling us to establish and to maintain. The first of these involves our primary corporate spiritual identification as believers. You see, we live in a society where people move around a lot and where family connections do not mean as much as they used to. People change careers, and even move to other countries and this has a spiritual impact on how people relate to their local spiritual communities.

It is sometimes called the circulation of the saints, where believers move around between local congregations, perhaps looking for the place where they best fit in. This is not a problem unless believers make this constantly shifting between communities a permanent part of their spirituality.

Identification means we understand that when we come to faith, we become permanent members of the eternal body of the Messiah and that we express this membership by becoming part of a local spiritual community. Rather than saying that we should become a permanent member of any particular community, let me say it this way – unless we become a permanent member of a local community, we are not adequately expressing a very important feature of our permanent membership in the eternal body of our Messiah.

Being a permanently floating believer who is always between local communities fosters a lack of stability that prevents us from sending down the community roots which will sustain us through the ups and downs we encounter in our pilgrimage through this life. This does not mean our local community is perfect and that all others are inferior. It does mean that we understand that finding our place in a local body of believers is part of the will of G-d for us as we express our faith in the Messiah and in His coming kingdom.

Related to this concept of identification is the idea of commitment, which involves settling down and becoming involved in community spirituality. We are pilgrims from conception to the grave and beyond and just as our commitment to the L-rd is voluntary and permanent, so we need to voluntarily be permanent members of a local spiritual community. Sheep need a flock in order to be safe and healthy in a world full of wolves and wild dogs!

Now there may be times when we have to move for a new job, or to help out family members – and there may even be times where we are moved on from one community to another to help out or to be helped out, but we always need to be committed to a local body of believers with whom we can experience the joy of a dynamic community spirituality.

Part of this spirituality is something which our society struggles with a lot and is not very good at – accountability. We live in a world where we are told to climb every mountain in our quest to find ourselves and do our own thing our way and where we are told that no one has the right to tell us what we should and should not do as we explore this apparently noble endeavour. This is not how things work in the L-rd because accountability means that our

spiritual individuality is developed in harmony with our community involvement.

We will always need more than one perspective to understand ourselves and to find our place in the will of G-d for our lives. Not every idea we have and not every direction we contemplate will be good for us and being part of a community prevents us from falling into a rut where we can only see things our way. As we share with each other and look out for each other, we understand that as family, we should be accountable to each other and not just keep on doing our own thing.

There is a potential downside to this accountability where everybody is intruding on everybody else's lives, but recognizing and protecting personal boundaries does not mean keeping everybody at a distance. It means learning to rely upon those people who are reliable and learning to be reliable people ourselves.

There are any number of influences we can encounter as we endeavour to walk with the L-rd and being a functioning member of a local spiritual community will help us to discern those influences which will help us grow spiritually and those which will damage or undermine our spirituality. Along with this accountability comes another feature of community membership which is one of the joys of walking with the L-rd – intimacy.

It is true that all of us have clay feet and for every upside there is also a downside. It has also been said that as we really get to know people, we will grow tired of them and wish they would leave us alone and go away. True intimacy as it is described in the Bible helps us work out issues between us so that we can grow spiritually and not just move around dealing with the same unresolved issues in a variety of different contexts.

I would even go further and say that until you really get to know who a person is and who they are not, you do not really know them and they cannot be an effective support in your life and you cannot be an effective support in their lives. When we pool our talents together as team members who have learned to function as a team, then the better we get to know each other, the better we are able to live together as members of a redemptive local community who are learning to be as committed to one another as we are to the L-rd.

Personality conflicts and misunderstandings will always occur, even in families and it is as we work these out and discover the meaning of resolution that we can begin to experience the kind of intimacy which the Bible describes as the kind of interactions which believers should be experiencing.

Membership means we identify with a local community as part of what it means to identify with our Messiah and His eternal body.

Membership means we understand the need to commit to a local body of people who share our faith who will help us to learn to walk with the L-rd corporately as well as personally.

Membership means we are willing to be accountable to people who know us and that we have learned that spirituality is not just a call to do our own thing our own way. Accountability means we are not stuck in a state of spiritual isolation which would make us easy prey for all the wolves and wild dogs (and pigs and snakes and other dangerous creatures) who are looking to derail us and separate us from a biblical lifestyle in the L-rd.

Membership means we are learning the joy of true spiritual intimacy, where people actually get to know us and where we actually do our homework and learn to work as members of a dynamic spiritual team.

Official membership is not necessary for this to occur and some congregations are afraid that such lists will open them to unwanted scrutiny by an increasingly hostile government. We want to establish a list of members so that we have a stable group of talented people we can rely on to help us get the work of the congregation done as we minister to all of our members, to the Jew first and also to the Gentile and from the cradle to the grave.

Over this series we will be examining the advantages of membership as we see our community grow in both depth and numbers. We will probably still see a lot of coming and going as people check us out and as we check them out, but we are aiming for a stable core of committed believers who identify with our ministry. This group we are building will aim to be accountable to biblical standards as we nourish and encourage biblical intimacy as part of what it means to be healthy and growing spiritually.

We are celebrating the L-rd's Table today as this is the last Sabbath of the Hebrew month of Tevet and the new moon will rise early next week. Our communion is open to all who wish to deal with all and any personal or community issues so that we can walk together in the L-rd and remain salty and full of light, both as individuals and as a community.

Do you know what the Bible teaches about membership in a local community? Come with us as we explore the riches of this feature of spirituality over the next few Sabbaths.

Shabbat Shalom.