

**Metzora** Infected One      Purification: Celebrating Healing

**Torah:** Leviticus 14:1-15:33

**Haftarah:** (Malachi 3:4-24 [4:6])      Passage for Shabbat HaGadol

**Brit Chadashah:** Matt. 23:16-24:2, 30, 31

(Marie p. 139) **Ps. 120**      Jewish Hero: Isaiah      Torah Carrier: Colette

Today, I want to do two things as we celebrate Shabbat HaGadol. First, I want to give you a Torah Meditation on the regular Torah portion and then I want to give you a sermon on the meaning of Shabbat HaGadol.

You remember that there are 54 Torah readings in the annual cycle and twelve times a year these are replaced with special readings for various festivals. To compensate for this, several times in the year, we have a double Torah reading. After today, during the eight days of Passover, there are special readings for the two Shabbats, but today is the last Shabbat before Passover and only the Haftarah or prophetic portion is replaced and it appears that the New Testament reading is also geared to the special Haftarah reading.

So let me deal with the regular Torah portion and then I will use the Haftarah and New Testament portions for my sermon. Leviticus was given as a ritual guide for the Levites, so that they would know how to perform sacrifices and rituals and sometimes these instructions can be quite detailed and even hard to follow. This week's portion deals with the ceremonies of purification when a person (or a house) has a leprous infection and they are healed from it.

A very big part of being holy is to be pure and in a large community special steps had to be taken to minimize the risk of spreading infections. A person with an infection of the skin was called impure and had to live apart from the community until such a time as they recovered from their infection.

The two chapters of our portion deal with the ceremonies involved in celebrating this recovery, whether it is from a full body infection (sometimes called leprosy) or a single location infection (ulcer, weeping wound). There is even a procedure to follow when a house has an outbreak of mold so that the people would not allow infections of any kind to fester and spread among the community.

In chapter fourteen there is a ceremony to celebrate a recovery from a full body infection and it involves two ceremonies and a full body removal of hair so that there would be nowhere for the infection to hide. It had to be deemed an authentic, complete healing before the two ceremonies of celebration were performed.

The first involved two birds and three symbols of healing: cedar wood, crimson thread and hyssop. One of the birds was killed and its blood was collected in an earthen jar, along with the hyssop, the yarn and the wood. Then the living bird was dipped in the jar and the priest sprinkled the one to be purified seven times with the dripping, living bird. It was then released

in the fields. This was a sign that the L-rd had removed the infection and it was completely gone.

Part of this ritual involved shaving all the body hair, washing your clothes and bathing in clean water after which they were inspected by the supervising priest, after a period of seven days quarantine. This was done before the two bird ceremony was performed and once the infected one was declared pure, on the eighth day, a triple sacrifice and a double anointing was performed. The person took two lambs and a sheep, or if they were poor, one lamb and two birds, along with some oil and flour.

The first offering was a guilt offering and for the first anointing, the priest took the blood of the guilt offering and anointed the healed person in three places: the ears, their right thumb and their right big toe. This was the same anointing the priests went through and it meant both that the entire person was healed and that they were totally consecrated to the L-rd who had healed them – they gave all the glory to their Healer.

For the second anointing, the priest took some of the oil in the hollow of his left hand and first sprinkled some of it seven times before the L-rd, as a sign that the healing came from Him and then he did the same triple anointing he had done with the blood, putting the oil on top of the blood. What was left of the oil was poured over the head of the one who was healed to show that full health had been restored.

Then the sacrifice of atonement was offered as a sign that a right relationship with the L-rd was restored and this sacrifice was eaten by the one receiving atonement as a meal of peace, which was the usual procedure for atonement offerings. The guilt offering was given to the priests to eat. The final offering was the burnt offering which included the kneaded flour and the last animal as a sign that the problem was completely dealt with and completely gone.

Once these two ceremonies were performed, the person would no longer be considered impure and was restored to full community participation, fully dedicated to the L-rd. In a real sense they had become a living offering to the L-rd and would live their lives dedicated to the One who had released them from the infection which rendered them impure.

There was also a ceremony to deal with mold in the plaster of a house, which either ended with a two bird ceremony to declare the house cleansed, or in the demolition of the house where the infection was too deep and resistant to be removed.

Chapter fifteen deals with single location outbreaks or sores or bleeding ulcers and once a person was declared by inspection to be healed from this, after seven days of quarantine, they would wash their body and their clothes. They would then take two birds, one for the sacrifice of atonement and the other for the burnt offering.

There was no anointing with blood mixed with cedar wood, crimson thread and hyssop and no double anointing with blood and oil, because it was a localized outbreak and not a full body infection. The same procedure was followed for a woman who was healed from a flow of blood which was not related to menstruation. She went through seven days of quarantine and washed herself and her clothes and also used two birds to be restored to full community participation.

There is also a euphemistic mention of a man who had a (nighttime) emission of semen – he

had to wash himself and his clothes and was unclean until the evening.

The whole point of these ceremonies was to celebrate healing and to separate the people from their impurities and not cause the whole community, which gathered at the tent of meeting, to become infected.

It was never intended to stigmatize sick people, but to celebrate their healing and their restoration to full community participation. It takes a slow, careful reading of the procedures to see that they are celebrations of healing and of cleansing and both the use of quarantine and of hygiene are sound medical practices in a community setting.

The sick person had to be quarantined from the community for the length of their illness, but once they were declared to be healed, there was a party which welcomed them back into full community participation, where they thanked G-d and celebrated what He had done for them.

It gave the community an opportunity to acknowledge G-d's healing power in their midst and also acted as a reminder for people to be alert to their need to deal with both localized infections and full body infections, so that the whole community did not become infected.

These ceremonies were community celebrations which once again acknowledged that G-d was in the business of removing sickness and defilement so that they would remain a holy people and never slip back into the defilement of Egypt from which they were delivered.

It was also a testimony to the L-rd's ability to heal them from all and any subsequent infections and defilement, both as they travelled towards the Promised Land and as they settled into their new home.

He is still able to heal us and purify us and make sure that no defilement of any kind is able to overpower us, either as individuals or as a community, which is what I John 1:9 means: If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

We are called to live lives where forgiveness and cleansing prevent all and any defilement from separating us from the redeeming love of G-d through our blessed Messiah, wherever and however we encounter it on our journey through this life to our Father's Home in Glory.

### **Shabbat HaGadol: Preparing for the day of the L-rd.**

Once our first ancestors fell and were excluded from the garden and once the remnants of the righteous core took refuge in the ark during the flood, the L-rd set in motion His redemptive purposes to bring all the scattered children of Adam and Eve back from the darkness and into His glorious light.

In order to do this, He first had to scatter us into nations and languages and families so that the progress of sin would be slowed. Then He chose one family, one nation and one language to begin to pull all the scattered children of Adam and Eve back into fellowship with Him as He prepares to inaugurate His everlasting Kingdom over all the nations and generations of mankind.

Once the family of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had become a great nation, He delivered us from Egypt and guided us to the Promised Land, which is the original site of the Garden of Eden. Our people have not always been very cooperative and today's prophetic portion mentions both our unfaithfulness and the eventual arrival of the day of the L-rd, when all the redemptive purposes of G-d will finally be fulfilled in our blessed Messiah.

It is a sad reality that the people of G-d have not always walked with the L-rd according to His Word and Malachi has at least three things to say about this sad state of affairs.

First, in Mal. 3:6, He says that He is YHVH who does not change and it is because of His faithfulness that the Children of Jacob have never been totally consumed (nor will we ever be). His faithfulness refuses to bend to our unfaithfulness and His call will always remain for us to return to Him and change our ways. It is this kind of intractable, positive spiritual stubbornness that we are called to embrace so that we remain steadfast, immovable, and always abounding in the work of the L-rd.

When we fall away from this commitment to faith and obedience, we are called to return, because G-d is not going anywhere and until we learn to walk with the L-rd, we are not going to get anywhere that matters. Too many believers are caught in various kinds of wilderness wandering because they have not returned to the double imperative of our walk with the King: faith and obedience (trust and obey).

Secondly, through Malachi, the L-rd mentions our spiritual unfaithfulness with our temporal resources and talks about tithing. There has never been a time when honouring the L-rd with our increase has not been a challenge and too frequently believers come with all kinds of reasons why this kind of practical walking with the L-rd is not practical in their particular situation.

I am not one to harp on one particular issue, like tithing, but whatever issue gets in our way so that we are prevented from walking with the L-rd, becomes critical – because walking with the L-rd is the only acceptable reaction to His love and goodness as we wander through this life on our pilgrimage home to our Father's Home in Glory.

No matter what is going on in our lives, walking with G-d according to His Word remains our singular spiritual mandate and if in anything we wander from this obedience, we are in greater spiritual difficulty than when we face any of the trials and troubles we have to confront along the way. You see, if our walk with the L-rd is intact, then the rest of our lives will catch up, but if our walk with the L-rd begins to falter, then our lives will begin to crumble, even if our trials and troubles go away for a while.

When we learn to make our walk with the L-rd the first and foremost activity of our hearts and lives, then whatever else happens to us, we are doing fine in that which truly matters – which is the message of Malachi. Tithing is often one of the first spiritual disciplines to suffer in our expensive, materialistic society, and it is not about the money, it is more about the ownership of all our resources.

If all that we have and all that we are cease to function under the ownership of G-d, then we have ceased to seek first His Kingdom and His righteousness and all these other things which only have a very limited shelf life will begin to crowd the light of His love and His joy out of our

lives and we will begin to sink back into the darkness out of which we were delivered.

This brings me to my third point, which is the day of the Lord. Our world may seem to be out of control and filled with violence and corruption, but there is coming a day when a final accounting will be given by all mankind, whether they are ready for it or not; whether they like it or not. Passover was a massive confrontation between the spiritual forces of darkness which are still trying to engulf our world and the Kingdom of God – and guess who is going to win?

Just as the gods of Egypt were humbled so that the People of God could be delivered from slavery and oppression, there is coming a day when what was done to Pharaoh will be done to all the kingdoms, nations and generations of mankind. We have an advantage over all those who live in the folly of spiritual darkness in our transient world – we know the end of the story and we know who is really in charge of the eventual direction which our world is moving towards.

Shabbat HaGadol proclaims the coming Kingdom, which is called the day of the Lord in our passage. Passover was both a time of judgement and redemption and this same spiritual reality which overthrew the Kingdom of Egypt will be the final and eventual destiny of all mankind. People will either choose redemption, which is readily accessible in our blessed Messiah, or they will select judgment by walking away from the truth and believing a lie (as they serve any number of false gods and false ideologies).

The passage in Matthew reflects the concerns voiced in Malachi and says something quite sobering. We are guardians of divine truth, but this does not exempt us from the need to walk in faith and obedience and if we change or violate the simple message which was given to us by altering the words of Moses, we come under the same level and kind of judgement as anyone else who also rises up against these unchangeable truths.

The generation of Israel into which our Messiah was born, was riding a high wave of success and influence. Judaism was the fastest growing religion in the ancient world and converts soon outnumbered the native born, sometimes on a scale of three to one. They were called to be a Torah observant community, poised to take the message of the Gospel to the ends of the earth, but disaster struck because they took the eternal changeless Word of God and diluted it with their own ideas and traditions.

We need to remember who is the Redeemer and who are the redeemed. We are redeemed to serve the Redeemer and to fulfil His Word and spread the message of His Kingdom to all the generations and nations of mankind until the Day of the Lord dawns forever. Violations of any part of our Kingdom mandate will spell disaster and the changeless King will work on us until we change and return to the place we have fallen from.

I am always delighted by all the pageantry and symbolism of Passover, but we need to be careful that we do not make it about us and our freedom alone. It was the first major confrontation between the true God of Israel and the false gods of this world. This confrontation is still going on as new forms of pagan folly rise up to challenge the eternal truth of the everlasting God.

Our task in this conflict will always be twofold and I will finish with this. First of all we are called to hold fast to His Word and not to allow our grip of it to be weakened or compromised. The Creator is also the Redeemer and the Redeemer is the coming King and Judge who will hold

all mankind accountable to the standards which will never change.

As the guardians of these standards we need to remain faithful both to the teachings of His Word and to the obedience which this Word requires of its followers. As we walk with Him according to His Word, we are ready for the second part of our task – to be a light to the nations. Our message may not always be well received and at various times in our history it has been attacked and even suppressed.

Nonetheless, we are to hold onto the Word and still proclaim it to those who will listen and even to those who refuse to listen – not ranting and raving and screaming and fighting, but gently and firmly, with respect as we explain the reason of the hope that is within us.

Shabbat HaGadol testifies both to the coming of another Passover celebration and also to the coming of the final confrontation between the forces of light in our Messiah and the forces of darkness in our adversary. The final victory of our blessed Messiah is as certain and as inevitable as the victory of the L-rd over the false gods of Egypt, no matter how hard the forces of darkness try to silence us, to crush us and claim that our message is an outdated, primitive mythology from which we have to be delivered.

We are called to exercise faithful obedience because of His goodness and because of the redemption accomplished both in Egypt and at the cross. May we never stray far from the message of the Day of the L-rd and may we understand that Passover was a turning point, both for our people and for all peoples.

Shabbat HaGadol Shalom!