

22 Nisan, 5776 (30/4/16)

Eighth Day Service: Stability Not Stagnation

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Eighth Day **Intermediate Sabbath** **The Time of G-d's Harvest****Torah:** Deut. 15:19-16:17

Deut. 16:16, 17. Living lives based on His provision and on obedience to His Word. Pilgrimage festivals (a positive, active, festival driven community identity)

Haftarah: Isaiah 10:32-12:6

Is. 11:1-3; 9, 10 – the glory of Messiah's reign. As Israel slides into the captivity scenario, Isaiah comforts them with both the promise of the return and of the future worldwide Messianic kingdom. Just as Israel shall regrow from the root (the survivors), so a root shall spring from Jesse and Messiah shall appear.

Brit Chadashah: John 1:19-35

John 1:29. John recognized the Messiah He was to prepare the way for - the root of Jesse had arrived and the time of G-d's harvest had begun.

(Colette p. 139) Ps. 148 Jewish Hero: John the Baptist Torah carrier: Tom YIZKOR (Candle lighters) | Thess. 4:13-18; Job 19:25, 26; I Corin. 15:51-58 (Kaddish p. 29).

Sermon:

We are in the 50 day countdown period between Passover and Pentecost and as we bid Unleavened Bread (Passover) farewell for another year, we get prepared for the next stage in G-d's Harvest/Festival cycle. When Israel was delivered from Egypt, they ended the first stage of their pilgrimage when they arrived at the waters of Mara and actually set up their first camp and baked their first leavened bread.

They also drank from the bitter waters turned sweet and the effect on them was cathartic – they emptied their bowels of all and any parasites and germs which they might have brought with them out of Egypt and G-d promised them that if they obeyed His Word and kept His commandments, He would not strike them with any of the diseases which He struck the Egyptians with. Once the cleansing was finished, they set out again and had their second camp at Elim, where the water would not have the same radical effect on them.

They were headed for the Promised Land where they were to initiate an annual festival cycle and cause their lives to revolve generationally around the harvest provision of G-d. There is always lots to do to keep this reality functioning in our midst and this morning I want to talk to you about the spiritual stability which the L-rd wants to build in our midst which has three functional objectives: to keep us from wandering away (assimilating/backsliding), to keep us

from stagnating (growing lukewarm and drying up) and to keep us kingdom focused (the harvest cycle will never stop until the final, Messianic Kingdom arrives).

Let me talk to you first about stability, which should be the one spiritual staple which we should aim at and around which our lives should revolve. Walking with the L-rd involves all kinds of divine intervention and spiritual conflict, but these are peripheral concerns that affect the journey of the camp and not its central purpose or health. Stability does not mean constantly engaging in an endless series of conflicts where the only peace and quiet we will ever know is only found once we have defeated and chased off all of our enemies.

Stability means that the joy of walking with the L-rd and entering His presence and listening to His Word are the staple activities which we engage in, no matter whether we are climbing a stormy mountain or walking through a valley of abundance. If we ever let our environment or the circumstances of our lives dictate our spiritual stability, then we will have none and will live at the mercy of the unreliable happenstances we encounter during our pilgrimage through the stages of this life on our way home to our Father's House in glory.

Some believers seek for sensational experiences and mistake the eventful part of David's early life with the contents of the 23rd Psalm. Combat and conflict may be inevitable, but they are not the staples of our lives which feed us and keep us going. Stability comes from a life of devotion that is driven by the festivals, the cycles of the L-rd, at every stage of our lives as we walk through this life. We are a generational community of believers who want to feast on the goodness of G-d at every stage of our lives and through every event of our lives.

David was essentially a peaceful man who was forced by circumstances to spend much of his life in combat, but he would always rather have been quietly sitting on a hill with his harp and his sheep. Do we want all the bells and whistles or is our goal to spend as much time as we can in the presence of the L-rd, feasting on His Word? If we are not facing down Philistines and chasing Moabites out of the camp and purging our ranks of idolaters and fornicators, are we getting bored?

We fight battles, not for the love of combat, but to protect and renew our walk with the L-rd and realize that entering into His presence is the most awesome and exciting activity we could ever engage in. I think I begin to understand the monastic movement, which was kind of like the school of the prophets to which Samuel belonged. These were people who withdrew from life to spend more time in contemplation and study because the joy and wonder of the presence of the L-rd is worth far more than any thrill of battle or excitement which comes from a great victory or deliverance.

Now, I am not saying that the presence of the L-rd cannot be with us and cannot bless us as we go through all the ups and downs and as we fight off the bushwhacks of the enemy. But once the adrenaline and the testosterone have settled down, we realize that we are fighting to remain focused on the L-rd and to be able to rest gently in His presence, because dwelling in and around His presence is the greatest joy and privilege of our lives. We've got to be careful not to become addicted to the excitement of spiritual combat, where we live in constant danger

of no longer being able to listen to the still small voice. Stability is the objective, not perpetual conflict. Israel was heading for the greatest thrill any believer can ever experience – living a festival driven life centred on the constant presence of the King of Kings.

I have always loved a good storm because I find violent weather so exciting and I have enjoyed all of the battles and conflicts which I have encountered in the L-rd, but it has always been the joy of the L-rd and the peace of the L-rd and the love of the L-rd which have been my greatest thrill. Walking with Him according to His Word through the festival cycle is the overpowering desire of my heart and the objective of how I live my life. Everything else is only temporary and a means to an end because stability is both the cleft in the rock where we hide from the storms of life and the high place where He sets our feet above these same storms as we wait for that glorious day when all conflicts will be resolved and all battles will be won.

Our world does not lend itself easily to stability, but all the activity and all the challenges in which we engage need to have this as their primary objective because walking with Him and abiding in His presence are still our first and highest calling, to the Jew first and also to the Gentile.

Now the flip side of stability is stagnation, where we kind of dry up and never want to face change or learn or do anything new. My grandfather wanted to be the oldest living man never to have flown in an aeroplane and I heard of one pastor who was fired for moving the pulpit and wanting to change how things were being done in his congregation. Stability is not averse to change because becoming stuck in a rut is like living in one long, endless tomb, where the same old same old is all we have come to expect from the our lives in the L-rd.

Now there is a big difference between being bored because we keep on doing the same things the same way and never change things up and always wanting to do everything differently because we are afraid of stagnation. Never confuse sitting still and being quiet with stagnation. Stagnation occurs when change becomes an impossibility and we want nothing new to ever happen in our walk with the L-rd.

Following the harvest festival cycle is not a formula for stagnation, but we have to understand that the spiritual staples we are called to maintain in our lives are there because they lead us to constantly plumb the depths of the wonder and the presence of the L-rd. The harvest festival cycle is all about constant new growth and regular renewal and repairing our tools and storing and consuming our harvest, year by year and season by season.

The tension between stability and stagnation is really between doing what we do with a clearly defined objective and just doing what we do because we have always done it. We follow a Siddur service to remind us of the staple truths and spiritual disciplines we need to maintain if we are to remain spiritually healthy, but we are not bound to always do it in the same way and never consider adding new things or removing old elements which are no longer meaningful.

I know of a Jewish family that always uses the same Haggadah, even though the language is archaic and many of the words have changed their meaning. At B'nai Chayim we want to be constantly on the lookout for better ways of doing the things that we do so that our staple

activities are meaningful for each new generation in our changing world.

However, we are called to change our world and not to be changed by the world, because we will never have the same objectives as the world and while our outreach needs to be meaningful to the world we are reaching out to, they need to see that we have a radically different, spiritual objective which revolves around my third and final point – a kingdom focus.

The Promised Land was to be a fruitful, peaceful paradise where love, joy and peace revolved around celebrating both the goodness of G-d and the fathomless wonder of G-d. It was to be a place where each new generation could explore the endless depths of the glory and majesty of G-d, year by year and harvest by harvest. The Jewish people have always understood that part of our calling is to be a light, or beacon to the peoples so that the nations which were scattered at Babel could be drawn back into fellowship with the only true G-d through His son, our Messiah.

We are called to do this both by our proclamation of the coming kingdom and by the kingdom focused lifestyle which is what the festival harvest cycle is all about. We want to model a lifestyle which revolves around experiencing the wonder of the presence of G-d, because knowing Him and walking with Him are the most amazing privileges which anyone can engage in. There is no life like it and no greater thrill available in our wonderful and wonder filled universe.

Our G-d is not a static "force" to be harnessed and manipulated in order to accomplish goals of personal advancement and gain as we explore and tame our world. Even the finest and most aesthetic pursuits in music and the arts and in science and technology, cannot compare to the wonder of discovering our mighty Creator and learning to walk with Him and to live by His Word. Our world is moving forward towards an inevitable direction, whether we explore the tiniest atom or the most distant clusters of galaxies and that direction is the final kingdom of G-d.

Our secular world wrongly supposes that the point of life is endless progress, where someone will eventually discover how the cosmos came into being and what the eventual point of life is supposed to be. As believers, we have discovered the point of life and it is to acknowledge the Creator and to enter into a personal relationship with Him and walk with Him according to His Word. He may not reveal many of His secrets concerning how the cosmos is put together, but He does endow us with both a desire to know the meaning of life and to discover how wonderful His creation is.

He even gives us desires and abilities which reflect the creativity with which He put both us and creation together. He is calling our generations back to Him through His Word as He prepares to inaugurate His eternal kingdom, and it is this eternal kingdom which is the intended final destination of all mankind – at least all of us who respond to His call. We are indeed engaged in a cosmic struggle between His kingdom and the forces of darkness which are trying to regain total control over mankind (the flesh, the world and the enemy), but this battle is not the point of life, nor is it the point of the annual festival cycle around which our lives are called to revolve. We must never confuse the journey with the destination – our journey is generational, our

destination is the kingdom which is unstoppable.

Empires may come and empires will certainly go, technologies will cause societies to rise up and will certainly bring them crashing back down but none of this is meant to be seen as the permanent condition of man. The rise and fall of civilizations and the movement of peoples from one end of our world to the other is really nothing more than people trying to live and eventually trying to figure out the purpose and meaning of it all.

Our modern world may be turning its back on a biblical, spiritual approach to life and may reject the answers we offer about the meaning and purpose of life, but this refusal and backsliding does not change the inevitable, irreversible direction this world is heading in - because this has never been negotiable.

Kingdom entrance and people's final destination are the only variables in G-d's economy in our blessed Messiah, no matter how much resistance people put up and no matter how loud and long the heathen rage, on line or through all and any other media they use to muddy the waters and promote the darkness they are really working for.

Our goal is to remain spiritually stable as we let our lives revolve around the festival cycle and as we learn to walk with the King according to His Word through all the highways and byways of this life.

Our goal is to be in dynamic dialogue with the lost and confused nations and generations of our world, without assimilating into their darkness or adopting the moral folly they promote under the guise of political correctness and the strange world of inclusiveness.

This will mean avoiding becoming spiritually stagnant and confusing change and innovation with losing our grip on the things of the L-rd. Our agenda will never change, how we fulfil it needs to adjust to the changing circumstances which we encounter. I have said it this way. Our principles will never change, because they are eternal.

Our priorities will change depending on the situations we encounter and our practices will always be modified and updated so that they both reflect the eternal principles of G-d's Word and our commitment to make these relevant and meaningful to a world that is slipping away from them into spiritual oblivion.

This will never be an easy task, but as long as we seek the L-rd and celebrate His provision (daily, weekly, monthly and annually), then our biblical spirituality will remain both dynamic and stable and never slip into stagnation or begin to slide down the slippery path of assimilation away from the light of His Word.

The annual festival cycle begins with a seven day festival which we celebrate for eight days from the Seder until today, as we remember our deliverance from Egyptian slavery. This same festival cycle ends with an eight day remembrance of our wilderness wandering, so that we do not settle into the world we are just passing through, nor adopt any of its values or practices.

This last week has been a time for us to consider how stable we are spiritually and for us to realize that in order to relate to the generational changes we will encounter along the way, we need to avoid becoming spiritually stagnant.

Our greatest pleasure and the core which drives our lives will always be the presence of the L-rd in our lives as they revolve around the festival cycle – and the first and greatest festival will always be the weekly Shabbat. We will frequently have to fight and overcome obstacles in our way, but it is not the battle which we seek – it is the glory of the L-rd and the wonder and joy of waking with Him.

We do not want to let our lives dictate our spiritual stability to us, we want to dictate spiritual stability to our lives and always let them turn peacefully and irrevocably around the festival cycle as we celebrate and study and learn to walk with Him through life according to His Word.

His kingdom is coming no matter how many detractors and hecklers rise up against it and as long as we maintain a kingdom focus, both in what we believe and in how we live our lives in this often contradictory world through which we are passing, then we will not lose our way and we will arrive safely at our final destination.

I hope you have enjoyed doing our annual yeast detox and you will make sure over the coming year that no yeast of sin or the world or the enemy is allowed to infect and leaven your life. We are called to live holy, unleavened lives and as we go through the countdown to Shavuot (Pentecost), we need to make sure that His Word is the place we sort out all of our concerns and our personal version of all the hopes and fears of all the years.

As we let our lives turn around His Word and around the festivals of His Word, our spiritual stability will make sure we do not spin out or stall or become overpowered as we roll through our lives.

We need to remain focused on the principles of His Word as we maintain the priorities which His Word calls us to uphold in our lives. This will allow us to make all the changes to the practices of our lives which we need to engage so that we do not begin to stagnate and lose our ability to live lives of salt and light before our dying world.

Our message will be relevant, even if it grows increasingly unpopular and as we pursue a meaningful dialogue with the darkness dwellers of our world, we will help people to arrive at their final destination as citizens of the coming kingdom, when all abominations shall cease and false gods are removed and forever silenced and His name shall be one over all the kingdoms and nations and generations of mankind.

Kingdom dwellers unite! Kingdom dwellers stay stable and focused! Kingdom dwellers avoid all and any forms of stagnation and assimilation and may His kingdom be established in your days and in the days of all the House of Israel, speedily soon!

Shabbat Shalom.

Let's pray.