

Behar/ Bechukotai On the Mountain/In My statutes The Practice of Holiness

Torah: Leviticus 25:1-26:2/26:3-27:34

Haftarah: Jeremiah 16:19-17:14

Brit Chadashah: Luke 4:16-21/Matthew 22:1-14

Reading: Hannah p. 163 NS Psalm 112 or 105. Jewish hero: Silas. Torah Carrier: Ifeanyi Chazak, Chazak, v'Nitchazek (Be strong, Be strong and may you be strengthened)

This week's double Torah portion deals with various aspects of holiness and what it teaches was given while the people were camping and the foot of Mount Sinai as they mobilized for their journey towards the Holy Land. The Haftarah portion reminds people not to trust in themselves, but to rely completely on the L-rd who knows what is really in their hearts. The Brit Chadashah portion states that Yeshua's arrival is a fulfilment of what the Jubilee year was intended to be – the final and full liberation from any servitude to this world. The passage in Matthew is a parable about the extended call of G-d to those among the nations who are receptive to the banqueting call of the Gospel and who want to celebrate the victory which our Messiah has won. The work was done by the Messiah, our response determines the validity of our call.

These last three chapters of Leviticus deal with two main concepts: ownership of the land and the status of the people. The land remains the property of the L-rd and the people remain His bond servants who are called to serve Him and to walk in His ways.

In chapter 25, deals with both the sabbatical year and the Jubilee year, where the land was also given a sabbath rest where it could rest and be renewed. Three verses stand out in this chapter.

(1) 25:16: "***If the years are more, you shall increase the price, and if the years are fewer, you shall diminish the price; for it is a certain number of harvests that are being sold to you.***" The sabbatical years and the year of Jubilee were reminders that the land remains the property of the L-RD and it is only the harvests which belong to the people. Selling the land was really just transferring ownership of the harvests from one Jubilee to another. If we understand that all we possess really belongs to the L-rd, then we will treat what our lives harvest, as a blessing of the L-RD which should express this divine ownership. The world we live in belongs to Him, as well as all the increase which it brings to us. How are you handling the increase which the L-rd brings your way?

(2) 25: 21: "***I will grant you my blessing the sixth year and it will yield a crop for three years.***" One of the saddest features of how our people walked with the L-rd is that they never kept either a Sabbath year or a Jubilee year. The L-RD promised that the land would meet the needs of a people that gave it a Sabbath year's rest and just before the seventh sabbatical year of rest, in the sixth year, the land would produce enough for the forty ninth year and for the fiftieth year, enough to last until the harvests of the fifty first year. We may not be in charge of all that happens in our lives, but our needs will always be met when we walk with the L-RD

(3) 25:23, 55: "***The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine and you are just strangers and tenants on it... For to Me, the children of Israel are my slaves, whom I made to come out of the land of Egypt. I am YHVH, your G-d.***" Israel was set free to serve the L-rd on the land which was once the garden of Eden. Instead of seeing the land as a

perpetual possession of the people, it needs to be seen as the perpetual possession of the L-RD. In the same way the people need to see that they too are His perpetual possession and walking in practical holiness according to His Word is the rent we pay for living in His world. Israel did not fully grasp the meaning of divine ownership. All that we have and even all that we are, belongs to Him. Are you learning to live as a bond servant of YHVH, using all that you have in His service? Do you fully understand what divine ownership means? It means that all that we have is really His and that truly we do not belong to ourselves, we belong to Him. Holiness (faith and obedience) is the way He wants us to express His ownership of us and of all that we possess. How is your holiness doing?

Chapter 26 outlines the conditions of blessing, the consequences of disobedience and the promise of restoration. We will all have to face trials and tribulations on our journey through this life towards our Father's home in Glory, but how we respond to His Word will determine whether or not His blessing will haunt our steps. Living without practical, biblical holiness means we are shooting ourselves in the foot, until we have no more toes and the L-RD is not someone you want to make an enemy of because His chastisement can be just as thorough as His blessings want to be.

I have selected two verses to highlight the impact of holiness and of the lack thereof.

(4) 26:30: ***"I will destroy your high places and I will knock down your statues which you have dedicated to the sun and I will heap your carcasses on the carcasses of your idols."*** Israel is warned in this chapter that they will be punished sevenfold for their sins, because as a people who should know better, they will be held more accountable for their folly than the nations they were sent to replace. I found this image very powerful. Not only will He knock down and destroy their idols, but their bodies (carcasses) will fall down on the carcasses of their idols. He will destroy our false gods just as thoroughly as He destroyed the gods of Egypt. We need to forsake all and any spiritual allegiances which should belong to Him or share their fate when they come tumbling down.

(5) 26:44: ***"But when they shall be in the country of their enemies, nonetheless, I shall never totally reject them and I will never be horrified by them to the point of exterminating them to the point of breaking my covenant with them. I am YHVH their G-d."*** Antisemitism forgets that Israel is still G-d's people and His protection and provision will always hover over them as we dwell among the nations. G-d will always remain faithful to His Word and it is this Word which will govern how He responds to those who walk with Him and to those who have walked away from Him. How is He responding to your response to His Word? He always wants us to come to our senses and learn to walk in practical holiness, to the Jew first and also to the Gentile. How is the hand of G-d working in your life?

Chapter 27 is a unique set of guidelines for oaths of consecration, whether it concerned people, animals or property, as well as the conditions for the redemption or buying back that which was consecrated to the L-rd. It reminds us that we cannot consecrate our tithes to Him, because they already belong to Him.

I have selected 27:8 as my verse for this section because it says that if a person was too poor to pay the price to redeem what he had consecrated to the L-rd, the priest shall establish a redemption price which is more suited to that person's limited means. These oaths of dedication were made for a variety of reasons and reasonable means are listed so that the person making the oath could regain ownership of that which he surrendered to the L-rd.

There was one exception to this ability to redeem what was surrendered to the L-rd through an oath. When anyone made an oath dedicating to destruction, what was dedicated could not be redeemed, but had to be destroyed. Jericho was dedicated to destruction and that which Achan kept for himself was not only an illegal acquisition of the spoils of war, it was actually stealing from G-d.

This rare oath was usually made in times of war, so that all the various spoils of war became the L-rd's property and could not be redeemed. Land dedicated with this became the L-rd's property and had to be permanently put out of commission. People and animals had to be destroyed, which is what happened to the daughter of Jephthah, when she was the first thing to come out of his house to greet him when he returned from his victory over the Ammonites.

Saul made a similar vow when he foolishly dedicated to destruction anyone who ate food before he defeated his enemies. Jonathon was unaware of the oath, but the people prevented Saul from killing Jonathon when he wanted to carry out his oath.

Holiness needs to be practical and it is the only rent we are called to pay as we walk through this life, recognizing that all we have and who we are, ultimately belongs to G-d. How are you expressing G-d's ownership of you? How are you expressing G-d's ownership of all you possess? His chastisement is never designed to destroy us. It is designed to bring us to our senses so that we may return to a closer walk with the King to whom we truly belong.

Chazak, chazak, v'nitchazek

Sermon: Sabbath Powered: Getting together to Worship

Passage: ***You shall work six days, but the seventh day is the Sabbath, the day of rest. There shall be a holy gathering. You shall do no work. It is the Sabbath of YHVH in all your dwelling places.*** (Leviticus 23:3)

There are two levels of relating to the L-rd – personal and corporate and both have to be in good shape if we want His goodness and mercy to follow us all of our days as we walk together towards our Father's Home in glory. In fact our weekly sabbath services are both times to renew our connection with the L-rd and with each other, so that none of the poison of the world is allowed to infect our lives, both as a community and as individuals.

Our weeks are supposed to revolve around our Sabbath rest and our Sabbath worship. Our passage says that it is the Sabbath of YHVH in all of our dwellings because His presence and His peace are to be the place where we truly dwell. We are to gather in the house of the L-rd to rest and to worship and each of us a part of the construction materials upon which this worship is built.

Part of this weekly coming together involves sharing our stories about how our week and the rest of our lives are doing, so that we can remain bonded together in the L-rd and do not pull away from our weekly corporate worship. We need to learn to rest in Him and in each other so that our gathering for worship can be a holy gathering that accomplishes the five sacred tasks of Sabbath worship: praise, prayer, Bible Study, fellowship and above all, rest.

I know that I am making an arbitrary distinction between praise and worship and I am aware that the Scriptures use these terms interchangeably. But for our purposes this morning I want

to examine the corporate side of keeping the Sabbath, and I have outlined five of them.

I am just as anxious as anyone to hear how people's weeks have been going and I am always glad to welcome both our regulars and our visitors, because we are all beloved of the L-rd. However, our primary task as we gather, is to worship the L-rd together and to remind ourselves that He should be the centre around which our lives should revolve.

We need to celebrate our deliverance from the Egypt of this world, as we rejoice that we belong to G-d, both in this life and in the one which is to come. Praise lifts our hearts and voices out of this world as we check in with G-d and get a fore taste of the world which is to come. It is an otherworldly group experience which can give both meaning and renewal to the week which it come. It reminds us that we are part of a team and that we are one with each other even as we are one with our King.

Praise expresses a broad scope of positive emotions and reminds us that we have so much to be thankful for. We can do this at home, but when we get together, we are pulled out of ourselves and join with our flock in expressing our gratitude to G-d for who He is and for what He does. It is actually a form of spiritual patriotism where we renew our ultimate citizenship over and above whatever else is going on in our lives. It gives our hearts a chance to lay down the cares and concerns and hopes and fears of all the years and sit at His feet as we are renewed in our spirits and in our minds.

Well, what do we do with all the tasks and challenges we face in our work a day world? When we gather together, we lift them up in prayer as we allow the L-rd to give us a bigger picture perspective on our lives. Sometimes we will face illness and sometimes our lives will overwhelm us. Sometimes we do not know which way to turn and we need to learn to ask for help, primarily from our Messiah and also sometimes from each other.

Corporate prayer helps us to know that we are not alone and that others share the same burdens that we have to grapple with. Our holy gathering allows us to lift each other up in prayer as we make sure that we do not begin to wander away from the L-rd and do not begin to wander away from each other. Prayer pulls us together under the shelter of His wings, as we do not allow anything in our lives to crowd out our faith in Him. Praise and prayer go hand in hand as we learn to walk with our eyes focused on His kingdom and on His righteousness.

There is another function of our holy gathering as we worship the L-rd and that is Bible Study where we determine to always let His Word to be the most important influence in our lives. Our world contains so many competing voices which are always scrambling to get and to keep our attention. Our Sabbath worship allows us a reprieve from their constant babbling.

We need to know our Bibles better than we know the neighbourhoods in which we live and part of our Sabbath worship is to dig deeply into this guide book, so that we never lose our way. Study helps us to know the L-rd better and it equips us with the spiritual tools and perspectives we need in order to overcome and be more than conquerors during the week. It is also a chance for us to move beyond our own perspective, as we learn to see things G-d's way. The truths of His Word can release us from the folly of this fading world which we are only travelling through.

It remains my goal that each of us and all of us become like wise householders who are instructed in the ways of the Kingdom through His Word. Each week when we gather we can

bring forth both the new things we are learned in His Word and the old things which we have already learned. The Bible is a unique form of soul food and we are called to have a balanced, spiritually nutritious diet as we wander through the halls of His Word and feed on its truths. How good are you at keeping your soul fed? How nutritious is your spiritual diet.

I want to put in a plug for our weekly Yeshiva, but Bible Study on the Sabbath is an essential feature of good spiritual health. Our weekly Yeshiva should be seen as a follow up to help us digest more of what we have been learning Sabbath by Sabbath. It helps us to worship with a better understanding of what it is we are doing and why it is that we do it.

Another function of our corporate Sabbath worship is fellowship, where we keep each other up to date with what the L-rd is doing in our hearts and lives. This usually occurs before service and after service, so that we get to know each other better and pray for each other more intelligently during the week. Shul should be seen as part of our extended spiritual family and the ultimate peer group who's views and opinions we cherish because we are of like mind in our determination to walk together in Him. Making time for fellowship as part of our Sabbath worship allows us to create and renew bonds with each other and is an essential feature of how we should function as a close knit flock which has each other's back.

There is one more feature of what it means to get together for worship and that is learning to rest together as we leave the hustle and bustle of the week and let our batteries recharge. I do not like to be in a hurry on Shabbat, but this does not mean that our services will not start on time. It means that I like to have everything ready, so the day is restfully pleasant and I am not constantly running from pillar to post like people tend to do during the week. Now this is not always possible, but I like to consider the Sabbath a fuss free zone where all of us can take time catch up and get to know each other better as a regular feature of how we spent the Sabbath.

The Children of Israel were to rest on the Sabbath and our corporate, holy gathering together is part of this rest. Sharing our stories and our struggles means that our community pulls together, because getting to know each other better should be part of our Sabbath resting.

Praise is a vital part of worshipping the L-rd together in our holy gathering. It lifts us up into the presence of the L-rd and gives us a taste of what is to come. It is a time for the vocal meeting of the minds as we lift our voices to Him. I have often said that when you can turn what is going on in your life into a song, both your good days and your bad days can become an offering to the L-rd.

All of our songs tell a story and singing them helps to turn our lives into stories that we can offer back to the L-rd on the day we have set aside for Him and the things of His Kingdom. Worshipping G-d on the Sabbath through our praises gives us a renewed perspective and it can be part of the healing process when our lives wound us. We are called to grow up into our Messiah in all things and corporate praise offered on the Sabbath is part of this process.

As long as our lives are in harmony with the L-rd through His Word, nothing can really disturb our spiritual peace and we can take the shalom we share on the Sabbath and infuse the rest of our week with it. Praise helps us to shift our gaze onto things which really matter. What really matters to you in your life?

Corporate prayer also helps our focus as we release our concerns into the hands of the L-rd

and together put them into a heavenly perspective. It is a discipline we need to exercise as we lift each other up to the L-rd and surrender our burdens to Him. Do you regularly release your burdens to the L-rd. We need to be both a community of praise and a community of prayer when we gather to worship the L-rd on the Sabbath.

We also talked about Bible Study, which is what we are doing here, both with the Torah Meditation and with this sermon. Jewish people have been called the people of the Book, how well do you know this Book. I encourage people to read the Torah portions during the week, so that we can get more out of it during the Torah meditation. I also encourage you to read over my sermon or at least review it, as part of allowing our discussion of His Word to deepen our knowledge of the Bible.

I have heard it said that cults and unbalanced fringe groups target believers who are not well versed in the Bible. How solid is your grasp of His Word? I have been studying it for over 46 years and it still surprises me and challenges and renews my heart. What do you let it do for you as you hear it preached on this day of our holy gathering?

Are you getting to know both our regulars and the visitors we welcome every week as part of how you keep the Sabbath? Are you letting people get to know you as you attend week by week? We need to both open up to the L-rd and to each other as we strive to be authentically Sabbath powered and festival driven.

Finally, are you able to rest when we gather together each week? Regular Sabbath worship can strengthen us and help us walk more closely with the L-rd, as we make our weekly holy gathering the highlight of our week. It is a restful discipline of worship that we give over to the L-rd and to growing together in Him, both as individuals and as a community. How good are you at getting the most out of the time we set aside for our weekly corporate worship? Sabbath worship has the potential to spiritually enrich us in ways that no other day can do.

It is the day of the L-rd when the people of the L-rd gather to worship. May the rest of this marvellous day give you lots of rest and spiritual enrichment because we have sought His face together.

Shabbat shalom. Hasn't it been great to gather together and have the L-rd move in our midst.