

Netzavim **You Are Standing**
Torah: Deuteronomy 29:10(8)-30:20
Haftarah: Isaiah 61:10-63:9
Brit Chadashah: John 15:1-11

Reading Jack pp. 105,107 and Ps. 81. Jewish hero: Leah, Zilpa Torah Carrier Art

Torah Meditation: Nitzavim

Do You Know Where You Stand in the L-rd?

Just before Moses bids farewell to the people and hands the reigns of leadership to Joshua he wanted to emphasize once more that walking with the L-rd involves making choices and sticking to them when they reflect our commitment to His Word.

29:14,15 have an eye to the future and both you and I are mentioned in the verses. ***"It is not only with you that I make this covenant which was sworn by an oath, but is is also with all those who are present here today before the L-rd our G-d – and it is also with those who are not present here among you this day."*** Three groups of people are mentioned in this passage. First those who are entering into this covenant which was sworn by an oath, the wilderness generation who on the verge of entering the Land. Next there are those strangers who are witnessing the performance of the covenant and who have agreed to live by those stipulations of it which apply to them. Lastly there are the future generations of Israel that will also come into the covenant which was being sworn on that day and future believers who will be blessed by the covenant.

A severe warning is given about the consequences of violating the covenant and which consequences will be a testimony to strangers who come from far away to witness this punishing and the uprooting of the offenders who will be cast into a country which is not their own. At the end of this dire warning comes my favorite verse when it comes to understanding why inexplicable things happen which we just have to accept. ***"The secret things belong to G-d, but the things which are revealed belong to us and to our children in perpetuity, in order that we would put into practice all the words of this law."*** (Deut. 29:29)

Some people claim that everything happens for a reason, which is true, but the reason is not always given. Why is there so much evil in a world that is so full of the beauty which the L-rd has built into it. Not every cloud has a silver lining and when we admit that there are things which far exceed our ability to understand, we can leave these mysteries to G-d and concentrate on putting into practice all the words of this Law.

The passage moves on to talk about G-d circumcising their hearts because: ***"This commandment which I prescribe to you today is certainly not beyond strength and is not out of your reach."*** G-d spoke His Word so that it would fit our hearts and lives like a glove because He explains at length what He requires from us and also builds in spiritual safeguards in the form of repentance and atonement. Not only does He forgive our iniquity, He also cleans us so that no defilement remains. His words is close to us, it is even in our mouth and in our heart, so that we can put it into practice.

The portion ends with a reminder that the L-rd is placing two alternatives before us, one with life and blessing, the other with death and cursing. So in a very real sense, our true spiritual

destiny is up to us and the choices which we make. We cannot chose the kind of weather that will storm through our lives, but we can choice to dress with the appropriate reactions so that even the harshest of circumstances can be used by our King for our spiritual enrichment and benefit, and never cause us to abandon our faith or our confidence in G-d.

This is the last Shabbat of consolation and this portion of Isaiah is quoted Luke's Gospel. Immediately after having overcome the devil in the wilderness, the L-rd goes in a synagogue in Nazareth to begin His public ministry. He quotes from Isaiah 61 and says that it is fulfilled in Him today. Two things we can take from this. First of all, the L-rd may have begun His ministry on the Sabbath just before Rosh Hashanah and second of all, the year of Jubilee is a symbol of the release and freedom we receive when we come to the L-rd.

The returned captives will be overcome by great joy in the L-rd as they see the L-rd cause salvation and praise to spring up in the presence of the nations. Israel will get a new name and no longer be called the forsaken one, but shall possess a royal diadem and be a crown of beauty in the hand of the L-rd. The description of the wonder of the returned exiles far exceeds the horror and pain of their captivity and there will be no more need for them to be scattered into captivity again.

The righteousness and fury of the L-rd will bring this about and there is for me a sadness in this wonderful passage, because the second diaspora did not have to occur and our people could have remained home, even as they took the Gospel to the ends of the earth. This speaks to me about how firm and unshakeable the promises of G-d are. Now as the ending of the ages draws near, Israel is again flourishing and has the biggest Jewish population in the World. Imagine the wonder and the joy which will erupt when they shall believe in their Messiah and accept Him as the Saviour!

The New Testament portion likens the L-rd to the true vine and us to the branches, which are pruned by His Word, so that we can produce much fruit. And just as the branch can do nothing without the vine, so can do nothing without Him. He warns that those who do not remain or abide in Him, will be gathered up like so much dead wood and thrown into the fire.

This abiding is likened to obeying the commandments of our Messiah, just as He has obeyed the commandments of the Father. It is by the keeping of the Messiah's commandments that we abide in His love and the core of these commandments are the Ten Commandments which He now enables us to keep and fulfil. He reminds us to dwell in His love and allow His joy to be us so that our joy can be perfect. He is ready and able to equip us, prune us and teach us how to walk closely with the Father because of the victory which He won on our behalf.

The seventh Shabbat of consolation ends on a positive if somber note, because when we know where we should stand in the L-rd and how we should live as we walk with Him, we are ready to face a new year and see what new and wonderful things He is going to bring into our lives.

His purposes are unstoppable and He is overflowing with love and blessing for those who walk with Him and who grow up into Him in all things. All of this wonderful potential still depends on how we respond to His Word. When we keep it, nothing can stand in the way of His blessing and provision. When we violate it, the blessing evaporates and we wither and dry up. In 5779 our destiny is blessing and growth, full of love and joy because we are kicking off the new year with the fall feasts, so that our annual major check up equips us with everything we need to

make this the best year ever.

Sermon: It's Time to Begin Another Lap And See What Shaper We Are In

Rosh Ha Shanna begins tomorrow night and we can look forward to another new year in the L-rd as we remain Sabbath powered and Festival driven. The Fall Feasts are actually an intense and compact series of special meetings to help us make sure that we maintain a firm grip on the things of the L-rd. Each new year brings with it a series of new challenges and we want to face them with a renewed and strengthened perspective.

In order to maximize this process, we are going to take another lap through the Makzor and this journey will take us through three separate festival periods and will be over after service on October 6th. Please make sure you have set the dates in your calendar so that you do not miss out on any of our special services. Please also make sure to get a Makzor, so that you can experience full richness of this special season.

As part of our annual introduction to the High Holy Days and Sukkoth, I want to introduce the Makzor to you and show you how to get maximum benefit during the Fall Feasts.

Let me first explain to you how it came to be put together. 23 years ago, when I became part of the Messianic Movement, I wanted to be both thorough and innovative, so we did not end up just being either a watered down version of a church or of a synagogue. Robbin Williams once described Anglicanism as Catholic Lite and I did not want us to be Judaism lite or Christianity Lite.

With this in mind, I wanted to design a truly Messianic Jewish approach to the Fall Feasts which was both faithful to the Bible and which reflected our commitment to maintain authentic Jewish space. There is no Gentile equivalent to the Fall Feasts and there are not many groups who are even aware of the importance of this period of time. So many people coming to us as visitors, will not have an understanding of what we are about to do as we begin another year in the L-rd, freshly serviced, fuelled and polished.

So, I researched how the traditional synagogues observed the High Holy Days and Sukkoth and also looked at how other Messianic shuls handled this special time of the year. I found most Jewish observances to be daunting and intricate and some of the Messianic observances lacking in substance and not giving these three festivals adequate attention.

Most talmudic Jews follow their own Makzors which range from 300 to over 500 pages and most of their services last from 5 to 8 hours or longer. This is the one time of the year when the synagogues are full and it would seem that the people are trying to make up for a year of spiritual neglect and shul absence by their short, but intense festival participation. In fact most synagogues sell seats to their members, and people pay anywhere from \$800 individually or sometimes over \$2,000 as a family.

I do not want us to fall into this annual attempt to make up for a year's absence from participating in the life of our shul. Our seats are free and our services will never be as long, nor as intricate. We will heed the words of our Messiah who reminded us not to vainly repeat, long and loud prayers, because we feel that our loudness and the sheer volume of words will somehow make our prayers more well received by G-d.

We want to walk closely with the L-rd daily, weekly, monthly, all year long and how we observe the Fall Feasts will be a demonstration of our desire to make sure we are in good enough shape

spirituality for another lap through the coming new year.

So, from a variety of sources, I gradually put together a Messianic Makzor which I have been tweaking over the years. We are currently using the 2017 version and I am open to suggestions as to how to make our journey through the feasts more meaningful and joyous.

With this in mind, let me introduce our own Makzor to you. I wanted to keep many of the core prayers which form the backbone of this time of the year and there are two familiar, long prayers around which both our Rosh Ha Shanna and Yom Kippur services are built.

They are first, Avinu Malkeinu (Our Father, Our King) and then Al Hayt (for these sins). I modified these prayers to reflect our faith in the Messiah and yet tried to leave the cadence and rhythm of the original prayers intact. And rather than repeat these prayers several times during our services, we go through the Avinu once in our Rosh Hashanah services and recite Al Hayt twice, on Erev Yom Kippur and in the Yom Kippur morning service.

On Rosh Hashanah, we also recite all 19 portions of the standing prayer (Shemoneh Esrei) from our Siddur, along with the full Alenu Prayer. We will also recite a Messianic version of two majestic prayers: Unetane Tokef (Let Us Acclaim) the Hineni (Here I Am).

On Rosh Hashanah, we also perform Messianic Versions of two traditional rituals: On Erev Rosh Hashanah, we perform Hatarat Nedarim (release from vows, where we symbolically release ourselves from last year's unfinished business, so that we can give our full, unencumbered attention to the challenges of the coming year) and in the evening service on Rosh Hashanah, we perform the Tashlikh ritual (casting away of sins, after we have signed them over to the L-rd and symbolically cast them off – or in our case shredding them).

On the morning of Rosh Hashanah, and in the evening Rosh Hashanah service we go through the full shofar blowing ritual. In the Rosh Hashanah services, we deal with the three main themes of Rosh Hashanah: sovereignty (Malchuyot), remembrance (Zichronot) and judgement (Shofarot). And during the evening service on the day of Rosh Hashanah, I deal with the meaning of the day of the L-rd and what that day should mean for believers.

Traditional shuls observe Rosh Hashanah and Sukkoth for two days, but we do not follow this practice. Just to make sure they are observing the festivals on the right day, they repeat both their Rosh Hashanah and Sukkoth services on the next day. The L-rd is more concerned with getting our hearts right and our lives renewed, than He is about repeating services to get the dates right.

The time between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur is called the ten days of repentance (or awe) and it is believed in Talmudic shuls that you have to generate ten days worth of intense repentance to convince G-d to give you a good year. We believe that repentance should be a lifestyle of both accountability and commitment, so we do not stray far from the straight and narrow, as we walk closely with the L-rd all year long. We do not try and make up for lost time, we aim to so order our hearts and lives, that we do not lose any time, all year long.

We use the festivals as a time of positive introspection, sort of like our annual spiritual check-up so that none of the nonsense which is going on in the world all around us, is allowed to take root in our midst or become a negative spiritual influence in our hearts and minds.

We hold our first festival Oneg on the Sabbath between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, which is called the Sabbath of repentance (Shabbat Shuvah). What are you planning to bring? It is exciting for me that even when we flounder and fall, the L-rd keeps calling us back to Him until we learn to get it right.

We hold four Yom Kippur services and I have included and modified many traditional pruning prayers (Pseukei D'Zimrah) from a rabbinic Siddur, which we will recite during our first two Yom Kippur services. I have also broken Al Hayt into seven sections and each one is introduced by a modified pruning prayer (Pseukei D'Zimrah), also from the traditional Siddur.

On Erev Yom Kippur, Kol Nidre is chanted in memory of those Jews who secretly practised their faith, even though they had outwardly converted to Catholicism under duress. On Yom Kippur morning, I give a sermon based on the Avodah, which refers to the annual going behind the veil by the High Priest (annual reality check). During the Yom Kippur afternoon service, we study Jonah and our own call to repentance which is personal and genuine.

During the concluding evening service of Yom Kippur, we observe Yizkor and remember our beloved departed. We also look at the meaning of holiness as we bring our fast to an end.

Three days after Yom Kippur, we observe the pilgrimage festival of Sukkoth. It is one of the three pilgrimage festivals (Shalosh regalim) when agricultural Israel used to bring their annuals tithes to the tabernacle and later to the temple. Between Yom Kippur and Sukkoth we will set up our Sukkah and will hold services in it over the week. We are to have nothing but joy and to remember that we are only pilgrims and strangers, wandering through this temporary world on our way to our permanent home in our Father's House in Glory.

On Erev Sukkoth, we bless our children as we hold our first service in the Sukkah, which we also bless. We talk about the special guests who are traditionally welcomed (Ushpisin) and have the first of many snacks after the service. On Sukkoth morning we wave the lulav (branches) sing some songs. We bless our children again and study (recite) the first Hallel (Psalms having the word hallelujah in them).

On the evening of Sukkoth, we wave the branches again and read the second Hallel. We bless our children for a third time and look at verses of hope and joy. The Sukkah will be open throughout the week for those who want to visit it and we will be holding our second Oneg after service on Shabbat Sukkoth.

On Shabbat Sukkoth I give my annual meditation based on Ecclesiastes.

The Makzor contains service outlines for three more special celebrations over the week of Sukkoth: Hoshana Raba (Great Salvation), Shemini Atzeret (the Eighth Day) and Simchat Torah (rejoicing in the Torah). The first two of these will be held in the Sukkah on Sunday September 30th and on Monday October 1st, from 2-4 pm and from 7-9 pm. For Hoshana Raba we will examine the wonder of our salvation and what it means for us, both in this life and in the life which is to come. For Shemini Atzeret we will look at the meaning of the eighth day in Judaism and what events will occur at the end of the world.

On Simchat Torah we will be doing at least three things. First of all, after our regular Torah service, where I will give a brief meditation based on the first Torah portion of the new reading

cycle, we will roll back the scroll to the beginning and read from some beginning and ending verses in the Scriptures. Then we will dance the scroll around the shul seven times, as we symbolically rewind ourselves in order to embark on a new Torah Reading cycle.

Then, once the final blessings are recited, we will let our children have a chocolate scramble, because the Word is sweeter than honey and the chocolate bar.

It takes more than one journey through the Fall Feasts to glean everything these festivals want to teach us and it takes time and effort to build and maintain an effective spiritually in our fast paced, turbulent world. One of the purposes of the High Holy Days and Sukkoth is to make sure that the Word of our Messiah is the functional centre of our lives and that we learn how to digest the whatevers of life and offer them in praise and thanksgiving to our King.

This joyful task is not an easy one and it is a life style we need to be constantly renewing and pruning. Constant change is where we live and we want to make sure that our grasp of His Word is one of the only things in our lives which does not change. How is your grip of His Word doing? Is it slipping? Does it need to be adjusted and strengthened?

The amazing thing about the Scriptures and the Festival cycle is that the more familiar with them you become, the more depth and meaning you are able to derive as you make sure that your walk with the L-rd is bold and vital. I am not speaking about any arrogance or disrespectful familiarity, where we could grow careless and lose our focus. I am talking about knowing your way around His Word and being aware of the seasons of His Spirit, so that we do not lose our way as we walk with Him through the whatevers life brings our way.

Join us for this special series of services and allow the L-rd to deepen and broaden your walk with Him and increase your confidence in His Word as you learn to rely on His protection and providence. We need to learn to see things from His perspective.

I have been reading a book written by a holocaust survivor who saw most of his village slaughtered and spent a few years hiding in a forest with those of his family who were not butchered by the Nazis. Rather than rage against the horrendous injustice all around him, he determined to trust G-d and do his best to survive. While we may never have to go through such horrible tribulation, we also need to determine to trust G-d and do our best to survive.