

Bechukotai **In My Statues** **L-rd's Table** **Chazak, Chazak, v'Nitchazek**

Torah: Leviticus 26:3-27:34

Haftarah: Jeremiah 16:19-17:14

Brit Chadashah: Matthew 22:1-14

Reading: Andrea: p. 145 and Ps. 105. Jewish Hero: Zadok. Carrier: Ifeanyi.

This Torah portion is actually a double addendum to the Book of Leviticus where two final categories of concerns are voiced. First is a recitation of the blessings of obedience and the consequences of disobedience. And finally, how special vows to the L-rd were to be carried out, concerning people, animals or even a field.

As the people near the end of the year they spent camping around the holy mountain, Moses is giving them some final instruction so that they would know how to walk with the L-rd every day of their lives, no matter where else they might be called to wander.

He begins with a series of promises about the positive impact of keeping all the commandments and precepts which the L-rd has given to His people. When we walk with Him, He will actively engage with our lives to bless our harvests and to give us amazing victory over the enemies who are more powerful than us. In other words, the direction and the eventual success of our endeavors will always be less about the best laid plans of mice and men as it is about the positive impact which obedience will always have on how well our lives turn out.

This does not mean that we will not have to endure hard times or that we are excluded from persecution and tribulation, but it does mean that when we sow obedience into our lives, we will eventually be blessed over and above all that we may have to temporarily endure.

The opposite of that is the negative consequences of disobedience, which, again, will have less to do about our actual circumstances as it does with the impact which circumstances have on our lives. Just as we have the possibility of being blessed over and above the usual impact of our circumstances, so we have the possibility of our circumstances chastising us seven times more intensely as a reminder of what it means to abandon the King who we are called to serve. Seven is used here as a symbolic number to refer to the hand of G-d, which will either have a positive impact in our lives or will make His presence made known when He confronts those who turn away from the words we are called to put into practice in every aspect of our lives.

The choice is ours and no matter what else is going on in our lives, how we walk with the L-rd, will always have a bigger impact in our lives, than anything life can throw at us. So instead of trying to figure out how to get the best out of the happenstance of our lives, we need to realize the positive, practical impact which obedience will always have in the lives of those who have learned to walk with the L-rd, according to the dictates of His Word.

The book ends with some final instructions about vows which are made before the L-rd. These are special vows which deal consecrating either people or animals and even land unto the L-rd. It was kind of like saying, L-rd is you grant me victory or success in my endeavour, I will give you this person, this animal, or even this portion of land.

During the whole process, that which is consecrated to the L-rd, belonged to the L-rd and had

to be redeemed or reclaimed by adding a fifth to its original value. It was kind of like a divine pawn shop where something or someone that we owned was surrendered to the L-rd and could not be reclaimed without paying a holding penalty of 20% of its original value.

Both the first born of any animal and the tithe of our lands already belonged to the L-rd and could not be dedicated to the L-rd ion the fulfillment of a vow. You could not dedicate something or someone to the L-rd that which already belonged to Him, because what you have already promised to give to the L-rd cannot be added as an additional promise, as if the first promise did not matter.

There was a special category of promise which was only used in reference to warfare as part of the spoils which would come our way, if and only if, we were on the winning side. It was called devoted to destruction and anyone or anything so devoted, could not be redeemed and had to be destroyed. Anything which could survive the purification by fire became the property of the L-rd and never reverted to the ownership of the oath maker, no matter how much he was willing to offer to redeem ownership.

We see this oath being made twice in the Old Testament and once in the New Testament. After the successful siege of Jericho, one Achan stole from the spoils which belonged to the L-rd and paid for his theft with his life. Saul wanted to put his son to death because he had had not heard the devoted to destruction oath, which his father had made over anyone who ate food until his enemies were defeated. The people prevented Saul from carrying out his threat, even though it prevented him from having a complete victory over his foes.

Ananias and Saphira dedicated the revenues of a property to the L-rd and wrongly withheld a from the sale of that which they claimed they were wholly dedicating to the L-rd. They lied even when they were given the chance to come clean and paid for their lie with their lives. Making a solemn oath to the L-rd is a serious undertaking because He takes us at our word and expects us to take Him at His Word.

The Haftarah portion extols the one who trusts in the L-rd and warns about the folly of trusting in the deceitfulness of the human heart. When we place our trust in the L-rd, not even the behind the scenes, hidden agenda cannot derail the purposes of G-d. When we trust in men, apart from surrendering our hopes and fears to the L-rd, we will crash and burn because people are notoriously unreliable and always have a hidden agenda which they are trying to conceal from us.

The New Testament portion speaks of the great banquet to which so many are invited. A full battery of excuses is offered by those who have made themselves too busy to consider giving their first priority to the things of the Kingdom of Heaven. It is a warning to us that the things of the coming Kingdom are not optional priorities we can adopt or ignore, based on what we consider to be the most important objectives of our lives.

We cannot succeed whenever we place anything or anyone above our need to seek first the Kingdom of G-d and His righteousness. He will either have a positive or a negative impact in our lives, depending on whether we listen to His voice through His Word or not. He takes us seriously and expects us to take His Word just as seriously, in every aspect of our lives.

Sermon: Counting the Omer: Discerning the Seasons of the Spirit

Passage: “For everything there is a season and a time for every purpose under Heaven. . . For we know only in part and we prophecy only in part, but when that which is perfect comes, that which is partial shall come to an end.” (Eccl. 3:1 and I Corin. 13:9, 19)

Because we are Sabbath powered and festival driven, we understand that the final purposes of G-d will always have a bigger impact in our lives than any of circumstances through which we wander on our pilgrimage through this life towards our Father's home in glory. From the first, when He created the entire cosmos, His kingdom purposes have always been fulfilled over and above the best laid plans of mice and men.

This is not always evident when you examine the confusing ebb and flow of human history, but the timing of G-d will always trump whatever human agenda is on the table, no matter how completely things appear to be going in the opposite direction to the purposes of G-d. In the past, I have said that the spirit of Antichrist arises whenever any man or nation claims the right to rule over another nation or collection of nations. This is because there is only one who has the divine right to rule over the nations of this world and He is the Messiah, the Son of David.

He does not share this privilege with anyone, because He alone is the King of Kings and the L-rd of L-rds. It may seem that His rule and reign is taking a long time in coming, but its arrival is governed by the seasons of the Spirit and not by schemes of any world power or political mastermind. There are certain necessary conditions which must be fulfilled before the arrival of this blessed event, but its eventual arrival is more sure than the daily rising and setting of the sun.

There are the eternal seasons of G-d's Spirit which determine how and when His purposes are going to be fulfilled and while nothing can ever thwart these divine eventualities, they will only be fulfilled according to the timetable of G-d and never according to any human agenda. Since the early part of the 1800's, believers have speculated about when the L-rd's return would occur.

They have gone from setting dates, often determined by complicated mathematical formulas, to actually getting ready by selling all they possess and waiting on roof tops to be whisked away by the Spirit of G-d. A friend of mine even had a sticker warning people not to be surprised if the driver suddenly disappeared and one of his bosses jokingly warned one of the passengers in the car to be sure to grab the wheel if this was ever to occur.

Yeshua Himself said that His generation was good at predicting how the weather would turn out, but were totally clueless when it came to determining the actual seasons of the Spirit. It is G-d's appointed times that we should be aware of as we realize that time is running out for all the nations and generations of mankind, to the Jew first and also to the Gentile.

As believers, we need to understand that there are different kinds of seasons of the Spirit, when it comes to the affairs of mankind. There are first the eternal purposes of G-d which will bring this old world to a close when the time is right and when the Spirit of G-d judges that it is time for G-d's Kingdom to burst forth upon mankind and bring human history to an end.

There are also the redemptive purposes of G-d where He is working to create spiritual openness among the various peoples and nations which make up our world. This may be through a series

of signs and wonders or even a natural catastrophe which was designed to get their attention. However He works, we need to understand that He always prepares a context of introduction to facilitate the reception of His Word whenever it goes forth. When we reach out and do not find a substantial hearing, we should not be discouraged as we learn to wait on the timing and the seasons of G-d.

At various times, there has been a national opening where the door was suddenly slammed shut in the face of the Gospel. At other times competitors have arisen to siphon off interest in the Gospel to pull peoples and nations in another direction. Whatever the case, we need to learn to trust in the seasons of the Spirit, both in the midst of great opposition and in the midst of great opportunities.

This was the lesson He was teaching His people, while they languished in Egypt until the iniquity of the Canaanites had reached its full term. Just as in the days of Noah, He was reaching out to an ever dwindling righteous core and only intervened when that core was finally extinguished. This is what He is doing in our world, over an above the noise and the ever spiraling technological advances which we seem to be getting better and better at producing.

The Western world seems to have completely turned its back on the beliefs and the morality of its Judaeo-Christian heritage, and people now seem to be feasting on the latest New Age wonders of evolutionary materialism, furiously scanning the skies for any evidence of extraterrestrial life. They seem to think that they have grown beyond the teachings of the Bible and have a better explanation for the origin of life and the purpose of our existence.

This is not based on any kind of solid evidence, but on a self perpetuating set of delusional thinking where one unfounded supposition is used as proof for another. This fragile house of cards will come crashing down long before the kingdom comes, but outside of a devotion to the Word of G-d, the world will just build another house on the sinking sand of its carnal delusion. They are so good at measuring and recording the minute details of all they have discovered, but they are blinded to the seasons of the Spirit which are always unfolding around them. Are you aware of the seasons of the Spirit which are unfolding in the global society which is building up all around us?

This also applies to the seasons of the Spirit which are unfolding in our own lives and in the life of our particular congregation. The writer of Ecclesiastes said that there was a time and a season to every purpose under heaven, including those which govern how our lives will turn out. We have just lived through a major economic downturn and it may be a while before things begin to pick up again. Instead of trying to make our dollars stretch further than they have in the past, we should be asking what it is the Spirit wants to be doing in our lives and in the life of this particular congregation.

Recently we have been seeing a rise in the number of visitors who are finding our community, without us changing how we do things and not in response to any outreach campaign we may have embarked upon. It seems that our light and our salt are finally arousing the interest of people who are looking for a Messiness Jewish approach to discovering the true meaning of life – and we are glad to help them discover how to fit into the wonder of our dynamic shul. You see, discerning the seasons of the Spirit, means to be aware when things are beginning to shift and to trust Him just as strongly when they seem to be lining up against us. I am glad that I did not live through the horror of the Holocaust, but if I had been called to life through it, I

would have trusted in the hand of the L-rd even as I was arrested. I would also have trusted in the purposes of the L-rd, even as they tortured me and I would have sung His praises even when they fed me into the fires of Auschwitz.

Our first line of defense as believers should be our unshakable faith in the inevitable kingdom purposes of G-d, which shall be accomplished over and above any temporary resistance which may be encountered along the way. They are governed by the stipulations of His Word and are brought to fruition when the times and purposes of G-d reach their appointed season, not a moment sooner or a second later.

If it is my lot to live at a time when these purposes do not seem to be moving very quickly, or even in a time when there is a growing resistance to G-d and to His Word, so be it. Instead of always asking the L-rd what is going to be happening next, as if knowing more about G-d's timing, would help us walk with the King, we need to always be asking G-d how we should live and how we should respond to whatever happenstances wander through our lives.

When the disciples were gazing up into the heavens, they were told that making speculations about the kingdom time table of the return of our Messiah was a pointless, even carnal endeavour. You see G-d does not want us to be breathlessly living just for that magic moment when we are sure that Messiah will return. As passenger who sends the whole cruise waiting in the life boats, will not really get anything useful out of the cruise.

It is true that we need to live every moment of our lives in anticipation of His blessed return, but we need to do so patiently as we observe the seasons of the Spirit in our own lives and make seeking His Kingdom righteousness the primary focus of our lives. The future will hit us all at the same speed, but it is our kingdom preparedness which will determine whether we are ready for the return.

It may be our destiny to suffer great pain and loss, just as it may be our destiny to rise up on great heights of victory as we smash the spiritual darkness which rises up against us. Our faith should not be seen as giving us some kind of edge where we get a free pass out of the suffering which frequently strikes believers. It should be seen as an anchor which will never allow us to be blown off course, no matter what storms blow our way in whatever seasons of the Spirit we find ourselves passing through.

It is true that He wants us to always be aware of the seasons of the Spirit as we pass through them, but we should never feel that this special knowledge gives us any special advantages or power over G-d. In fact we should see our faith in the eventual kingdom purposes as a means where our lives come under the power of G-d, with all of the advantages which this brings.

A healthy spirituality is not substantially impacted by the environment it encounters on its homeward journey, because it is constantly feeding on the Word and not trying to figure out what the next stage of the journey will look like. G-d may tell us, in order to prepare us, but never just to settle our curiosity. I am prepared to face whatever whatevers come my way because I am not looking for the circumstances of my life to be my guide on this journey.

We need to see our lives as one big tableau which we can paint with all the colours of His Holy Word. We need to be looking daily for His coming Kingdom and not get caught up with the things of this fading world which have no kingdom value. It will always be too easy to lose our way and get caught up in living for the things of this age. That is why our kingdom awareness

is so important.

Not that we waste our time making guesses as to when it will finally appear as if we had some role in requiring it to come according to an agenda we have made up. It means that we seek to know what season of the Spirit we are passing through and how we should live in consequence to that knowledge. It is not complicated to figure out what G-d is doing in our lives, whether we are passing through a time of blessing or are blundering through a time of trials. His Word will show us how to live with a strong, healthy spiritual offense and how to protect ourselves with a strong, healthy spiritual defense.

Over and above how He is moving in our lives, we know that there are great battles being fought in the heavenlies, even as we speak. Whether this has a positive impact on our lives or makes us victims of the enemy's wrath, greater is He who is in us, that He who is in the world and in all things we are more than conquerors through Him who loves us.

I do not want to just be a fair weather believer who serves the L-rd for what he can get out of it for a better life or an easier journey. Another term for this kind of spiritual manipulation is being a rice Christian, because somehow I feel that G-d is willing to bribe us into the kingdom.

The seasons of the Spirit in our world will always be active at G-d's appointed times and we should never feel that they are being stalled or even derailed. Evil men will come and go before the final Antichrist sinks his fangs into our world and takes one last bite before the end. Good times will be followed by bad times, both in our lives and in the life of our congregation and we should be in prayer about this.

Our prayer should not be that we have the best possible time or that our congregation does not face any opposition as we fulfill our calling to be a light both to the Jewish community and to the Gentile Christian community. Our prayer should be that we encounter victory over all the fortresses and false ideas which rise up against us. Our prayer should also be that all of our individual needs are met as we grow in strength and numbers towards becoming generationally sustainable.

I look forward to the day when that which is perfect finally arrives, but we always need to be about our Father's business until that great day dawns. What is His business? First to have faith in the teachings and promises of His Word. Second to live peacefully by hope in that which is to come. And finally to learn the power of love to heal and enrich every area of our lives on a regular, daily basis.

Another way of putting this is to say we are to be a well tended garden where the fruit of His Spirit grow and flourish and not a untended garden where the works of the flesh are choking us profusely. What season of the Spirit is operating in your life and how is He telling you to respond to this divine activity?

Shabbat Shalom and Shavua Tov.