

Today's Torah Portion is taken from Leviticus 9:1-11:47 and it deals with three themes: transferring the Presence into the Tabernacle, dealing with the strange fire and the rules of biblical kosher. The Haftarah portion (2 Samuel 6:1-7:17) deals with bringing the ark back into Jerusalem and the New Testament portions outlines the superiority of the Messiah's priesthood because it is of the order of Melchizedek. I will leave these two portions for your private study and will focus on the three sections of the Torah.

This week's portion begins with the newly assembled tabernacle being consecrated so that the presence of YHVH can take up permanent residence between the two cherubim in the Holy of Holies. Once the offerings were completed according to the special instructions, Aaron blesses the people and climbs down from the big altar and goes into the tent of meeting with Moses.

Fire comes out from in front of the L-RD and consumes the offerings which were burning on the altar. This was a sign that everything had been done correctly and that from this moment on, the tent of meeting was restricted sacred space. The priests could access the Holy Place, but only the High Priest could go into the Holy of Holies. It could also be accessed by Moses during his lifetime, but no one else was ever to go in there, except to dismantle the holy space and set it up again. When this was done, they covered their eyes so that they never actually saw the ark ever again, once the L-RD's presence took up residence there.

The people were overjoyed that G-d had come to dwell in their midst, which meant that the shame of the golden calf was finally erased. They gave great shouts of joy and fell on their faces. It was a wonderful day in the life of the camp. Then Aaron's sons offered strange fire.

What happens in the next chapter is both shocking and easily misunderstood. Various potential explanations have been attempted to explain the meaning of the strange fire. It was not an act of paganism or of idolatry, it was simply an act of disobedience. The sons of Aaron had no business going into the tent with offerings of fire which were not asked for.

In order for access to be obtained to the tent of meeting, the timing and the protective rituals were clearly outlined. The two sons of Aaron decided to freelance and not follow them. We learn later that the High Priest was only to go into the Holy of Holies once a year and he was to do this by following strictly prescribed rituals. There is no room to be casual in the L-rd.

The two men assumed special familiarity with the Presence and since fire came out, they would take some in and meet with the Presence, whose guardians they had become. We are not told why they wanted to go in and it is likely that they pushed ahead before Aaron and Moses could stop them and they perished for their presumption and foolishness.

In light of our current Corona crisis, we are protecting ourselves by practicing social distancing. In order to protect the people from the potentially lethal presence of G-d, the people needed to learn to practice spiritual distancing. The two men went in without the protective rituals of spiritual distancing and they paid for their impertinence with their lives.

Instead of asking the grieving Aaron and his surviving sons to retrieve the scorched bodies, the sons of Aaron's uncle performed the task. They did not directly touch the dead bodies, but carried them out by their tunics to the place where the holy ashes were dumped. We are not told what kind of funeral, if any, they received.

Some feel that the garments escaped unharmed, but the text does not specify this. More

priestly garments could be prepared and I doubt anyone would want to wear the dead men's clothing. The tent of meeting had full extraterritoriality and was considered a heavenly place that ordinary, unprotected mortals had to avoid. This error was to be repeated twice more in the Book of Numbers, with the same result. You don't mess around with G-d. Not ever.

Here is a footnote for chapter ten. For the sacrifice of atonement to be completed, the officiating priests had to eat their portion to absorb the sins of the people and carry the blood into the sanctuary to complete the purification in a manner similar to the ritual of the Day of Atonement. Aaron and his sons could not complete the ritual and even though they were not allowed to mourn, they still refused to complete the ritual. Either the ritual remained incomplete or Aaron's cousins completed it for them. We are not told. However, the degree to which the necessary rituals was carried out was approved by Moses on behalf of YHVH. We need to learn to come to G-d on His terms and not on our own. Does He approve of you?

The focus of the portion switches to a discussion of practical holiness when it comes to eating, which the rules of biblical Kosher outline. I am a Torah observant Jew and not a Talmud observant Jew. Kosher determines what meat is safe to eat, nothing more and nothing less. The rabbinic rules of kashrut are very intricate, but the whole purpose of Kosher is to determine what meat is safe to eat and which meat can be used as a sacrifice. That's all.

Three things. If ever you are marooned on a desert Island, eat kosher and you will not get sick. Sorry, bats are not safe animals to eat, nor are seagulls. Secondly, we are not to eat blood, because the life is in the blood, and we are not allowed to eat animals alive, like the ancient Canaanites did. Lastly we are not to boil a kid in its mother's milk, but it is not wrong to mix dairy and meat, unless you are lactose intolerant. Cheese burgers can be kosher!

Chapter 11 of Leviticus and chapter 14 of Deuteronomy give a lesson in biblical zoology and all the animals on earth are divided into five distinct categories: animals that walk, animals that fly, animals that crawl, animals that slither and animals that swim. Only animals that walk and that fly can be offered to the L-rd. Please know that according to the Bible all plants are kosher and strangely enough, even though bees are not considered kosher, honey is.

If an animal walks, it must have hooves that are split and divided and it must ruminate. According to this, giraffes are kosher, but no animal with paws is safe to eat, not even rabbits. If the animal flies, it must have feathers and if it has feathers it must fly. Domestic chickens and turkeys are out of shape and are bred for weight, but they are considered kosher. No carrion feeders or predatory birds are kosher. Ostriches are not kosher, neither are bats.

If an animal crawls, it must have jumping legs, so grasshoppers and locusts are kosher, but not spiders, ants or termites. No animal which slithers is kosher and their meat is not safe to eat. If an animal swims it must have fins and scales, so sharks and catfish are not kosher. Neither are whales nor seals. Shell fish are not kosher. Bottom feeders are G-d's garbage collectors. As an exception to the rule, tuna are kosher even though they are carnivores.

As believers in the G-d of Israel, we must separate ourselves from everything which is unclean, but this must be defined by the stipulations of the Bible and not by the traditions and customs of men. Holiness must be practical and how we lead our lives must also be based on the principles outlined in His Word. Nothing less, nothing more. Keeping Kosher is good.

Sermon: Materialism Lacks Holiness

We live in an age where global societies possess more personal wealth than at any time in history and yet we are not satisfied or contented. Many people still want more and more and seem to get less and less pleasure out of all they possess. As believers, we understand that G-d will always look after our needs, even if sometimes we live through some very lean times.

The patriarchs were wealthy and they supported big communities, but their greatest treasure was always the covenant promises. You see, Jewish people do not see anything wrong with either wealth or poverty, because the community has always looked after its own.

Materialism is a spiritual sickness which confuses G-d's protection and provision, with the wealth which this world promises to those who serve its three lieutenants: the lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh and the pride of life. Mature spiritual people ask themselves when enough is enough, because satisfaction and self realization do not depend on how much of this world's goods a person or a community possesses. Our faith is our greatest treasure.

Some people and some professions will naturally attract riches, and this is not wrong. However, we are called to work for the true riches of the coming Kingdom and not become slaves to this fading life. The rich need to be rich in their generosity and the poor need to rejoice in the true wealth of the Kingdom, which nobody can take away from them.

In his first epistle to Timothy, Paul said that if we have food and clothing, then that is enough as a basic life principle. Anything less is painful; and anything more, should not be allowed to become a distraction away from what really matters in this life. The riches of a rich man often rob him of sleep, but the sleep of a common labourer is sweet. What matters in your life?

If riches are a byproduct of our profession, all is good, but if ever the pursuit of wealth becomes our key objective, we will plunge our lives into great pain and much hurt. What shall it profit a man if he gains the whole world and yet loses his soul? Sadly, some ministries have a carnal focus that seems to center on the acquisition of wealth and material gain.

A "name it and claim it" prosperity teacher, actually once said that the Saviour has redeemed us from sin, sickness and poverty. I have no problem with the first two, but the Messiah did not save us to make us rich. Most communities will have a mixture of wealthy and poor people, but the true measure of authentic spirituality is found in the presence of the fruit of the Spirit and in the absence of the works of the flesh and not in the contents of our pockets.

If you have lots of money, do lots of good things in the L-rd. But do not despise the poor man and do not let him lust after your wealth. Wealth and poverty are just two temporary conditions we may be passing through in this life and should not be confused with the true measure and value of our souls. Knowing His Word and having faith is what really matters.

Many of the world's great buildings were paid for by the wealthy people and many of them are stunningly beautiful. They took both the gold of the wealthy and the sweat of the poor to be completed. They only become truly vulgar when they stand as monuments to violence and men's greed. There will always be greater beauty in nature and in the heavens. I am not attacking art, only the greed of bloodthirsty men who would stop at nothing to complete extravagant monuments to their inflated egos, which will eventually crumble into dust.

Most surviving ancient monuments are just the bare bones of the splendor which they once

possessed. The great pyramids of Egypt were once topped with solid gold and sided with marble. The gold was stolen by subsequent pharaohs and the invading Muslims stripped off the marble to build mosques in Cairo. The Roman Forum also had incredible buildings which were also covered with multicolored marble, which was also later stripped off and stolen.

One day, even the most magnificent buildings will melt and disappear before the mighty fire of our Messiah's return. I do appreciate great works of art and I am a fan of fine music of many kinds. However the most beautiful thing which can be made by the artistry of human hands is dull and worthless compared to the magnificent glory which will one day be revealed.

Well, how do you keep your wealth in perspective, both when you have a lot and when you have very little? The first thing that we need to do with all that we possess is to consciously surrender all that we have and all that we hope to have to our blessed Messiah, to whom our very breath belongs. The prophet Jeremiah warned us to be wary of a love of wealth, a love of power and a love of knowledge. We need to have a strong love of the Messiah.

All that this world possesses, will one day soon fade into nothingness and what we have given our heart and soul to, will either cause us to finally receive heavenly riches in our Father's home in glory, or, sadly, our true, eternal poverty will be revealed for all to see. How do we avoid such a permanent, tragic loss? We must avoid materialism at all costs.

I have already mentioned surrendering our "all" to the Messiah, but there is another means whereby our wealth can be made to serve the coming Kingdom. And here I am talking about tithing, where 10% of our increase is offered up as G-d's portion of our resources. This portion truly does belong to G-d, whether we offer it willingly or wrongly horde it for ourselves.

You see, the tithe is actually one of the most practical and productive safety valves which both prevents us from slipping into greed and shows us how to foster the spiritual use of our financial resources. Is your tithing helping you not to slip into greed and how much spiritual use have you dedicated your financial resources to? It is really G-d's money and not ours.

In the Tanach, which is also called the Old Testament, the tithe was usually offered from the people's agricultural increase and was paid three times a year during the three pilgrimage festivals: First Fruits, Pentecost and Sukkoth. One of the first mentions of tithing was when Abraham tithed a tenth of his military spoils to G-d through the mysterious priest Melchizedek. Just before he set off on his great journey, Jacob also promised G-d a tithe of all the increase he would later acquire. He wanted G-d to be the L-rd over all he would later possess.

In the same manner, we all owe ten percent of our increase to G-d, whether it is 10% of a lot or 10% of a little. If we do not offer 10%, we are both robbing G-d and ourselves, because G-d promises to richly bless the 90% which we are allowed to keep. How is yours doing?

I am not just teaching this because your tithes and offerings pay my salary. We have had several rough years financially and, without any grumbling, I have already taken two substantial pay cuts in order to keep the congregation afloat and out of the red. When people rob the government, it is called a crime. How about when we rob the Messiah? Is that not also a crime? The prophet Malachi says that it is and it was one of the reasons our people went into the captivity of Babylon. Is your money holding you captive?

Our taxes help pay for roads and other essential services, including the salaries of those

amazing front line workers in the current Covid 19 crisis. In the same way, our tithes and offerings should pay for the ministry of our shul and allow us to build up a positive balance towards our double future objective: to procure our own place and obtain the services of an assistant who will one day replace this old rabbi. We would also like to fund the Rebbetzin as she moves into more visitation and parish ministry. We could also do with more financial aid for our music team and for our Shabbat School ministry. Where will this come from? Tithes.

We are not looking to equip our leadership with fur coats and fancy, expensive cars. That kind of greed brings great disrepute to any ministry. I am ashamed of many of the big ministry names who bring in the big bucks in the name of the L-rd and live in great luxury.

Even in the midst of our current Corona crisis, B'nai Chayim is at a crossroads. We have a wonderful new facility and our children are growing up. We need to plan for the next generation as we become truly generationally sustainable. But we need the necessary financial resources to accomplish this great and worthy task, with no one holding back.

If everyone tithed 10% or their increase, we would not only have more than enough for a full time salary or two, we could also begin to plan to purchase our own facility in the near future. I do not want to take the food off anyone's table, but when we do not tithe, we are robbing G-d and taking food off His table. At different times, we may all need a financial helping hand when we encounter financial distress, but until we have learned the amazing discipline of tithing, in many ways we will always be in financial distress. We cannot serve G-d and Mammon. You are living in constant and dangerous financial distress when you do not tithe.

If our pocketbook drives our life and we let any variety of reasonable sounding circumstances prevent us from tithing, then we will slide deeply into the red, spiritually. I know many of us are experiencing financial distress and we have fewer resources to contribute, but G-d does not look at the size of the offering, but at the heart which is offering it. In His eyes, 10% of a little is the same as 10% of a lot. We give back a portion of what He has given unto us. The tithe.

It is not always easy to live up to what the Scriptures teach, but that is our calling and sometimes people may feel that we have become their enemy, because we tell them the truth. Honestly, when we cease to tell people the truth, we have really become their enemy, especially in our materialistic society, where money is elevated to a level of importance only G-d should occupy. Materialism is totally devoid of holiness, because holiness derives from how you handle what you possess and if the perceived point of life is to keep on getting more and then building bigger storehouses, then you have missed the real point of life.

Tithing can be a touchy subject and talking about it can often carry the risk of offending people. Well, we face the same challenge and run the same risk of offending people when we share our faith and defend faith causes, which are dear to our hearts. I am not going to stop sharing because I might offend someone. I want to learn how to share wisely, so that if any offense is given, it derives from the message and not from me as a messenger.

You see, inside, I remain an old hippy who is not too interested in getting rich. I just want to love people and help them to walk more closely with the Messiah. Well, unless we pitch in with our tithe and help support the work of the shul, we cannot walk with the Messiah or serve Him in other areas of our lives. Tithing remains a very positive, necessary spiritual discipline.

You see, if the L-RD cannot trust us to contribute our tithes, how can we claim to trust Him in

other areas of our lives? It has been said that what we do with what we have, is far more important than what we actually have. My family struggled as poor immigrants when we came to this country years ago. At first, my father ended up going door to door to sell for the Fuller Brush company. It took our family well over ten years of struggling before our life was similar to the one we left behind. I do not regret that we were spared the civil war.

I know what it is to struggle as a student and to have to work summers to pay for the fall and the winter semesters. When I was doing my masters, I taught English as a Second Language four nights a week and I preached most weekends and even taught on the weekend to feed my family and pay my tuition. Many good people helped us out, but one Summer, I wrote my last exam in the morning and began work in the afternoon and finished work on a Friday and started a new semester on the next Monday. But we still tithed and it wasn't always very much and it wasn't always very easy, but our needs were met as we lived simply.

Our money seemed to go farther because we tithed and it kept our hearts from being stung with the love of money. One of my fellow students came from a wealthy home and often flew home to study on the weekends and I was not jealous of him and did not stand there with my hand out, looking for handouts. We rejoiced in the L-rd as we tightened our belts and even found money for the occasional trip to MacDonald's. We turned our money over many times before we spent it and after graduation, we went right into ministry because we had no more resources to rely on, for us to take a bit of a break. We hit the ground running.

It was amazing to see how the L-rd provided for us, even if we lived simply and humbly. One of my favorite treats at Bible School was when someone gave us two tickets to the symphony, which was way beyond our humble resources. You see when you trust the L-rd, you can count on His provision. When you do not trust in the L-rd, you have to scheme and scheme to keep the wolf from your door. Trusting the L-rd and tithing makes much more sense.

It is when we exercise our spirituality in practical ways that we serve the L-rd in action and truth and not just with empty words. Our L-rd owns the cattle on a thousand hills and the fullness of the Earth is His, so why does He want us to tithe? He doesn't really need the money, does He? Do you know there are people who wrongly teach that the tithe was abolished and only belongs to the Old Testament before the Messiah came? Silly people.

We need to pay the tithe so our hearts do not fall prey to materialism, which will make us lose our holiness. Paul said that those who are taught should contribute to the needs of those who taught them. When he first came to the Corinthian church, Paul did not require that they contribute to his upkeep and he later had to apologize for this mistake. Tithing is no mistake!

It is always a mistake not to tithe, even when our contribution would be very small. G-d blesses the widow's mite and loves a cheerful giver. He wants to be the L-rd of every part of our lives. Is He the King of your pocketbook? Is tithing a regular part of how you walk with the L-rd? Tithing brings the blessing of the L-rd to the rest of our money, because it all belongs to Him in the end. How are you handling His property? Sometimes we will need help and sometimes we can help others. But tithing is the best financial decision we can make as we wander through this life, avoiding the snares of materialism and other vicious forms of sin which the enemy is throwing at us. Shabbat Shalom and Shavua Tov. May you be blessed and protected in the coming week. How is your tithing doing?