

Parashah One Hundred Thirty-Eight
Deuteronomy 16:13–22; Micah 6:6–8; John 7:14–24

notes by Tim Hegg

Joy in this Life

Our Torah section is short but concentrated. It begins with a reiteration of instructions about Sukkot, the Festival of Booths. The terminology is interesting: “You shall make the Festival of Booths for yourself...” What is meant by the Hebrew “you shall make the Festival...”? The Sages reasoned that it referred to the construction of the Sukkah, without which the festival would have no meaning. Thus, to build the Sukkah is the first requirement of the Festival, a place in which one would celebrate the festival for seven days.

The second requirement is clearly stated: “...and you will be completely joyous.” When collated with the instructions in Lev 23, it becomes clear that the Festival of Sukkot is to be a time of joyful celebration before the Lord for all of the blessings He has given to His people. The text actually makes a prophecy: “...for HaShem will have blessed you in all your crop(s) and handiwork.” Thus, the celebration of Sukkot is dependent upon God’s blessing as He promised. Each year, the celebration of Sukkot is a reminder that God has kept His word and blessed us as He said He would.

There are many lessons to be learned from the celebration of Sukkot, but from an overall perspective the grand lesson is that God intends His people to realize a life of joy, a joy that flows out of relationship with Him first of all, and then out of the relationships we have among family and friends. In fact, these relationships exemplify the Hebrew concept of “shalom,” for it is only when there is mutual respect and appreciation that a relationship can produce a full joy. A relationship fraught with the discord of selfishness or deceit is not one which produces joy, for there is no shalom.

But Sukkot envisions a time when peace will prevail and the dwelling of Messiah with us will assure a proper understanding of any and all issues, so that true shalom can be pursued and obtained. It is this very central thread, that of shalom in the life of one who is joyful, that knits the sections together in our *parashah*. The peace that Sukkot exemplifies can only be realized in the presence of righteousness. And, righteousness within the context of a community can only exist where there is justice. Note this progression carefully: justice—righteousness—peace—joy. Now this progression is clearly opposite of what mankind in his fallen state believes. The soul that has no regard for God or His Torah believes with all his heart that joy is found in a disregard of the rules—of engaging in the “forbidden fruit” of lust and self-indulgence. It goes cross-grain to our sinful nature to agree that true joy and happiness comes through the sometimes difficult road of justice and righteousness.

Thus, having summarized the joyous festival of Sukkot, Moses goes on to instruct the nation regarding judges and officers, those who will see to it that justice and righteousness prevail within the community. I think it becomes self-evident that when the judges and officers are themselves corrupt, the way to shalom and joy with the community is blocked.

The establishment of shalom is directly connected to the Torah, as Shlomo comments regarding the Wisdom of God (Torah), (Prov 3:17) “Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace.” “Peace” is part of God’s eternal character, as it is written (Jud 6:24), “Then Gideon built an altar there to the Lord and named it Adonai Shalom (the LORD is peace)...” God is so desirous of peace that He constantly makes peace even in the heavens, as we say, עֲשָׂה שְׁלוֹם בְּמַרְמְיוֹ, “He who makes peace in the heavens...” (cf. Job 25:2).

Thus, it is God’s intention that His people strive for peace, for in doing so they imitate Him. It is for this reason that judges and officers are appointed—so that as a people we may pursue peace. So important are the judges in this respect that they are referred to by the term אֲלֵהִים in Ex. 21:6;

22:8, 9, 28. In using the term “God” to refer to the judges, it should be understood that they are appointed by God to carry out His judgments upon the earth and thus their words carry God’s authority. To revile a judge or to disrespect his judgment is thus parallel to reviling God Himself. It is, in fact, with these very texts in mind that one should interpret the saying of Yeshua in John 10:32-36. Here, having referred to Himself as the “Son of God,” He is charged by the Jews of His community with blasphemy and they are ready to administer the punishment—stoning. Yet based upon the fact that they knew the Torah, Yeshua refers to the time in the Torah where the judges, themselves mere men, are referred to as אֱלֹהִים, “God.” His argument is persuasive: if the Torah refers to mere men who act on God’s behalf by labeling them with the divine title, then how much more should He take on the divine name who is more than mere man, but Who came from the Father and Whose works prove His divine nature?

The Sages, in referring to the high position of the judge or government official, reasoned that for a person and a group of people to appoint a judge which they know to be less than honest is to incur the penalty upon themselves of “showing favor,” i.e., of judging without justice.

But even more interesting in this *parashah* is the juxtaposition of the appointing of judges and the laws pertaining to them, and the prohibition of planting an *asherah* tree or erecting an *asherah* pole near the altar. The Sages teach that it was near the altar that the Sanhedrin would render their judgments, and that coming into the court and laying hold of the horns of the altar was a signal to the judges that an individual required a *halachic* decision or a ruling on a matter. To erect idols or idolatrous items in the place where judgment was to be made was to insure a perversion of justice.

Why is the judge compared to the *asherah* pole? The Rabbis say it is to show that just as an *asherah* tree is tall and beautiful, but bears no fruit, so some judges are seemingly beautiful, and don a pious appearance, but are false in their hearts. Thus, a judge who does not render righteous decisions engages in a similar act as one who would lead a person into idolatry. Indeed, righteousness within a community or a nation is ultimately dependent upon the leaders of that community or nation submitting themselves to God and committing themselves to follow in His ways. To allow idolatry to enter the picture is to withdraw one’s submission to Adonai and therefore to leave the path of righteousness.

Verse 20 of our section makes a strong statement: “Righteousness, righteousness you shall pursue.” The word “righteous” is repeated in the verse, and the Sages asked the obvious question as to why. They concluded that the meaning was this: “you must pursue righteousness in a righteous manner.” It is not enough to seek righteousness; it must be done through righteous means. The Torah does not condone the pursuit of a holy end through unholy means.

Thus, the *haftarah* portion (Mic 6:6-8) is indeed a perfect summary of the *parashah*: “He has told you, O man, what is good (i.e., what brings peace); And what does Adonai require of you but to do justice, to love *chesed* (=loving kindness; loyalty to a covenant), and to walk humbly (or rightly) with your God?” The doing of justice and living a life of grace (*chesed*) can only be done by walking with God, that is, living according to His ways—following His *halachah*, if you will. The pursuit of righteousness must always follow the path He has prescribed, and none other.

I’ve wondered myself about those groups who, with sincere desire and fervency, pray that God would bring revival in their city or nation, but who at the same time persist in their clear disobedience of what God has commanded. It seems to me that true revival comes when we are struck with “thus says HaShem” to such a degree that we are willing (or should I say we realize we have no choice but) to follow Him regardless of the cost. First we must be willing to obey, and only then can we expect God’s blessing.

And so, the Apostolic section is also a fitting summary, for in it Yeshua quotes our text: “judge with righteous judgment.” But how is this possible? How could they understand that Yeshua’s

healing of a man on the Shabbat did not, in fact, break the Shabbat but established it? They could only understand it if they were looking at the whole Torah with eyes of faith—faith to see that the Torah itself pointed to the Messiah. Thus, in the end, righteousness is only found in submitting to God’s Messiah, in finding first in Him a cleansing for the soul, and then the power to live out the life of righteousness. Such cleansing, and such power, comes from being healed by the touch of the Messiah’s hand—by coming to know His saving power, a power which brings true rest—Shabbat rest, to the soul.

And this returns us full circle to the issue of peace and joy, where the *parashah* began—in the Festival of Sukkot. When we have this picture well in mind, we understand more fully why Zechariah chooses Sukkot as the fitting conclusion of his prophecy of peace. Sukkot—the dwelling of God with man—is the final and wonderful victory which God Himself has won through the work of His Messiah.