

We are Required to Rejoice

Parashat Ki Tavo



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Shabbat Shalom. Our parasha opens with the commandment of the firstfruits. This commandment of bringing the firstfruits expresses, perhaps more than any other commandment, the connection of the Jewish people to their land, to the Land of Israel.

The Importance of Firstfruits

At the beginning of our parasha we are commanded to offer the firstfruits, the commandment consists of four main components:

- * Bringing the firstfruits – the act of bringing your firstfruits to God.
- * The speech that the giver of firstfruits must make.
- * Bowing to God after the end of the speech, and after giving the firstfruits.
- * A special addition to the commandment: “Then you... shall rejoice in all the good things the Lord your God has given to you...” (Deuteronomy 26:11)

That same Israeli worker who works hard all year, prays every day for optimal conditions of rain at the right time, or sun when necessary, is finally enjoying a wonderful sense of satisfaction and great achievement when the firstfruits of the labor appear. As it says, “They that sow in tears shall reap in joy.”

And here in this act of giving to God the first and the newest, after man works hard throughout the year, the first produce, the first fruit is the most intriguing part.

Here we see how the crop turned out after much work. The first fruit has the greatest significance.

It is precisely this part, the most precious thing, that man has to give up and give to God, the main meaning of which is to strengthen generosity and to lessen the desire for food and money.

We are commanded to control our desires, and give up the best for God’s sake.

The Commandment to Rejoice

The last element in the commandment of the firstfruits is the joy that accompanies the fulfillment of the commandment:

“Then you... shall rejoice in all the good things the Lord your God has given to you...” – Deuteronomy 26:11 [NIV]

Thanking God is not only a matter of courtesy, but of fulfilling a duty. The person should feel great joy that he can give thanks for the good things.

Both as individuals and as a state we have things to be thankful to God for, we have a reason to rejoice, we live in all the goodness and blessing of God, we are free in our country to worship God and work the land.

Israel is a world leader in agricultural innovations.

Joy Helps Us Not to Forget God

Joy appears once again in our parasha, as a warning:

“All these curses will come on you. They will pursue you and overtake you until you are destroyed, because you did not obey the Lord your God and observe the commands and decrees he gave you. They will be a sign and a wonder to you and your descendants forever. Because you did not serve the Lord your God joyfully and gladly in the time of prosperity...” – Deuteronomy 28:45-47 [NIV]

Because you did not serve the Lord your God joyfully.

This passage has several meanings, the first is found at the end, with the addition of “in the time of prosperity”. When things are going well, we forget God.

When we are hungry or suffering, we remember God. We remember to ask from God. This isn't always the case when we are not hungry or not in trouble.

I learn from our parasha that it is my duty to serve God with joy. It is not enough to fulfill the commandment, it is not enough to be a believer – joy needs to seep into our inner being.

Joy Holds Us to a Higher Standard

If we compare this commandment to serve God with joy, with the Sermon on the Mount, I think we can learn something new. Jesus declares in Matthew 5:

“For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.” – Matthew 5:20 [NIV]

What is Yeshua saying here?

Do we need to strive to observe the commandments and to be more strict than the Pharisees and the scribes? Do we have to be even more devout?

No! I believe that Yeshua is speaking here of fulfilling the Word of God with joy and love. Yeshua is speaking here about our relationships, with our neighbors, and between us and God.

Yeshua teaches us that it is not enough to fulfill the commandment. There is no such thing as, “Hey, I finished, I’m done!” No! God is interested in the heart’s intent. We are required to serve God with joy.

We give importance to the faith – the Body of Messiah speaks endlessly about what we should believe. The real question is not what’s in our head, the question how much love, how much joy, do we have in our hearts.

From this parasha, and from the words of Yeshua, I learn that if I am a believer and I’m living in bitterness, if I’m a bitter person who does not live according to how God wants, my faith is not enough. Period.

The Curse of the Law

As we continue to read the parasha, we encounter many curses. The word “cursed” appears 16 times in our parasha:

“You will be cursed in the city and cursed in the country.” – Deuteronomy 28:16 [NIV]

“The fruit of your womb will be cursed, and the crops of your land...” – Deuteronomy 28:18 [NIV]

“You will be cursed when you come in and cursed when you go out.” – Deuteronomy 28:19 [NIV]

“Cursed is anyone who does not uphold the words of this law by carrying them out.’ Then all the people shall say, ‘Amen!’” – Deuteronomy 27:26 [NIV]

From here the Apostle Paul gets the concept of the curse of the law. And what does Paul mean when he says that Yeshua redeemed us from the curse of the law?

Some go further in their interpretation of the expression “curse of the law”. They propose that the Torah itself is a curse to all those who uphold it.

But that is not Paul’s intention at all when he says that the Messiah redeemed us from the curse of the law.

The Curse Allows Redemption to Come

Paul understands that the entire nation is in a shameful legal situation, where there is no one who does not sin, and so we are all under the curse and we are all condemned, we, the work of our hands, our families, are all under the curse.

Paul takes this very seriously and he asks himself and us, how can one escape from this situation? And he replies, thanks to Messiah, who bought us with his blood, who took the curse upon Himself and nailed it to the cross.

Here we have a concept of redemption, in the Bible, the work of he who is called the redeemer, and the classic act of redemption, are equal.

A redeemer is someone who pays the debt of someone else, and thereby extricates him from the situation he is in. The redeemer does not forcibly break the prisoner out of prison in order to release him. He pays the debt of the redeemed until the last cent.

Can We Just Forget About the Law?

So what now? What is my relationship to the Torah of Moses?

There are those who claim, “because we can not keep the whole Torah, we are therefore exempt from it.” Or: “If we want to keep the Torah, then we will have to observe the entire Torah, and disobedience to even one commandment will bring a curse to those who are under the Torah.

As it is written in our parasha: “Cursed is anyone who does not uphold the words of this law by carrying them out.” Then all the people shall say, “Amen!” (Deuteronomy 27:26 [NIV]) So the Messiah exempts us from the burden of Torah.”

I agree that the whole Torah can not be kept, even if we very much wanted to, but then even the “commandments of Yeshua” in the New Testament will not be kept, and no person is capable of keeping them. So is it possible to “give up” on them, because it is impossible to keep all of the instructions in the New Testament?

Yeshua's Standard is Higher

In Matthew 5:21,22, Yeshua said:

“You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.” – Matthew 5:21,22 [NIV]

And whom amongst us has never cursed his or her brother or sister? Whom amongst us has never gotten angry at his or her brother or sister?

In Matthew 5:27-30, Yeshua said:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.” – Matthew 5:27-30 [NIV]

This goes for women as well. Whom amongst us is not guilty of this sin? Who has gouged out his or her eye, and has never sinned by looking?

In Matthew 19:16-26, Yeshua was asked by a man who kept the Ten Commandments how one's name can be written in the Book of Life:

“Jesus answered, ‘If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.’” – Matthew 19:21 [NIV]

Even Yeshua's disciples were shocked by His answer. They asked, "Who then can be saved?" Whom amongst us has sold all of their possessions?

Fulfill the Law – With Joy

I believe that the whole Word of God, from Genesis to Revelation, is sacred, good, and true. And we must learn and observe the Word of God as much as is possible in today's modern life.

I will conclude in saying that this parasha and Yeshua the Messiah teach us the importance of the fulfillment of the word of God with joy and love. This is the lesson and the main point.

I will not stand here and demand strict observance of the law – but I will demand that what we do will be done with a radiant face. With a smile.

Shabbat Shalom.

The Teachings of Messiah Yeshua *in a Jewish Context*

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