



בס"ד

Partners In Torah
San Diego
Study Guide &
Take home Dvar Torah

Growing Throughout the Year

November 21, 2017

© 2017

Partners In Torah San Diego

Mission Statement:

Partners In Torah San Diego is a community-wide, independent and inclusive adult education program focusing on understanding Jewish relevancy to our lives by studying text most interesting to each participant. Through one-on-one discussion for 1 hour each week, friendships are forged between mentors and mentees, thinking is shared, and hearts are inspired.

Partners in Torah San Diego has proven to be effective at reclaiming the rich legacy of wisdom, inspiration, and guidance for many who have, until now, lacked access.

Welcome. Thank you for coming. Please encourage friends to join you in participating so that we can grow together as a community.

GROWING THROUGHOUT THE YEAR

Significantly, the Hebrew word for year is *Shana*, which means to repeat. The import of this concept is that each new day of the year brings forth a specific moment of spiritual energy, influence flowing from the Divine source of all existence, which links these 24 hours to a past, and offers us, living through this time once again, the opportunity to absorb from it renewed energies going forward.

This framework means that when a holiday is celebrated, it is not a commemoration, a simple remembrance of a time gone by, a tribute to some moment of heroism or significant historical transition. The Jewish chagim / holidays are rather set by the Torah as moments in time when we have the chance, through celebration, ritual, and openness, to tap into spiritual energy which can be transformative, going forward. We can best understand this by reviewing together the Torah text relating to the Jewish Biblical holidays (there are five), and by considering the five legal rulings which introduce them. We shall see how these seemingly mundane laws shed light on how we can maximize the joyous celebration of each of these special days, taking from them not only lessons, but spiritual strength which is essential to personal positive growth. Let's look into this now.

Here is an edited text of Leviticus, Chapter 23:

These are the feasts of the Lord, holy gatherings, which you shall proclaim in their seasons. In the fourteenth day of the first

month at evening is the L-rd's **Passover**; and on the fifteenth day of the same month is the Feast of Unleavened Bread to the L-rd; seven days you must eat unleavened bread....

You shall count fifty days, seven complete weeks (**SHAVUOT**) and you shall offer a new meal offering ... And you shall proclaim on the same day, that it may be a holy gathering to you; you shall do no labor in it; it shall be a statute forever in all your dwellings throughout your generations....

In the seventh month, in the first day of the month, shall you have a Sabbath, a memorial of blowing of Shofar.... (**ROSH HASHANA**)

Also on the tenth day of this seventh month there shall be a Day of Atonement; it shall be a holy gathering to you.... (**YOM KIPPUR**) it is a day of atonement, to make atonement for you...

The fifteenth day of this seventh month shall be the Feast of Booths (**SUKKOT**) for seven days to the Lord. The first day shall be a holy gathering; you shall do no labor in it...

And Moses declared to the people of Israel the feasts of the Lord.

What sections of Torah precede these Holy Days?

Beginning with Chapter 21, the Torah discusses the details of 5 specific legal issues:

- Spiritual contamination from contact with the dead, and the necessity of purification, as it applies to the Kohen;

- The Kohen (priest) who has a physical deformity, may not serve in the Temple as a representative of the people;
- The Kohen who becomes ritually impure through contact with a dead animal / happenstance must desist from his ministering role until he can be purified;
- An animal chosen to be brought to the Temple as an offering before the Lord, and develops a blemish, may not be offered, but rather must be redeemed;
- A Thanksgiving Offering must be completely eaten within a 24 hour period of being brought; after 24 hours elapse, any remaining parts must be burned on the alter.

Now, let's think about why the Torah would list these 5 seemingly random, seemingly minor legalities just prior to presenting us, the Jewish people, with the holy days and celebrations which have come to characterize the Jewish calendar and year.

1) Connecting spiritual contamination from contact with the dead to the celebration of Pesach:

Every human death which occurs brings a bitterness and finality into the lives of us who continue living; it raises within us natural doubts, such as 'Is G-d truly compassionate?'

The finality of death also arouses within us a pessimism, reminding us of the fleeting nature of life itself, and leaving us perplexed as to what is truly lasting, worthwhile, or meaningful?

Passover is the holiday of the Springtime, when we see nature renewing itself, seemingly coming back to life from a period of dormancy which evokes an image of death. Within the human heart hope springs, and together with the blossoms of springtime come a natural sense of energy.

The Jewish people left Egypt in the springtime, on a given day (15 of Nissan), leaving behind a society that worshipped death. The Pharaohs spent their lifetimes building their pyramid / death monument, and equipping it with all they thought they would need on the 'journey.' The Jewish people were enslaved there, stripped of all prospects for a better tomorrow, a better future for their children. It was only by clinging to the assurance that was handed down by tradition from Joseph, that 'surely you will be remembered and brought out of Egypt to the Promised Land' that we survived the generations of oppression, within a society that embraced preparation for death.

And so each year, when we return to the very moment of freedom from Egyptian bondage, we do not merely commemorate an ancient event; rather we renew within ourselves an appreciation for moral freedom, for living our lives embracing the great possibilities that life gives us, and by passing forward our moral / ethical / spiritual legacy on to our children. Passover is an antidote to a spiritual condition which we lived through and survived.

Each of us in our lifetimes must live through the loss of family and friends, we must consider death, and find the strength to place that experience properly within ourselves so as to live lives of great meaning and achievement. Passover enables us to do so.

2) Physical deformity

Imagine the pain of the Kohen, a proud descendant of the family of Aaron, aware that a physical deformity disqualifies him from service in the Temple. Imagine the frustration – my special privilege of birth becomes set aside; my educational preparation to fulfill my exalted responsibilities as a Kohen will never be put into practice. Such a circumstance could certainly justify a lifetime of bitterness, of anger, and of alienation.

Shavuot, which falls on the very day when the Revelation at Sinai took place, returns us to the moment when the entire Jewish people heard directly from G-d the Ten Commandments, and saw with their own eyes the magnificence of G-d's Presence openly manifest before them.

What value is this Torah which was revealed to us? Its essence lies in the spiritual benefits it offers us through study and practice. 'I created the Evil Inclination within all people,' declares G-d, 'and I have given you a Torah as the antidote.' Yes, human beings are imperfect, flawed, and prone to doing wrong. That is the fact of life. For some of us, our flaws are apparent to all; for others of us they are hidden, seen only by

those who love us most, or perhaps only by ourselves. In all events, is life a chance to bluff our way through, forge a reality in which we appear always to be the good one, and along the way justify our shortcomings to ourselves, to our loved ones, and to all others? Or perhaps life is a chance to do good, discover our flaws, even our deformities, and to deal with them constructively, overcoming what we can humanly overcome, and avoiding having the others define the lives we live. Shavuot focuses us on this perspective, to choose life wholesomely, and as we come to know ourselves, deal with ourselves in an honorable way.

3) Happenstance stands between me and my true self

How often do we set out to do good, to help another or to address an evil, only to fall short in our efforts and feel that our trying made no difference after all? After all, it was only happenstance or some misstep which derailed me from achieving my goal.

This experience is captured in the experience of the Kohen who accidentally becomes impure. Before him is a joyous meal made from sanctified foods, which he is now prohibited from eating. I chose to elevate some aspect of my life, seek out a renewed closeness to my Maker. And yet, even with the best of intentions, I did not reach my mark.

At such a moment, become cynical and callous, perhaps it is best to just live life out, rather than seek to raise the moral

arc of the world, and raise the spirits of all good people around me.

Rosh HaShana comes, the very first day of human existence, and we relive those stages of human moral development when we sought our G-d's Majesty, when G-d considered our righteousness or lack thereof, and the spiritually re-awakening that blowing the Shofar stirs within us. This reminds us of the upper limits of human potential, and energizes us to seek growth and progress. We are reminded that no effort for good is ever wasted, and that human beings are forever spiritually resilient, able to redirect the course of our lives.

4) Blemished offerings

We are determined to do good, and yet we fall short. Yom Kippur shows us that no act is beyond Atonement, and that through our inner will and strength of conviction, we can make amends, and spiritually recover, so that a life of purity can be started fresh once again.

5) Leftovers from our Thanksgiving offering

We assess our lives and feel a surge of happiness and appreciation. We decide to set aside some of our bounty and bring it, in Thanksgiving, to the Temple to express before G-d and our fellows that we are overflowing with gratitude.

But then, we wonder: 'yes, I have so much to be thankful for, and certainly it merits appreciation. But, who knows what

tomorrow will bring? Perhaps my celebration in itself will just be a prelude to a future tragedy or mishap.' Can we truly celebrate with a full heart?

Along comes Sukkot, and G-d invites us to sit outside under the stars for the week, unprotected. All we can count on is the Heavenly assurance that G-d's support and connection will always be there for us. We have nothing more to protect us, and nothing less.

So we learn, celebrate the great moments of life, lift your spirits high, and, whenever necessary, you will find within yourself the inner strength and Heavenly support to handle life's setbacks and tragic moments as well.

And so, as we pass through another year of life, we find ourselves even better able than before to live life to the fullest.