

## NEHEMIAH

### Lesson 11, Chapter 8 Continued

As we continue in Nehemiah chapter 8, it occurs to me that the focus of this chapter is a subject that I am confronted with virtually daily both by emails and face to face: how do we obey the Law of Moses in our current circumstances? And if we can't obey all the Law to the letter, should we try to live by any of it?

As pertains to Nehemiah and Ezra's time, so many of the commandments and ordinances of God's Torah had fallen into disuse as a result of the Jewish exile to Babylon. Everything that required a Temple and a Priesthood was impossible to observe up in Babylon, kosher eating to the divine standard was not doable, and so in some cases replacement systems were invented by the more zealous of the Jews. Those systems followed the Jewish exiles that returned back to Judah, and of course became the norm for the 95% who chose to stay.

The political reality was that the Law was given to the Hebrews almost a millennia earlier under the conditions of self-rule (having just been freed from Egypt); but now the condition was that Judah was merely a small province in a vast Persian Empire, and the Jews were Persian citizens under the authority of a Persian King no matter where they lived. How might divine laws and regulations that by design were to be not just part of the Hebrew religious sphere, but rather were to also be the everyday civil laws and moral code that the Jews lived by, translate to a people who were but an insignificant population under the firm rule of a powerful pagan government?

As we read in Nehemiah 8, and as we'll further discuss today, Ezra introduced an important concept that I have tried to introduce as well to all of you: when we can't follow the letter of the

Law because circumstances dictate that we can't, we should follow the principle that any particular Law is built upon or than any regulation is demonstrating. And truth be told, if the Torah and the Law had not been intentionally designed by the Lord to have that sort of cross-cultural flexibility and adaptability to time and progress, then it was doomed to failure from the moment the Israelites crossed the Jordan into Canaan and began to encounter life in a pagan land, fighting against and living among various pagan people.

What we do NOT see is Ezra telling the people that because you can't do one law as it was originally intended, then the whole Law is dead and gone. He doesn't say that because sometimes the letter of the Law necessarily has to be pushed to the background and the hard work of finding the principle of any particular law has to be done, that all obligation to the Law becomes optional. For many centuries the Christian solution to this challenge of making the Law relevant to changing times and circumstances has been to declare it abolished and thus to simply wipe away the challenge. According to our traditional institutional Church authorities going back as far as the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D., it is they who shall dictate religious observance, morality and behavior. It is they who shall declare holy days. Manmade Christian customs and doctrines shall replace God's laws and even evolve as political correctness evolves.

Let's re-read part of Nehemiah chapter 8.

### RE-READ NEHEMIAH 8:9 – end

Nehemiah is called the ***Tirshita***, usually translated as governor. ***Tirshita*** is not Hebrew; it is a Persian word. And it helps to realign us to the reality that Nehemiah may have had a Jewish racial heritage, but to the world of his day he was a Persian official (the king's own cupbearer) governing via Persian law over Persian citizens in a Persian province called Judah.

And verse 9 shows with certainty that Nehemiah and Ezra were contemporaries; they co-operated to convene this gathering on the 1<sup>st</sup> day of the 7<sup>th</sup> month, Tishri, and each played his role. Nehemiah is to be commended as his role is obviously one of organizing, and it is Ezra who is made front and center; Nehemiah doesn't insist on the spotlight.

It is said that the reading of the Law by Ezra caused the people to weep. However Ezra and the Levites admonished them that they should cease their tears and instead celebrate with joy. Why were the people mourning? Because God's purpose for the Law was served: it first made the people aware of their sins, and then convicted them of those sins, and then showed them what their predicament was, and finally what the consequence of sins was. Paul's comments on this subject in the Book of Romans could just as easily have come from Ezra's mouth as he stood on that wooden platform before the people of Judah.

### Romans 7:7-13 CJB

***<sup>7</sup> Therefore, what are we to say? That the Torah is sinful? Heaven forbid! Rather, the function of the Torah was that without it, I would not have known what sin is. For example, I would not have become conscious of what greed is if the Torah had not said, "Thou shalt not covet."***

***<sup>8</sup> But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, worked in me all kinds of evil desires- for apart from Torah, sin is dead.***

***<sup>9</sup> I was once alive outside the framework of Torah. But when the commandment really encountered me, sin sprang to life,***

***<sup>10</sup> and I died. The commandment that was intended to bring me life was found to be bringing me death!***

***<sup>11</sup> For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me; and through the commandment, sin killed me.***

***<sup>12</sup> So the Torah is holy; that is, the commandment is holy, just and good.***

***<sup>13</sup> Then did something good become for me the source of death? Heaven forbid! Rather, it was sin working death in me through something good, so that sin might be clearly***

***exposed as sin, so that sin through the commandment might come to be experienced as sinful beyond measure.***

Many Jews had apparently not heard the Law in a long time; some no doubt had never heard it. And as the hours of instruction passed it became clear that the traditions and customs that had been developed over the past 175 years in exile (the traditions and customs that dictated everyday life) didn't necessarily match with God's laws; it was a sobering wake-up call. Think upon what is happening here: just as Paul said 500 years later, the knowledge of their sin had been dead to these people standing before Ezra because they didn't know the Torah. Paul said in Romans 7:8, ".....apart from Torah, sin is dead". So was Paul suggesting that staying apart from the Torah was supposed to be a good thing? That the right thing (the smart thing?) is to intentionally make ourselves separated from God's laws, and thus we won't sin. Paul says in verses 12 and 13 that not only is the Torah and the commandment holy, just and good, but that any thought that the Torah has become a source of death must be dismissed. "Heaven forbid" he says to that notion. But modern Christianity says the opposite. Here's the rather standard (admittedly not universal) Christian formula: just be ignorant of what sin is according to the Bible by avoiding the Torah, and therefore since you won't know what sin is in God's eyes, you can't commit sins! Instead, sin is now customized for each person. Sin has no standard. Whatever God tells you is sin "in your spirit" is sin, but that same sin may not be sin for me (and vice versa).

Thankfully the people standing in front of Ezra took the Laws of Moses to heart and began mourning when they realized their sorry state. It is my hope, it is my purpose in life, it is the reason for the existence of Seed of Abraham and Torah Class, that someday all Believers will open the Torah and weep, finally realizing the truth and relevance of it. And yet, we have Ezra and the other leaders telling the people to stop their mourning and instead to celebrate with joy! What are we to make of this?

I think the best single word to explain the reaction of both the people and the leaders is bittersweet. Think about the meaning of that word bittersweet: bitter and sweet are opposites, so how can something be both at the same time? The definition of such a thing is called irony. And yet, this irony was true. It was bitter for the people to learn that they had been displeasing God, had somewhat intentionally ignored God's Word, and what the terrible consequences for this were. They had been living in exile as a consequence. They had returned to Judah, living in a heap of ruins as a consequence. They were subjects of a pagan king as a consequence. Yet, ironically, it was sweet that here they were finally learning what pleased God and now they knew it with certainty. They were no longer relying on flimsy traditions of men to try and be in

harmony with God. They found out that while disobedience indeed brought curses and death, obedience brought blessings and life! And the day that they were hearing all this was itself a God-ordained holy day, the Feast of Trumpets..... **Yom Teruah**. And this holy day was meant to be a joyful day, a day of abundance, and not a day of sadness.

This is exactly how it ought to be for modern Believers. Don't consider it a defeat that the Lord suddenly reveals to you that the Torah is alive and well after you had denied it for all your Christian life. Don't consider it a day to be sad and mournful when finally the scales fall off your eyes and you realize that you have a duty and obligation before the Lord to obey His commandments. Think of the bittersweet tears you cried the day you first believed; that moment that you stopped running from God; that you knew Christ was real, that He died for you, and that you had been rescued from eternal death because of your sinful ways. How awful for your past, how guilty for rebelling against the Lord, and how wonderful and thankful for your future that you felt all at the same time. That is essentially what is happening here in Nehemiah chapter 8.

In verse 10 Ezra continues to explain why the mourning of the people should turn to celebration. It is because, "the Joy of Adonai is your strength". The word translated in the CJB as strength, is **ma'uz**. More literally **ma'uz** means a refuge, a place of safety, the protection of a stronghold. So the joy of the Lord is our place of protection. Have joy in the Lord by getting into harmony with Him, says Ezra, and do this by means of knowing and obeying His Torah, and this will put you in a place of safety. The Rabbis regularly speak of the Torah metaphorically as a fence, and if we stay within the fence of the Torah, we are protected by the Lord Himself.

In verse 12 we learn that the people got the message and they left to go home and feast, and to drink (wine), but also to "send portions". In other words, what better way to celebrate than to have food! Having a special meal on a festival occasion was common in the Old Testament. In fact, a special kind of sacrifice called the **Zevah Shelamim** had been established in God's Law for these festive occasions. With this kind of sacrifice a small portion was burned up on the altar, but the majority was given back to the worshipper to eat. However the term "sending portions", **shalach manah**, is a Hebrew expression that means to give gifts of food to those who are in need. The idea is that all Israel is to celebrate, and that those who have plenty are to be sure to include those who have insufficient means to join in; no one should be left out.

Upon verse 13, we have now turned the page to a new day, the 2<sup>nd</sup> day of Tishri, and the assembly is continuing. Thus since on the day before the people had been dismissed to go home, to celebrate, and to “send portions”, only part of the crowd remained and so those affected by what happens next is described only as “the heads of the father’s clans”. And what happens is essentially that a Torah class breaks out. And as they’re studying the Torah (they were no doubt in Leviticus) they learn that part of God’s instructions concerning the Sukkot celebration that is only a couple of weeks away is to build and live in Sukkahs, huts.

### Leviticus 23:39-43 CJB

***<sup>39</sup> "But on the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when you have gathered the produce of the land, you are to observe the festival of ADONAI seven days; the first day is to be a complete rest and the eighth day is to be a complete rest.***

***<sup>40</sup> On the first day you are to take choice fruit, palm fronds, thick branches and river-willows, and celebrate in the presence of ADONAI your God for seven days.***

***<sup>41</sup> You are to observe it as a feast to ADONAI seven days in the year; it is a permanent regulation, generation after generation; keep it in the seventh month.***

***<sup>42</sup> You are to live in sukkot for seven days; every citizen of Isra'el is to live in a sukkah,***

***<sup>43</sup> so that generation after generation of you will know that I made the people of Isra'el live in sukkot when I brought them out of the land of Egypt; I am ADONAI your God."***

Now before we address their observance of Sukkot, let’s discuss an obvious omission: the Feast of Yom Kippur: the Day of Atonement. Yom Kippur is supposed to happen on the 10<sup>th</sup> day of the 7<sup>th</sup> month. It is a very special time when the day itself is a full-blown Shabbat in which no work is to be done. It is a day of fasting, not feasting.

**Leviticus 23:27-32 CJB**

<sup>27</sup> "The tenth day of this seventh month is *Yom-Kippur*; you are to have a holy convocation, you are to deny yourselves, and you are to bring an offering made by fire to *ADONAI*.

<sup>28</sup> You are not to do any kind of work on that day, because it is *Yom-Kippur*, to make atonement for you before *ADONAI* your God.

<sup>29</sup> Anyone who does not deny himself on that day is to be cut off from his people;

<sup>30</sup> and anyone who does any kind of work on that day, I will destroy from among his people.

<sup>31</sup> You are not to do any kind of work; it is a permanent regulation through all your generations, no matter where you live.

<sup>32</sup> It will be for you a *Shabbat* of complete rest, and you are to deny yourselves; you are to rest on your *Shabbat* from evening the ninth day of the month until the following evening."

Bible scholars have weighed in on the missing Day of Atonement in this passage of Nehemiah since time immemorial. Modern critical scholars say that the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah were written BEFORE the Torah was written, and so only later was the Day of Atonement added. There's no evidence for that, but it is a quite common claim today among Bible academics who find the Bible to be nothing more than Jewish Literature and myth, having no actual spiritual influence because they don't believe there is such a thing as the spiritual world. Some speculate that there was a strain in relationship between the Priesthood and Ezra or perhaps between Ezra and the acting High Priest, so Ezra cancelled the Yom Kippur observance that centered on the High Priest going into the Holy of Holies. Again, this is just fanciful thinking as there is not a hint of such a thing in the Bible or even outside of the Bible. But for me the bottom line is that we're not told. My one and only thought on this is that everything we see happening so far has nothing to do with the Temple. Everything in this chapter is happening away from the Temple, by the Watergate. The rituals of Yom Kippur, however, are entirely within the Temple, and only involve the High Priest. So I guess what I'm suggesting as a real possibility is that Yom Kippur did happen, but it bears no relationship to Ezra's reading of the Torah, the celebrating, and the teaching of the people by the Levites,

etc. so it is beyond the scope of this chapter since this is all about the Law and its relationship with the common folks.

Yom Kippur, from a Biblical standpoint, was a 100% priestly affair. The people are simply supposed to rest. They are to observe a Shabbat (not a 7<sup>th</sup> day Shabbat but a special feast day Shabbat). Judaism later added to the Biblical instruction and created a number of traditions for the laypeople to do. For instance, on the 9<sup>th</sup> day of Tishri, before the sun sets (thus becoming the 10<sup>th</sup> day and Yom Kippur), people are to gather and observe **Kol Nidrei** at a Synagogue. **Kol Nidrei** is actually a prayer that declares the person is annulling any vows they made over the past year. During the day of the 9<sup>th</sup> there is supposed to be 2 festive meals, one in the morning and the other just before the onset of Yom Kippur. On Yom Kippur there are 5 prayer services at the Synagogue. And depending on the strictness of the observance, people are not to wear shoes made of any kind of leather, and they are not to wash or bathe.

Now let's talk a bit about the command in Lev. 23:27 to have a holy convocation for Yom Kippur. This concept of certain holy days calling for a holy convocation is greatly misunderstood and I'd like to address it because it expands outward into some very touchy areas of Scriptural commands and instruction and religious observances. And it has caused anger and accusations and deep divisions within Judeo-Christianity.

First, the phrase "holy convocation" is in Hebrew **kodesh miqra**. Gentiles and English speakers commonly take the term to mean a holy assembly. So the thought is that a holy convocation, a **kodesh miqra**, is a call for God's people to assemble together for some kind of worship. That is not so. Rather from a Biblical perspective **miqra** more means a reading or a proclamation. It can mean a summons in the sense that people are being summoned to do something in common, like pray. But that in no way means that people are to travel to a common place to have that prayer. Thus by no means is the day of rest, the festival Sabbath of Yom Kippur a call for people to travel to the Temple for an assembly. Rather the Biblical sense of a pilgrimage, a journey, to a designated place to hold a common worship event is called a **chag** in Hebrew, not a **miqra**. And there are only 3 Biblical Feasts that are **chag**, collective assemblies: Matza, Shavuot, and Sukkot.

Follow me because this is where it gets really dicey. Today for many folks within Messianic Judaism especially, is the belief that Saturday, Shabbat, is the God authorized day of worship;



in fact it is to be the chief, if not sole, day of worship. And they get this from Leviticus 23:3 where we read this:

<sup>CJB</sup> **Leviticus 23:3** "*Work is to be done on six days; but the seventh day is a Shabbat of complete rest, a holy convocation; you are not to do any kind of work; it is a Shabbat for ADONAI, even in your homes.*

They see the term "holy convocation", ***kodesh miqra***, and say, see, we're supposed to assemble on Shabbat. Wrong. It simply means a holy reading or a holy proclamation. In fact traveling for assembly on Shabbat is greatly restricted. Plus, the Torah is clear that the ONLY place of a holy journey to assemble (a ***kodesh chag***) is to be the Temple in Jerusalem. If the Hebrews had been instructed in Leviticus 23:3 that they were to travel to the Temple for an assembly on every Shabbat (meaning every 7<sup>th</sup> day), it would have been a practical impossibility immediately upon them crossing the Jordan River and then scattering to occupy the territories of the districts assigned to the 12 tribes by Moses and Joshua.

In fact, Orthodox Judaism does NOT claim that Shabbat is the Jewish day of worship. No Orthodox Rabbi would tell you that Shabbat is the Jewish Day of Worship. As concerns worship, Shabbat is just another day to have worship. Admittedly Tradition has made the worship on Shabbat somewhat different as to the rituals and prayers from other days, but nevertheless this in no way separates, or designates, Shabbat as the Jewish Day of Worship. Daniel shows us that he prayed 3 times per day every single day of the week, and prayed towards Jerusalem. In fact Daniel is the model that Judaism uses for prayer and worship.

It is a myth in our time, sometimes held by Messianics (Jews as well as the many gentiles who attend Messianic synagogues), that Shabbat is the Biblically ordained day of worship. Often it is thought that by declaring Saturday as the day of worship, we are doing what our Jewish friends (more specifically the Orthodox in Israel) are doing. That's not the case. And then this is held up against Sunday, which indeed is the declared Christian day of worship, Saturday is deemed as superior and Sunday (or any other day) as an inferior or even a pagan day of worship. And therefore a Jew should worship communally only on Shabbat and shun 1<sup>st</sup> day of the week worship. Well, the Orthodox worship daily at the synagogue including Sundays and don't agree at all with this concept of Shabbat as the official day of worship. The Orthodox Rabbis fully understand and declare that Shabbat is the day of rest, and not the day of

worship.

So I want to be very clear; if you are Messianic or Hebrew Roots and harbor the notion that Shabbat is in any way the official or set apart or better or even highest Jewish day of worship, as practiced by Judaism, you have been misinformed. If you think that Orthodox Jews avoid Sunday worship, you are misinformed. If you think that there is even such a thing as a designated day of worship within the Scriptures or within Orthodox Judaism, you are misinformed. So to hang on to that notion is to act on wrong assumptions and bad information.

Now as for Christians: those of us who might think that Sunday is the proper and only authorized day of worship are also incorrect. As with the Old Testament, the New Testament does **not** ordain an official day of worship. So where did this idea come from? Around 100 A.D., the gentile church father Ignatius advocated the replacement of Sabbath with a new day called the Lord's Day, which would be the 1<sup>st</sup> day of the week. He was roundly criticized by other gentile Christian Bishops for this. Further Ignatius urged that followers of Christ avoid any worship meeting on Sabbath and instead designate Sunday NOT as a day of rest, but as a day of worship for Christians. A couple of centuries later Sunday as the Lord's Day was officially created by Constantine in the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D. And as Emperor of the Roman Empire he declared it to be the official day of worship across his entire Empire. But what isn't usually explained is that it was the official day of common worship for ALL religions in the Roman Empire, not just Christianity. And Sunday was chosen for two reasons: first, because Christians had been meeting for worship on Saturdays (among other days), which the Jews also did, and Constantine's stated goal was not to do anything the Jews did. And second, because the Sun worshipper religion of the Empire known as Sol Invictus, which at that time appears to have been the most prevalent religion practiced in the Empire, met on Sundays. So by declaring Sunday as a national day of worship for all religions, including Christianity, Constantine avoided a messy political and religious problem.

Let me end this discussion about the term "holy convocation", ***kodesh miqra***, by saying that what I have read in their writings leads me to suspect that the gentile church fathers, early Bishops, and Constantine who were blatantly anti-Jewish were confused about the Sabbath and about the need for a day of worship, and like so many Christians and Messianics today, thought that at least in the minds of the Jews the two were essentially the same thing. They are not. God's ordained Sabbath is strictly the day of rest; it is not the day of worship. There is no God ordained day of worship. Any designated days of worship are manmade traditions and customs. And interestingly the Jews didn't make any traditions about any particular day being THE designated day of worship; 4<sup>th</sup> century Christians did that. Once more: that is not the

same issue as to which day is Sabbath. That is well established by the Holy Scriptures, and it is Friday sundown to Saturday sundown. It is not optional, and it is not changeable. But most important, please cease judging one another about which day or days you go to a communal worship meeting. Worship any day you like, and know that God finds it perfectly acceptable; it's humans that get all bent out of shape about it.

Getting back to Nehemiah 8:15, we find that the leaders sent out word that everyone was to construct a Sukkah; they were all to go and collect various kinds of tree branches and large plant foliage to use in the construction. So the people obeyed and all over Jerusalem and Judah people built Sukkahs and placed them on their roofs, in their courtyards, by the Watergate where they were gathering, by another place called the Ephraim Gate, and even in the Temple courtyards. Everyone lived in a Sukkah for the entire 7 day cycle of the Feast of Sukkot. But perhaps the most interesting aspect of this passage is that the writer says that building and living in Sukkahs had not happened since the days of Joshua (9 centuries earlier). That is, apparently after Joshua's death the Israelites either stopped observing Sukkot in general, and/or stopped building and living in Sukkahs as part of the celebration. We do get mention in a few places in the OT prior to Ezra and Nehemiah of celebrating feasts but no specific mention of celebrating Sukkot. In Ezra chapter 3 we see that some years earlier Ezra had led a Sukkot celebration. So it seems that at the least the use of huts, Sukkahs, had been dropped hundreds of years earlier, and that only occasionally was the Feast of Sukkot celebrated at all. A very sad commentary on Israel's history, and just one more reason that God eventually ejected all 12 tribes from their land.

The good news is that the people were so glad to be doing this; they didn't see living in Sukkahs for a week as a burden but rather as a newly re-discovered joy. And verse 17 also gives us a clue as to why this building of Sukkahs was embraced with such zealousness by the people. An emphasis is made in this passage that it was the returned Babylonian exiles who celebrated using Sukkahs. I think it is reasonable to postulate that they felt a kindred spirit with those Egyptian refugees led by Moses who were returning from their exile. And so this is how Israel is supposed to feel every time they celebrate Sukkot; they are to remember that they were slaves in Egypt, God redeemed them, and that their ancestors lived in huts in the wilderness. This feast re-connects present Israel with past Israel and makes them as one common people with one common identity. And this is why I am so adamant that gentile Believers need to celebrate this and the other Biblical Feasts, because it connects with Israel as one people under one set of covenants given to us by the One God. But sadly it is also the reason that Christianity in general refuses to celebrate the Biblical Feasts: they want to be separate from Israel, and separate from Israel's covenants.

It is hard to know what to make of these words that they read from the 1<sup>st</sup> day to the last day (no doubt meaning the 7 days of Sukkot) from the Torah. There is no Scriptural instruction to do this. So perhaps this is not the beginning of a new tradition, but rather a one time event brought about by the completion of the wall around Jerusalem and then a determination of the people to return to the Torah. And the only way to do that is to study it, remember it, and do it.

We'll move on to chapter 9 next week.