

Entrance to the Eternal Kingdom

Introduction

In our Torah cycle, we've been making our way through the book of Leviticus. In Hebrew, the book of Leviticus is named Vayikra, which means "he called." That's an appropriate name because it's about how to approach God when he calls you. How to draw near to the consuming fire of the Creator. This is a big deal, because drawing near to God is the purpose and meaning of our lives. It's why you're here. We have been called. We are on a quest to follow God's calling.

With each week and each parashah in Leviticus, we've taken a step on a progression toward unity with God. It started with sacrifices, or *korbanot*. The Hebrew word for sacrifice is *korban*, which comes from the term "to draw near." We are drawing near to God.

The text then introduced us to the priesthood, the family of *kohanim*, who serve an intermediary role, representing us before God in the *mishkan*, the Tabernacle, and representing God to us.

The Torah moved on to addressing the obstacle of human mortality as it relates to ritual purity. It talked about external sources of impurity, such as dead animals, and then moved to internal causes of impurity, such as life cycle and bodily functions.

Then it took us to an even deeper level and introduced the problem of *tzara'at*, the skin disease caused by an impure heart.

This week, in parashat Acharei Mot, we move on from purity to atonement, to our yearly relationship maintenance with God on Yom Kippur, the day of atonement.

Our parashah goes on to address relationship boundaries and the proper context for sexual contact, the limits that define marriage relationships.

But this week, we read two parashiyot, moving on to parashat Kedoshim. Kedoshim means "holy ones," and it comes from the opening passage where Hashem commands, "You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy." It contains a fascinating mix of laws, some laws that seem ethical, others that seem ceremonial. Ultimately, the purpose of the laws in this section is to provide each person with guidelines for revealing God's holiness to the world, and achieving holiness in our own lives. Holiness is an important step along the way to our ultimate goal: unity with God.

The commandment to "be holy"

But the commandment itself, "be holy" is a bit difficult to understand on its own. How can a person just "be holy"? What is the Torah commanding us to do in the specific verse, "You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy"?

Holy, or in Hebrew, *kadosh*, means "separated for a divine purpose." Achieving holiness involves collaboration between God and man. For example, Shabbat is a holy day. It is holy because as Genesis 2 tells us, God blessed the Shabbat and sanctified it (sanctified means "made it holy"). And yet, God commands Israel to remember and observe the Sabbath day, "to sanctify it." Who sanctifies Shabbat, God or man? The answer is that it is a partnership; and this is a general rule of how sanctification and

holiness work. So what about us—how do we become holy? God sanctifies us, and we sanctify ourselves, and in partnership, we achieve our goal.

But back to the commandment, “be holy.” If holiness entails separating, what then are we to separate ourselves from? It already told us what not to eat, who not to sleep with, and so on. What is this verse adding?

Corrupt with the Permission of Torah

The Ramban has a famous interpretation of this verse where he claims that we need to separate ourselves even from things the Torah permits to us. How so? It’s not enough to look at the Torah as a book of regulations. You must find the heart of God in it, recognize the purpose of life in it, and let it guide you on a trajectory of improvement. The Ramban explains that a person could in theory keep every technical detail in the Torah and yet still be a corrupt person. This verse, “be holy,” comes to mitigate any such loopholes by laying upon us the bigger picture.

That kind of corruption is what Yeshua confronted in his statements, “You have heard that it is said...but I say to you.” Yes, the Torah gives us a list of dos and don’ts, but those are dots we must connect to produce a whole picture of our divine calling. Remember, God has called us. This calling is not about sitting in the place we call “good enough,” where our spiritual life is quarantined in a small corner of our lives to prevent it from spreading. It is about seeking day by day to make spiritual progress, a process that lasts our whole lives.

Spiritual Progress

We can find the concept of spiritual progress throughout the Bible, but today I’d like to focus on a particular passage I find interesting. In 2 Peter chapter 1, the author provides a step-by-step plan for how to avoid corruption, become spiritually fruitful, and enter the Kingdom. With God’s help, we will analyze this list in light of Jewish sources and wisdom. Today, my goal is to just to provide an introduction. We won’t have time to get into the list itself in depth, but God willing, we may be able to take a closer look in the future.

Supplementing Faith

The Eternal Kingdom

Let’s start by taking a first look at the passage: 2 Peter 1, starting with verse 5:

For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love.

OK, here we have a step-by-step roadmap. What is the destination? Let’s cut to the chase and jump down to verses 10 and 11:

Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall. For in this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Master and Savior Yeshua the Messiah.

Our goal is to follow God's calling and enter the kingdom. What is the kingdom? It is the ultimate Shabbat at the end of our current world, the time of fulfillment of all God's promises through the prophets. It begins with the resurrection of the righteous, and it's the highest priority of a disciple to enter that kingdom, as Yeshua taught us: "seek first the kingdom of God."

If this list proposed in 2 Peter 1 really works (and of course we should accept that it does), then it's extremely valuable to us as disciples.

Counting Up

Achieving spiritual progress is quite apropos to our current season. We are now nearly halfway through a period known as Sefirat HaOmer, or the counting of the Omer.

The Omer is the name for the period between Passover and Shavuot. It is a period of 49 days, which are seven weeks, and fiftieth day is Shavuot.

When the Israelites left Egypt, they traveled during these 49 days, arriving at Mount Sinai in that final week. On the fiftieth day, God revealed the Torah to them.

The Torah instructs that every year, we are to count the 49 days and the seven weeks starting the second day of Passover. On the fiftieth day, the day of the giving of the Torah, we celebrate a holiday called Shavuot, which means "weeks."

The Torah kicks off this count with the first ceremonial harvest of barley during Passover. The word *omer* is a unit of measure referring to the amount of grain in that first offering.

Leviticus 23:15-16 instructs us to count the days.

You shall count seven full weeks from the day after the Sabbath, from the day that you brought the sheaf [Hebrew: omer] of the wave offering. You shall count fifty days to the day after the seventh Sabbath. Then you shall present a grain offering of new grain to the LORD.

In Deuteronomy 16:9-10, the command is like this, instructing us to count the weeks:

You shall count seven weeks. Begin to count the seven weeks from the time the sickle is first put to the standing grain. Then you shall keep the Feast of Weeks—

"Weeks" in Hebrew is Shavuot, the singular "week" is *shavua*, as we say at Havdalah when Shabbat ends, *shavua tov*. So, one week, one shavua, many weeks, many Shavuot.

By having us count these days, the Torah has us retrace the steps of the Israelites. Not the physical journey, but the spiritual journey of transformation.

In Egypt, they were degraded, impoverished, and surrounded by idolatry and impurity. Just seven weeks later, God bestowed upon them his holy, pure Torah. But to receive it, they needed a spiritual makeover. They needed preparation. This is why it took 50 days, instead of happening the moment they crossed the sea. For the Israelites leaving Egypt, those seven weeks were seven weeks of spiritual progress.

The Counting of the Omer and Spiritual Self-Improvement

Passover is not just a time of remembrance. The Haggadah tells us, "In every generation a person is obligated to see himself as though he was personally freed from Egypt." That means that every year at

Passover, we relive the exodus. We are freed again from the bondage that shackles us. We are redeemed from the burdens and obstacles to our spiritual growth.

And likewise, on Shavuot we receive the Torah once again. Like our ancestors and spiritual forebears we say "All that Hashem has said, we will do."

But are we really ready to receive the Torah? Have we spent the weeks leading up to Shavuot preparing ourselves? This is what we are doing as we count each day. We want to level up in holiness and closeness to God each day. The numbers increase as we ascend like the floor indicator in an elevator.

Tools for Growth

You might be saying, sure, I would love to grow spiritually, but what does that even mean? Am I supposed to just get more religious? Double down on my religious persona?

People just getting started on a life of keeping Torah will often look around at the community and think, I get it. I'll grow a nice long beard and wear tzitzit, or I'll cover my hair with a tichel and wear long skirts. I will forbid pork from entering my mouth, and I will tell my family I can no longer attend their Christmas gatherings.

Little do they understand, those are not the fundamentals of Judaism. That's not what makes a person Torah observant.

Fortunately, there are tools and methods for growth. And our goal is to improve our character, our inner person, not the persona that other people see directly.

The practice and study of character refinement and spiritual discipline in Judaism is called mussar. The most common approach to mussar is to focus on specific character traits or qualities called middot. Middot literally means "measurements," because we are taking an honest assessment of ourselves, just as one might use a scale to measure progress as they seek to become more physically fit.

Preparation to Receive the Torah

Let's look at some specific resources and roadmaps for spiritual growth. One great example comes from the ancient book of Jewish wisdom called Pirkei Avot. It contains a list of 48 qualities by which one must acquire Torah.

Greater is learning Torah than the priesthood and than royalty, for royalty is acquired by thirty stages, and the priesthood with twenty-four gifts, but the Torah by forty-eight qualities. By study, Attentive listening, Proper speech, By an understanding heart, By an intelligent heart, By awe, By fear, By humility, By joy, By attending to the sages, By critical give and take with friends, By fine argumentation with disciples, By clear thinking, By study of Scripture, By study of Mishnah, By limiting sleep, By limiting chatter, By limiting pleasure, By limiting frivolity, By limiting preoccupation with worldly matters, By long-suffering, By generosity, By faith in the sages, By acceptance of suffering. [By being someone] Who recognizes his place, Who rejoices in his portion, Who makes a fence about his words, Who takes no credit for himself, Who is loved, Who loves God, Who loves human beings, Who loves righteous ways, Who loves reproof, Who loves uprightness, Who keeps himself far from honors, Who does not let his heart become swelled on account of his learning, Who does not delight in giving legal decisions, Who shares in

the bearing of a burden with his colleague, Who judges with the scales weighted in his favor, Who leads him on to truth, Who leads him on to peace, Who composes himself at his study, Who asks and answers, Who listens and contributes, Who learns in order to teach, Who learns in order to practice, Who makes his teacher wiser, Who is exact in what he has learned, And who says a thing in the name of him who said it. Thus you have learned: everyone who says a thing in the name of him who said it, brings deliverance into the world, as it is said: “And Esther told the king in Mordecai’s name” (Esther 2:22).

It is convenient that there are 48 traits by which one acquires Torah, and there are 49 days of the omer, which gives you 24 hours to practice each one and an additional 24 hours for review. There is a great book called *With Heart in Mind* by Alan Morinis that expands on each one of these traits and provides actionable methods for putting them into practice. Perhaps it would be even more effective to spend about a year focusing on each trait over the course of a week. No reason not to start now.

Let me give you another example of how a list can be a helpful tool for personal growth. Here is a passage from the Mishnah, at the very end of tractate Sotah. This quote is from a second-century sage and comes in the context of discussion about what has happened since the destruction of the Temple, how the world has gone down the toilet, so to speak, and so this list provides guidance as to how to endure the chaos of the end of days.

Rabbi Pinehas ben Ya’ir says: Torah study leads to care in the performance of mitzvot. Care in the performance of mitzvot leads to diligence in their observance. Diligence leads to cleanliness of the soul. Cleanliness of the soul leads to abstention from all evil. Abstention from evil leads to purity. Purity leads to piety. Piety leads to humility. Humility leads to fear of sin. Fear of sin leads to holiness. Holiness leads to the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit leads to the resurrection of the dead.

Again, we are presented with a spiritual progression involving ten steps. A classic work of mussar, entitled *The Path of the Just*, or *Mesillat Yesharim*, explains and expands on each one of these steps. At Beth Immanuel, we have used this text multiple times in studies and classes, and I can’t recommend it enough.

These are only two of many examples of mussar literature available in the Jewish world. Texts like these resonate with our Messianic faith and with the teachings in the New Testament because the message of Yeshua was at its core a message of mussar.

Peter’s Seven Steps

With that brief introduction out of the way, let’s now begin to take a look at the process outlined in 2 Peter. Honestly, we will only have time for an overview, but perhaps this would be a good subject for a longer series of discussions.

The list begins in 2 Peter 1:5: “For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue.” We might deduce from this that the first step in the journey is faith. In some sense this is true, but the way Peter is framing it, it seems like he considers it not the first step, but the starting point. What faith is he talking about? Go all the way back to verse 1:

Simeon Peter, a servant and apostle of Yeshua the Messiah, To those who have obtained a faith of equal standing with ours by the righteousness of our God and of the Savior Yeshua the Messiah

There are some strange features in this verse. First, Peter says that the community receiving this letter has “obtained a faith.” How can you obtain a faith? This is a highly unusual verb to use alongside “faith.” You either have faith or you don’t. Second, this verse uses some peculiar pronouns. Who are the “those” who obtained faith, and who are the “ours” who apparently already had it? Third, in what sense is this acquisition of faith “by the righteousness of God?”

I think the second question is the easiest to answer, so let’s start with that. “Those” obtained a faith equal to “ours.” The most plausible reading is that Peter is writing to a community of Gentiles whose faith he deems of equal value to his own community, the Jewish people. In that light, this list describing the entrance to the eternal kingdom is Peter’s way of saying, “Welcome to a life of faith, now let me show you the ropes. You want to know how to follow our God? How to take hold of the light of Torah shining through the Jewish people? Here are some practical steps.”

That’s great news for us, because it suggests that this list is a great path to pursue for disciples who are Jewish and for disciples from the nations. It’s universal.

But what about the other two questions. What does it mean to “obtain” faith, and in what sense is it “by the righteousness of God”? To answer this question, we must pick up on the allusion he is making to the Torah, to Genesis 15:6.

Genesis 15:6 tells us, “And he [Abram] believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.”

A Protestant interpretation will interpret the verse this way. “And Abram believed in God’s promise, and in response to Abram’s belief, God imputed to him righteousness, that is, the forgiveness of sins, thereby granting him access to heaven.”

But there is another way. The verse says “he counted it to him as righteousness.” Who counted what to whom as righteousness? Additionally, the Hebrew word for “righteousness” in this verse is tzedakah, a word that has come to mean “charity, alms, donation, a free gift.” Yeshua uses the word righteousness in this way in Matthew 6:1, “Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people...when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you.” In that light, consider this reading of Genesis 15:6 by Rebbe Menachem Mendel of Kotzk:

Belief in Hashem was planted and engraved in the heart of Abraham, but he did not think that this came from his very nature, rather [let us understand “and he counted it to him for righteousness” as] “he regarded it as charity”: he thought, and knew, that the Creator of the world had treated him charitably and mercifully by planting in his heart belief of Him and His unity.

Do you understand this interpretation? Abram had Emunah, had faith in Hashem, and yet he counted that faith as tzedakah from Hashem. Abram said, even this faith is not something I achieved of myself, but I obtained it from God by his generosity as tzedakah.

This reading of Genesis 15:6 helps us understand what Peter is getting at:

Simeon Peter, a servant and apostle of Yeshua the Messiah, To those [Gentiles] who have obtained faith [in the manner of Abram] of equal standing with ours [the Jewish people] by the tzedakah [as a charitable gift] from our God and from the Savior Yeshua the Messiah.

And this is why faith is not the first step on the journey. Faith itself is an act of God's generosity on our behalf. We receive faith itself as a free gift, and it is a prerequisite to embarking on our journey of sanctification. As such, faith is the starting line, it is position zero.

If the first day of the counting of the Omer happens on the second day of Passover, it marks one day of progress from the starting point. That means that the starting point, day zero of the omer, is Passover night itself. It is the night that we, by an act of faith and the kindness of God, ate the bread of faith, the matzah, along with the Passover lamb and the bitter herbs, as we awaited the fulfillment of his promise.

Given that faith is position zero, the starting point but not one of Peter's steps, how many steps are there to the Entrance to the eternal kingdom? Let's take a look:

1. Virtue
2. Knowledge
3. Self-control
4. Steadfastness
5. Godliness
6. Brotherly affection
7. Love

Seven? That's a suspicious number, isn't it? Does it align with the seven sefirot? Are they going up or are they going down? What does each one really mean? Those are fun questions we can explore in the future.

Spiritual Self-Improvement as a Lifelong Journey

To wrap up, I'd like to emphasize the importance of ongoing spiritual growth throughout life. Being a person of faith, a disciple of Yeshua, is not a binary condition. It's a constant mission of growth, a choice that you make every day and every minute of the day. In Pirkei Avot, we learn that the great sage Hillel taught, לֹא מוֹסִיף יָסֵף , lo mosif yasef: if you are not adding, you are ending. There is no such thing as treading water in spiritual life.

Salvation

You might feel concerned about the idea that we should progress toward the kingdom. I just saw a sign on a nearby church that says, "Salvation is received, not achieved." Does seeking to enter the kingdom by following the steps on this list mean we are trying to earn our salvation? Those concerns come from a mindset and worldview that is foreign to Judaism. Is salvation a free gift from God? Absolutely. But it's not a ticket that you get by saying some magic words. God is gracious and faithful even when we are unfaithful, but this is not mutually exclusive with the idea that we push forward toward the goal and task we were assigned to nonetheless, storing up treasures in heaven. As Peter says it, "being diligent to confirm our calling and election." Assurance of salvation and pursuit of salvation can and do coexist. Just as sanctification comes from above, from God, and from below, from us.

God will take care of his responsibility. We don't have to worry about that part; we focus on our own responsibilities. And even our spiritual growth relies on his help; nonetheless it requires our initiative, if only to pray and ask him for motivation.

Conclusion

I want to encourage you today to utilize the remaining time of the Counting of the Omer to make efforts toward spiritual growth. Don't worry if you are just getting started now, and don't waste the remaining days. This is urgent. Don't tell yourself, I'll come around and pick it up next year. Start today.

Maybe you will find this list in 2 Peter inspiring. Or pick up a book like the ones I suggested. If you want to receive the spiritual outpouring we are promised on Shavuot, then prepare yourself to receive it.

Systematic spiritual progress throughout life

Ongoing spiritual development doesn't end with Shavuot. It is our purpose in life. Every day, seek opportunities to enhance your walk with Hashem, to become more like our holy Master Yeshua, to perfect your character, and to improve your relationships with others.

Kedoshim tihyu. You shall be holy, for the Lord your God is holy. That is both a call to action and a promise. The sages taught (Shabbat 104a) that one who seeks to be purified is helped from heaven. That's probably the source of the old saying: God helps those who help themselves.

Let's support one another as we progress. Collaborate. Find a partner or a group and work through a text together. Answer God's call by seeking him. Strive for holiness and pursue the entrance to the Eternal Kingdom.