

2-11-17 to Roeh Israel Abilene – B'Shalach (“when he let [the people] go”)
Torah Portion: Exodus 13:17 – 17:16
Haftarah: Judges 4:4 – 5:31
Suggested Acheron K'tuvim: Acts 23:1-7

The Pharisees, Paul and Yeshua

Central question of this message: What did the Pharisees, Paul, and Yeshua have in common?

We are in the fourth reading portion of Shemot (Exodus) today. It is entitled B'Shalach, and comes from the eighth word in the English, and the second Hebrew word of the passage, which means “when he let [the people] go”.

Ex 13:17-18

17 Now it came about when Pharaoh had let the people go, that God did not lead them by the way of the land of the Philistines, even though it was near; for God said, "Lest the people change their minds when they see war, and they return to Egypt." 18 Hence God led the people around by the way of the wilderness to the Red Sea; and the sons of Israel went up in martial array from the land of Egypt.

וְלֹא־	הָעָם	אֶת־	פַּרְעֹה	בְּשַׁלַּח	וַיְהִי	17
that not	the people		Pharaoh	when had let go,	And it came to pass,	
<u>3808</u>	<u>5971</u>	<u>853</u>	<u>6547</u>	<u>7971</u>	<u>1961</u>	
כִּי	פִּלְשְׁתִּים	אֶרֶץ	דֶּרֶךְ		אֱלֹהִים	
although	the Philistines,	the land of	the way of	through	God	led them
<u>3588</u>	<u>6430</u>	<u>776</u>	<u>1870</u>	<u>9999</u>	<u>430</u>	<u>5148</u>
יִנָּחֵם	פֶּן־	אֱלֹהִים	אָמַר	כִּי	הָיָא	קָרֹב
repent	Lest peradventure	God	said,	for	that	near; was
<u>5162</u>	<u>6435</u>	<u>430</u>	<u>559</u>	<u>3588</u>	<u>1931</u>	<u>7138</u> <u>9999</u>
	מִצְרַיִם:	וְשָׁבוּ	מִלְחָמָה	בְּרֹאֵתָם	הָעָם	
	Egypt:	and they return to	war,	when they see	the people	
	<u>4714</u>	<u>7725</u>	<u>4421</u>	<u>7200</u>	<u>5971</u>	
דֶּרֶךְ	הָעָם	אֶת־	אֱלֹהִים	וַיֹּסֶב	18	
the way of	through	the people	God	But led about,		
<u>1870</u>	<u>9999</u>	<u>5971</u>	<u>853</u>	<u>430</u>	<u>5437</u>	
בְּנֵי־	עָלוּ	וַחֲמִשִּׁים	סוּף	יָם־	הַמִּדְבָּר	
the children of	went up	and harnessed	Red	the	sea: the wilderness of	
<u>1121</u>	<u>5927</u>	<u>2571</u>	<u>5488</u>	<u>9999</u>	<u>3220</u>	<u>4057</u>
			מִצְרַיִם:	מֵאֶרֶץ	יִשְׂרָאֵל	
			Egypt.	out of the land of	Israel	
			<u>4714</u>	<u>776</u>	<u>3478</u>	

Today's parasha contains the account of the parting of the sea, the crossing of the people, and the drowning of Pharaoh's pursuing army. In today's portion, the Hebrew people, together with the "mixed multitude" which were gathered with them in faith to the One true G-d, became separated from not only their slave-masters, but also from the land of Egypt. The people on that day became "separated ones" as they turned their backs on the culture of Egypt, and then went forward to an appointment with their G-d.

And that concept of being separated unto the L-rd is a springboard for the topic I wish to address for you today, as the latest installment in my series on clarifying some of the troubling issues that some in the Body have with certain topics in Scripture.

Today, I wish to turn to the topic of the Pharisees, as they are called today, and address whether they deserve the harsh reputation with which they have been painted by modern Christian teachers.

Since the Christian “church” was ripped from the G-d-woven tapestry of Jewish life by the efforts of the early church fathers, there has been a consistent undercurrent of antisemitism in some church teachings. This tragic doctrinal drift found a level of acceptance and codification in the decrees of the Council of Nicea, and have only increased since that time.

One of the decidedly antisemitic teachings that many of us have heard repeatedly in churches is that “the Pharisees were hypocrites.” This is supplemented by the statement, “Jesus condemned the Pharisees.”

Without question, there were *some* Pharisees who were hypocrites, just as there are a number of Pastors who fit that unflattering descriptor. And most certainly Yeshua condemned *some* of the practices of *some* of the Pharisees, as we will examine, below.

But I will suggest to you today that when Christians paint all Pharisees with these wide brushes of disdain, they draw too broad a circle, surrounding all of those who might be categorized as “Pharisees.”

It is quite easy, when speaking to a group of people who are of like mind, to make sweeping statements with which the group agrees. But broad agreement by a group regarding any topic or statement does not confer a mantle of “truth” upon it. Consensus does not define truth.

Examples are easily found. It was the consensus of the scientists and astronomers within the Catholic faith that the Sun rotated around the Earth. They saw the Sun “rise” and “set” with no sense of movement under their feet to suggest the Earth had moved at all. When Nicolaus Copernicus determined that the Earth rotated around the Sun, and published his findings in a book entitled *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium* (On the Revolutions of the Celestial Spheres), just before his death in 1543, he started what was called the “Copernican Revolution” which sparked a revolution in scientific thought.

Notably, Martin Luther was one of Copernicus’ strongest detractors, saying, “This fool wishes to reverse the entire science of astronomy; but

sacred Scripture tells us that Joshua commanded the Sun to stand still, and not the Earth.”

Copernicus was followed by Gallileo Gallilei, who fashioned a telescope which he used from 1609-1612 to visualize, and then describe, mountains on the Moon, and moons around Jupiter. He built upon Copernicus’ theories, and solidified the idea that the Earth was in orbit around the Sun, and that the Earth rotated on its own axis. He also advanced the idea that neither the Earth nor the Moon were flat disks, but rather spherical.

In 1615, a Dominican friar filed a written complaint against Gallileo with the Pope, accusing him of heresy, for the Earth’s motion as postulated by Gallileo was contradicted by Scripture. (Joshua 10:12-13). A trial was conducted, presided over by Pope Paul V. The verdict was that Gallileo’s beliefs were heresy, and ruled that these teachings were prohibited. It also prohibited the reading of Copernicus’s writing.

Thus, the consensus of the scientists sponsored by the church was clear, even after considering the findings of Copernicus and Gallileo – the Earth is the center of the universe, and the Sun and Moon rotate around it. ¹

¹ In 1992, Pope John Paul II publicly apologized for whatever faults were committed by Church officials against Galileo.

There are many more examples which make this point, but this should be sufficient. A consensus of belief among Christians does not in and of itself, establish truth.

The core problem, in my opinion, which manifests itself in persistent error in either the Christian or Jewish communities, is found in three main parts:

1. Ignorance brought on by a reliance upon the statements of others, combined with failure to do adequate personal research,
2. The imposition of personal theology upon Scripture, forcing the verses to conform, rather than allowing the culture and linguistic techniques within that Scripture to bubble to the surface to provide clarity, and
3. The consistent repetition of error in an atmosphere of consensus which then allows that error to become embedded into the faith so deeply that the truth, once revealed, is immediately dismissed as inconsistent with true faith.

Regarding the church's view of the Pharisees, one bubble of truth breaks the surface where in the book of Acts we find:

Acts 23:1-7

23 And Paul, looking intently at the Council, said, "Brethren, I have lived my life with a perfectly good conscience before God up to this day." 2 And the high priest Ananias commanded those standing beside him to strike him on the mouth. 3 Then Paul said to him, "God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall! And do you sit to try me according to the Law, and in violation of the Law order me to be struck?" 4 But the bystanders said, "Do you revile God's high priest?" 5 And Paul said, "I was not aware, brethren, that he was high priest; for it is written, 'You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people.'" 6 But perceiving that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, Paul began crying out in the Council, "Brethren, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees; I am on trial for the hope and resurrection of the dead!"

Clearly, Paul was offering testimony in court, in defense of an accusation against him. So to offer a falsehood would be a grievous sin. Let us then conclude the Paul was indeed offering truth.

That being said, when Paul said, "I am a Pharisee," we must conclude he spoke the truth. Note that he *does not* say "Until recently, I was a Pharisee." He affirms he is still in that group.

I have heard many times Christian teachers state that “Paul was converted” to Christianity on the Damascus road. They contend that in that moment, he turned his back on all things Jewish. If that teaching is true, then they also must admit that Paul was being, at a minimum, deceptive, offering testimony before the Council. Or, could it be, that being a Pharisee *was not* fatally inconsistent with being a believer in Yeshua as Messiah and Savior? Might it be that those in the church who teach against all the Pharisees, as an undivided group, are engaging in unwarranted group-condemnation?

I wish to now examine the Pharisees of the Second Temple era, so that you might know more about them, and possibly find less reason to condemn them as a group. Let’s begin with a bit of history on how this group came to be.

Let us begin by calling the group by their proper name, “Parushim.” A parush is a “separated one” in Hebrew. Maybe in that one small action, we might also begin to diminish the sad “baggage” that is attached to the title “Pharisee.”

Let’s go back to the time of Ezra, after the Babylonian captivity ended. There was a great spiritual revival in the land. Ezra reestablished the

Council of Elders.² This group then became known as the “Great Assembly.” The people as a whole were becoming so dedicated to G-d and so observant of His ways that they became known as *chasidim*³ (pious ones). They resolved to become *nivdalim*, which were “separated from all filthiness of heathenism” around them.⁴ Although the Parushim insist that this is their genesis, such cannot be verified with certainty.

The earliest mention of the Parushim by name is found at the time of the Maccabees.⁵ Because of the persecution by Antiochus Epiphanes, and his desecration of the Temple, the pious ones fled to the desert. These became known as the *chasidim* (pious ones).⁶

The earliest Parushim adhered to the teachings of Antigones of Soko. The Mishnah speaks of him:

Antigones of Soko received [Torah] from Simeon the Righteous. He used to say, “Be not like servants who serve their master for the sake of wages, but be like servants who serve their master with no thought of a wage – and let the fear of Heaven be upon you.”⁷

² Ezra 7:25; 10:14, 16, Ezra 10:10-19

³ This is rendered in the Authorized Version as “saints.”

⁴ Paul uses this very phrase in 2 Cor 6:14- 7:1 as he admonishes them to be holy in the fear of G-d.

⁵ 175-140 BCE

⁶ 1 Maccabees 2:42-43

⁷ Mishneh.Avot 1:3

Antigones taught that it was right to follow the teachings of Torah not to get some eternal reward, but because we love G-d. Torah observance is useless, he taught, without the proper heart. Simply acting righteously, without the heart toward G-d, is works without faith.

A man named Zadok, one of Antigones' talmidim⁸, turned away from his teachings and formed another group. They called themselves the Tzadikim (holy ones). Their name has come to us in the English as Sadducees. These discarded all the "additions" and "hedges" that the other sects had established surrounding Torah. This sect persisted into the first century, as well.

The Parushim believed they were the custodians of the oral explanations that were originally given to Moses by G-d, regarding how the individual commands of Torah were to be carried out in practical fashion. In this way, they constructed what has become known as a "hedge around the Law." These became the "oral law" and those precepts often exceeded those of Torah itself. Sadly, sometimes the oral precepts even contradicted Torah's instruction.

⁸ Talmid = disciple

Gradually, the teachings of Antigones lost favor among the Parushim, and the concept of strictness in observance began to prevail.

This resulted in a more externalistic accountability for righteousness. They focused more upon what the outward appearances of righteous behavior were, than the intentions and purity of the heart.

The Parushim functioned for many years as “pairs.” Rabbis Hillel and Shammai were the last two of such pairs to lead the Sanhedrin of the Parushim. But there was a deep rift developing between Hillel and Shammai. It is said that Shammai forced Hillel to sit and listen to him at the point of a sword, as if Hillel were a subordinate.⁹ This indignity caused a deep split of the Parushim into two houses. The House of Shammai (the stricter one) and the House of Hillel (the more permissive one). Hillel’s descendants then led the Sanhedrin of the Parushim¹⁰.

The two Houses, or Schools, held diametrically opposing views on a number of halachic issues which were important in the first century. Rabbinic literature of that era records over 350 disputes between them. According to the Zohar, the House of Shammai based its rulings on *gevurah* (strength/severity) and Hillel on *chesed* (grace/mercy). It would

⁹ Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat. 17a

¹⁰ This is not the same Sanhedrin as the political one before which Paul was accused.

be fair to describe the adherents to the tenets of Hillel as forming a “grace movement” in the first century.

Eventually the House of Hillel prevailed among the people, and his halachic rulings became those which led to the establishment of modern Rabbinic Judaism.

The rulings of the House of Shammai were mostly concerned with the outward expressions of observing Torah. The House of Hillel was more concerned with the heart – following G-d in your own best way, and walking out the Torah with a deep conviction.

It can be said that Shammai was focusing on the letter of the Law, and Hillel on the spirit of the Law.

And so it was that the House of Hillel, focused upon the heart, had little room for hypocrisy. And so it was that one segment of the Parushim had drifted quite far from their core principles of faith – purity of heart above all, as taught by Antigones.

Yeshua told His followers to adhere to the good teachings of the Parushim, but to reject the hypocrisy in their behavior. It seems His approval lay with the teachings of Hillel, and not with Shammai.

Matt 23:1-12

23 Then Jesus spoke to the multitudes and to His disciples, 2 saying, "The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses; 3 therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say things, and do not do them. 4 "And they tie up heavy loads, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves are unwilling to move them with so much as a finger. 5 "But they do all their deeds to be noticed by men; for they broaden their phylacteries, and lengthen the tassels of their garments. 6 "And they love the place of honor at banquets, and the chief seats in the synagogues, 7 and respectful greetings in the market places, and being called by men, Rabbi. 8 "But do not be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers. 9 "And do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. 10 "And do not be called leaders; for One is your Leader, that is, Christ. 11 "But the greatest among you shall be your servant. 12 "And whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted.

A humble and contrite heart is the central core of what should have remained as the governing principle of the Parushim. But, as we have seen, one sect (Tzadikim) stripped the heart away from the outward expression, and made it a hollow shell. So, Yeshua addressed his strongest condemnation to the hypocrites *among* the larger body of the Parushim.

It seems that those of the House of Shammai were proud of their prominence in visible “righteousness” and loved being known as “Rabbi.” Yeshua wanted His followers to not be identified with them at all, and even to refuse that title. He did not rule that at no future time should the teachers among Israel refuse that title, and He even responded to that title Himself without objection.

Yeshua’s teaching regarding the primacy of the heart over outward manifestations was in line with similar feelings as expressed in the literature of the time.

all are the same, the one who offers much and the one who offers little, on condition that [each] man will direct his intention to Heaven.¹¹

¹¹ Mishna.Menachot 13:11

And

R. Hisda also said in the name of R. Jeremiah b. Abba: Four classes will not receive presence of the Shechinah, — the class of scoffers, the class of liars, the class of hypocrites, and the class of slanderers.¹²

When Yeshua condemned the hypocrites for making a show of prayer in the streets, to be seen, he was reminding His followers of what had already been spoken by others, recorded in Talmud at Ber. 24b:

One who says the Tefillah [prayers] so that it can be heard is of small faith.

When Yeshua condemns the prayers of the hypocrites, He does not condemn the prayers which are found in the Siddur, but merely the repetition of words, in belief that such will help G-d hear them.

Matt 6:7-8

7 "And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition, as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words. 8 "Therefore do not be like

¹² Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin. 103a

them; for your Father knows what you need, before you ask Him.

The Mishna of the Parushim actually has a similar directive, to pray with a sincere heart, and not by rote:

Rabbi Simeon says: “Be meticulous in the recitation of the shema and the Prayer. And when you pray, don’t treat your praying as a matter of routine. But let it be a [plea for] mercy and supplication before the Omnipresent, blessed be He”¹³

Yeshua spoke clearly about ordering your priorities toward G-d, and not focusing on your own treasures.

Matt 6:19-22

19 "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal.

20 "But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; 21 for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

¹³ Mishneh.Avot 2:13

Yeshua's teaching is a somewhat shortened summary of what had already been well understood among the Parushim. It may well have been that Yeshua was, in classical rabbinic style, invoking this larger teaching by His summary statement.

Our Rabbis taught: It is related of King Monobaz that he dissipated all his own hoards and the hoards of his fathers in years of scarcity. His brothers and his father's household came in a dispute with him and said to him, 'Your father saved money and added to the treasures of his fathers, and you are squandering them.' He replied: 'My fathers stored up below and I am storing above, as it says, Truth springs out of the earth and righteousness looks down from heaven. My fathers stored in a place which can be tampered with, but I have stored in a place which cannot be tampered with, as it says, Righteousness and judgment are the foundation of his throne. My fathers stored something which produces no fruits, but I have stored something which does produce fruits, as it is written, Say of the righteous that it shall be well with them, for they shall eat of the fruit of their doings. My fathers gathered treasures of money, but I have gathered treasures of souls, as it is written, The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, and he that is wise wins souls. My fathers gathered for

others and I have gathered for myself, as it says, And for you it shall be righteousness. My fathers gathered for this world, but I have gathered for the future world, as it says, Your righteousness shall go before you, and the glory of the Lord shall follow behind.¹⁴

We can see now that Yeshua's teachings to the masses, and in particular His rebuke of the Parushim, was in significant part a plea to return to the earliest – purest – form of Jewish faith that the Parushim had embraced at first. Simply, if your heart is turned toward G-d, then your actions will follow.

Righteousness then is not a set of rules to follow, to show devotion to G-d, but rather an outward expression of a love bubbling up from within us that brings our bodies and our actions into alignment with G-d because that is the most natural thing in the world.

Yeshua's endorsement of the teachings of the Parushim tells us much. They were teaching something Yeshua thought was good, but their lives were not reflecting their own teachings. That was the issue.

¹⁴ Babylonian Talmud. Bava Batra 11a

Certainly, Yeshua's rebuke to the "hypocrites" of the Parushim did not include those among the Parushim whose hearts were still pure, and whose practices were expressions of love for G-d bubbling up from the inside. Those righteous ones likewise scorned the hypocrites found under their own roof.

As believers today, we can confidently follow the teachings of Yeshua which are found in the Bible. But we should also now recognize when the precious ones in the Body, who don't know better, rush to improperly criticize the "Pharisees" as the embodiment of all that was wrong with pre-Cross Judaism. We should now be broken hearted when they condemn the teachings found in Talmud and Mishna as being "rejected by Jesus."¹⁵

And, we can most certainly now understand how Paul could stand before the Council making testimony in his defense under oath, and declare, "Brethren, I am a Pharisee!"

¹⁵ These are the precise words heard in a Bible study by a dear friend of mine a short time ago.