

What Are We to Learn from Judas Iscariot?

Searching Our Souls at Pesach

Tim Hegg • TorahResource • 2009

Each year as we approach Pesach, we begin the arduous task of cleaning our homes in order to remove anything that contains leaven. We wash the cupboards, shampoo the carpets, sweep and vacuum all of the rooms, and remove all of the leavening agents from our kitchens. In short, we do everything humanly possible to make our homes ready for the week of Unleavened Bread.

This task of cleaning, which many of our neighbors no doubt consider our annual “spring cleaning,” has a very real spiritual dimension beyond our desire to make proper preparations for the Festival of Unleavened Bread (*Chag HaMatzot*). It becomes a sober reminder that we are to look into our souls to find what leaven might be there, which also needs to be removed.

As followers of Yeshua, we recognize the significance of the fact that Yeshua’s death and resurrection coincided with the Pesach Festival. The story of our redemption from Egypt provided the backdrop against which our eternal redemption was accomplished by the “Lamb of God,” so that our freedom from the slavery of Egypt foretold our freedom from the penalty and enslavement of sin. Having been rescued from the “domain of darkness,” we now have entered the “kingdom of His beloved Son” in Whom we have “redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Col 1:13–14).

As we read and re-read the Gospels’ story of the days that led up to the crucifixion of our Savior, we sometimes seek to put ourselves, as it were, back into that historical context. What would it have been like to be in Jerusalem during the festival that year, to walk with the Master as He prepared His disciples for the events which were about to take place? How would we have responded to His words, His questions, His rebukes?

Recently I have been considering what lessons we are to learn from Judas, the one disciple whose name would forever remain in infamy for his role in betraying Yeshua to those whose purpose was to have Him executed. How could someone walk with the Master, witness His miracles, hear His teaching, even share in His ministry to others, and then betray Him for monetary gain? If we consider Judas and his camaraderie with the circle of Yeshua’s closest disciples, we may gain some very important insights.

We really know very little about Judas. We do know that “Judas” is a Hellenized form of Yehudah (Judah), but the meaning of the added “Iscariot” is much debated. Some take “Iscariot” to be some form of an original “*ish scarii*,” which would mean he was a member of the Sicarii, a group of dagger-wielding assassins also known as Zealots. Others find the Hebrew word *שָׂקַר*, *shaqar*, “to deceive, lie, break trust” in Iscariot, and suggest that his family name (cf. John 6:71; 13:2, 26, where Judas is referred to as “the son of Simon Iscariot”) contained a hidden portend of his villainous role. Still others suggest that “Iscariot” is based upon Hebrew *סָכַר*, *sakar*, “to deliver or hand over,” and became attached to him and to his family in later Christian tradition. Another suggestion is that “Iscariot” means “a man from Keriot,” a city in Judea. In the end, there is really not enough historical data to make a firm conclusion. What we can say with certainty is this: his name would indicate that he was a Jewish man. On that everyone agrees.

We do know, of course, that Judas was one of the Twelve. This means that of men living in his time and in his location, he was privileged above most to have a close association with

Yeshua. Yeshua chose Him to be one of His disciples, to walk with Him, minister along side of Him, and to know what others did not know. Indeed, while Yeshua would sometimes teach in parables so that His message would be hidden from others, He made it clear that the secrets of the Kingdom were initially the privileged possession of the Twelve alone (cf. Matt 13:11). This means that Judas saw what Abraham and Moses only longed to see; that he personally heard the words of Yeshua, words that David and Isaiah knew only from a great distance. Judas was included within the circle of the Twelve where he not only saw miracles of healing, the miraculous feeding of the masses, the storms calmed, demons cast out, and the dead brought back to life, but he actually participated in the performance of some of these miraculous events (cf. Lk 10:23–24). He saw these things himself, up close and personal.

From this we learn a very important lesson: *A privileged position does not necessarily secure a genuine faith.* Many people take for granted that their religious upbringing, their association with this church or that one, has granted them acceptance before God. They live their lives with the false impression that their associations are sufficient grounds for God to look favorably upon them in the day of judgment. Yet they have never had genuine faith themselves. Outwardly they are accepted as members of a recognized community of faith, but inwardly their hearts are cold toward the Lord. In the day of reckoning they will be among those who say: “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?” But Yeshua will answer, “I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness” (Matt 7:22–23).

Another thing we learn about Judas is that by all outward appearances, he was no different than his fellow disciples. When Yeshua sent the Twelve out to proclaim the Gospel of the Kingdom, Judas was included (Matt 10:5–15). One could say that Judas was “ordained” by Yeshua Himself! Imagine what prestige an evangelist or preacher would have in our day if he were known to have been personally commissioned by the Master Himself! Many people would look up to him as a model of religious piety to be emulated. Indeed, by all accounts, Judas’ lack of genuine faith was hidden even to the rest of the disciples. For when at the Pesach seder Yeshua announced that one reclining at the meal would betray Him, all of the disciples began to ask who it might be. No one said under his breath, “I’ll bet it’s Judas!” If Judas was self-deceived, his deception was clever enough to keep the others in the dark as well.

From this we learn a second important lesson: *Outward profession and religious activity may not necessarily indicate an inward reality of faith.* Did not Yeshua Himself, in the parable of the Tares and Wheat, teach us that before the harvest, even the tares are difficult to distinguish from the wheat (Matt 13:24–30)? This calls for personal introspection. Paul admonishes, “Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves!” (2Cor 13:5). Now, as the Pesach approaches, we do well to examine our own faith—to ask ourselves if we have been crucified with the Messiah and risen to newness of life. If we have trusted in our religious activities or in our own “goodness,” now is the time to rid ourselves of such leaven and rely entirely upon the blood of the Lamb to protect us.

A further lesson we learn from the life of Judas is *how destructive the love of money and desire for power can be.* Paul writes to his disciple Timothy, “For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs” (1Tim 6:10). In the few words from the lips of Judas that are recorded in the Gospels, his question to the chief priests stands out: “What are you willing to give me to betray Him to you?” Is it possible that for a sum of thirty silver coins he was willing to betray the Master with Whom he had so closely associated? Was his love of money the open door to Satan’s influence in his life (cf. Lk 22:3; Jn 13:27)? The Bible contains many stories of debauch-

ery fomented by the love of money: Joseph is sold by his brothers; Sampson is betrayed to the Philistines; and Ananias and Sapphira lose their lives in an attempt to save their wealth. How true is the saying of our Lord: “For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul?” (Mk 8:36). May the prayer of Prov 30:8 be ours: “Keep deception and lies far from me, give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that is my portion, that I not be full and deny You and say, ‘Who is the LORD?’ Or that I not be in want and steal, and profane the name of my God.”

Finally, as we investigate our hearts before the Lord, cleaning out any leaven that might be there, the words of Yeshua, spoken in regard to Judas who would betray Him, are emboldened in our thoughts: “The Son of Man is to go, just as it is written of Him; but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been good for that man if he had not been born” (Matt 26:24; Mark 14:21; Luke 22:22). All of us are striving for significance—for purpose in our lives. How dismal is a life lived without meaning, waking each morning feeling that life is useless and returning to bed at night believing that the day’s activities had little, if any, lasting value! In the end, we realize that true significance in life begins by acknowledging, first and foremost, the very reason for which we were created: to glorify God and live life to the fullest by walking with Him as our faithful Lord, Master, and friend. David said it this way: “For a day in Your courts is better than a thousand outside. I would rather stand at the threshold of the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness” (Ps 84:10). When we have as our primary focus in life the mission of sanctifying God’s name upon the earth, then all that we do takes on true significance, and life is imbued with real meaning.

Such reflection calls us to a renewed investigation of our souls—clearing away those things that have cluttered our lives and renewing our resolve to glorify God by drawing close to Him, enjoying His blessings to the fullest, and giving Him the glory for all that life holds. This, in turn, will cause us to be more fervent in our prayers, particularly on behalf of family and friends who have not yet come to faith in Yeshua. And we will seek God’s help all the more to be a living witness, both in word and deed, of the saving grace of God to sinners.

Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump, just as you are in fact unleavened. For Messiah our Passover also has been sacrificed. Therefore let us celebrate the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. (1Cor 5:7–8)