

## Am Hasefer – People of the Book

**Nehemiah 8:1-3 HCSB** all the people gathered together at the square in front of the Water Gate. They asked Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses that the LORD had given Israel. (2) On the first day of the seventh month, Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly of men, women, and all who could listen with understanding. (3) While he was facing the square in front of the Water Gate, he read out of it from daybreak until noon before the men, the women, and those who could understand. All the people listened attentively to the book of the law.

Am Hasefer is Hebrew for “People of the Book” and it refers to godly people’s love for the Scriptures. Our congregation’s name, “Community BIBLE Fellowship”, is apt. We are a “people of the Book” as few other congregations are. One of the principle goals for this church that the elders have is that we imitate Israel at this particular point in history. When God’s children move away from loving, reading, and obeying the Holy Scriptures, they lose Hashem’s blessing. If we want to be like fruitful trees, we must delight in God’s Word.

- **Psalms 1:2-3 HCSB** Instead, his delight is in the LORD’s instruction, and he meditates on it day and night. (3) He is like a tree planted beside streams of water that bears its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers.

Some people may sneer and call this love of the Scriptures “bibliolatry” if they will. Worship of the Book it most definitely is not. Rather, we acknowledge that the Author of the Book is the all-wise and all-sufficient One who has so given His Word as to make it a safe guide in every time of confusion.

What are the characteristics of the Am Hasefer? What traits should we seek to inculcate into our congregation if we want to also be Am Hasefer? There are obviously many more traits than these, but allow me to share twelve of them with you.

### 1. **United in waiting on God.** (v.1) *gathered together*

The will of God will always become apparent and be brought into being when Adonai’s people are with one mind and one heart gathered together to learn His will from His all-sufficient Word.

There is a tendency today to run hither and yon, from program to program, from new idea to latest whim. Too many congregations are so busy trying various church organization models or philosophies that they are completely unaware that they don’t know the will of God on the matter.

It is not enough to be united. The people of Germany were united in their desire to kill our people. Humans are silly enough to be united about a group of big men throwing around a ball!

It is not enough to be united. We must be united in waiting on God.

### 2. **Relying on the Word of God.** (v.1) *bring the book*

In every genuine revival the revealed Word of God has played a huge role. It was so in Josiah’s day as well as in the awakening under Hezekiah. This has held true throughout the Church period. It was the recovery of the Word that began the Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Every major awakening or revival since has been largely based on Bible study and Bible practice. They always begin with some small devoted band of God’s children gathering together and searching the Scriptures, seeking the right way for them and their children in stark contrast to the ecclesiastical confusion and dead formality of the status quo.

If we humbly trust in the Lord with all our hearts, do not rely on our own understanding, and think about Him in all our ways, He will guide us on the right paths.<sup>1</sup>

3. **Unconcerned about the opinions of men.** (v.1) *bring the book...of the Lord*

I want you to notice that they did not seek Ezra's opinion nor Nehemiah's ideas nor Zerubbabel's philosophy of ministry. They honored God's servants, and rightfully so, for they would have despised the Master if they had not respected His sent ones; but the servants were to be ministers of the Word – not of philosophy or church growth principles. They were to be ministers of the word of the living God; and so they cried, "Bring the Book!"

It is a sad truth that today human writings are put on the same level as the Book of books. Let something be called into question and at once everyone begins quoting one theologian or another. "Tozer says...Bonhoeffer says...Tillich says..." They care more what Mr. Such-and-such taught than they do the sovereign Lord of the universe! By doing this the authority of God and His Word is weakened in their minds.

May I remind you of Paul's admonition,

- [1 Corinthians 1:10-13 HCSB](#) Now I urge you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all say the same thing, that there be no divisions among you, and that you be united with the same understanding and the same conviction. (11) For it has been reported to me about you, my brothers, by members of Chloe's household, that there are quarrels among you. (12) What I am saying is this: each of you says, "I'm with Paul," or "I'm with Apollos," or "I'm with Cephas," or "I'm with Christ." (13) Is Christ divided? Was it Paul who was crucified for you? Or were you baptized in Paul's name?

By mentioning Jesus Christ ten times in the first ten verses of 1 Corinthians, Paul makes it clear who it is all preachers and teachers should emphasize. God's message is much more important than any human messenger.

4. **Possessing balanced egalitarianism.** (v. 2) *men, women, and all who could...understand*

Children and bad parents often believe that "fairness" should mean that every sibling should get exactly the same thing. If one gets a new pair of shoes then the other should too. If one gets two scoops of ice-cream then they both should. What if one already has a good pair of shoes? What if one is a three-foot, seventy pound girl and the other is a six-foot, hundred and seventy pound teenage boy?

The desire for equality and egalitarianism has been raised to the status of religion in America. It is to the point where most believe that ALL opinions are equally valid no matter how uneducated the source. Would you seriously ask me for my opinion on the repair of an internal combustion engine? I should hope not! Yet, people who don't even read the Bible think that their opinions on religion should be taken as seriously as the most devoted tzaddik in the congregation! Ridiculous.

The people of Israel practiced egalitarianism in the sense that all could freely come and learn from the Book. Yet, this was balanced by the wisdom of including those "who could understand." That's why our congregation provides multiple Sunday School classes (for both adults and children) and a separate worship service for the children of our congregation.

5. **Attentive and focused as they read.** (v.3) *the people listened attentively*

The Bible is not a "magic book" that will change you or your circumstances simply because you read it or hear someone else recite it. It is only when it is understood that it can

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<sup>1</sup> Proverbs 3:5-6

be obeyed and it is only when it is obeyed that it can enter your heart, releasing its life-changing power.

When you approach the Scriptures it must be with attention and focus. You must come prepared to study and to stretch your mind. Those who lackadaisically loll around with their brains in neutral need not apply. The Lord will give them nothing.

#### 6. **Providing for ministry** (v. 4)

##### a. Facilities (high wooden platform)

The crowd was large enough to require special facilities to enable them all to be fed and taught together. Does a large family feed its children in rotation around small tables? No! They look for or build a single large table so that all the family may eat together and enjoy the resulting fellowship!

Similarly, we are in the process of providing special facilities so that we may all worship the Lord, fellowship, and study the Word together as a single, united family.

##### b. Organization (to his right were...to his left were)

As important as the possession of proper facilities is, the possession of organizational structure is even more critical. Imagine your body without a skeleton! Where would you be? How far would you go? Some people seem to favor a high-chaotic, anarchic state with minimal to no structure but that is not what the God who has called us to “decency and order” and commanded that we “obey those who have the rule over us” favors.

#### 7. **Respectful of the Scriptures** (v.5) *as he opened it, all the people stood up*

Again, I am not advocating bibliolatry. I remember being taught as a child that no books should be placed on top of my Bible; that my Bible should never be laid on the ground or laid face down; that my Bible should not be placed on a shelf with other books written by humans lest a sense of their being equal with the Word of God rise up in my heart. All that is taking respect for the Bible too far. What you have in your hands (I trust you DO have your Bible, right?); what you have in your hands is merely paper and ink, glue and string. Do not idolize the book itself, but be respectful of the truth therein.

When the book is open and read, may your hearts rise in excitement at the truth about to be revealed. As the book is closed and laid down, may your hearts be committed to obey what you have learned.

Keep track of where your Bible is. Let it be central to your life. If there is a tornado, let it be the first material thing you think of saving. Yet feel free to write in it. Mark it up. Underline and highlight important truths. In this way show reverence for your God.

#### 8. **Reverently demonstrative** (v.6) *said “Amen, Amen!” Then they bowed down and worshiped*

I want you to note that the people, when they were at their best, most passionate, most reverent, were verbally and physically expressive. Let me ask you something, if you were as demonstrative to your lover as you are to your God, would you be lonely?

#### 9. **Educationally driven** (v.7-8) They provided:

a. Teachers – They didn’t just plug in warm bodies. They made sure that they had qualified people in place – in this case the Levites.

b. Practical application – (*explained the Law*) They didn’t simply read the Word, make generalized statements on the goodness of God and then walk away. They explained the LAW. That means that they were explaining what to do when someone is caught stealing or committing adultery. They were explaining exactly HOW to provide for the poor, or to get out of debt.

- c. Public reading – (*read the law*) We are commanded to “give attention to public reading, exhortation, and teaching.”<sup>2</sup> Yet, in many churches the only Scripture publicly read is the text of the sermon. “Independent” churches sometimes criticize “liturgical” churches for being too bound to tradition but at least the so-called “liturgical” church systematically reads the Word of God publicly!  
Ezra, Nehemiah, and the other leaders acknowledged that some among them may have been illiterate. They understood the power of the whole congregation hearing the same truth at the same time. Let all those who believe there is no need for attending church and that it is sufficient to worship alone in their living room explain that away to the Holy Spirit!
- d. Translation - (*translating and giving the meaning*) Apparently, even in their day, this was necessary! We need to keep in mind that after the captivity, Hebrew, as a spoken language, had largely been displaced by Aramaic. This explains why the Hebrew Words of the Torah needed to be translated and explained to the people. If this is true of them, how much more of us, a people some three thousand years removed and of a completely different culture and language!

10. **Repentant and emotionally expressive** (v.9) *the people were weeping as they heard the words*

Reading and studying God’s Word with honest hearts should nearly always lead to confession because that is when God can show us where we are sinning. They wept openly when they heard Yahweh’s laws and understood just how far they had gotten off track with God. Honest confession should precede true worship. You cannot sit there on the chairs, unmoved, unrepentant, insensitive to your sins or to the wonderful grace of God in putting up with you and expect to have a meaningful worship experience. It’s simply not going to happen.

11. **Celebratory** (vv.9-12) Let me share with you four points on the matter, three in quick succession, followed by a fourth.

- a. Sanctify days. *this day is holy to the Lord.*
- b. Eat rich foods together. *Go and eat what is rich, drink what is sweet*
- c. Provide for the poor. *Send portions to those who have nothing*

Do any of these elements sound familiar to you? Why do you think your pastor keeps trying to encourage you to observe Passover, Shavuot, Sukkot, Yom Kippur, etc? It is important that God’s people routinely set aside days to remember their God and His long history of acting on their behalf. It is important that we prioritize fellowship with God’s people and the establishment of justice when surrounded by a culture that elevates free, easy, cheap, and carnal relationships and routinely rides rough-shod over the needs and rights of the weak.

However, the fourth thing I want you to note is that they were,

- d. Motivated by the Word. *Because they had understood the words*

If we celebrate, it is because we have understood the Word of God. If we celebrate, it is in acknowledgment of our great King. We must never fall prey to the world’s philosophy of partying for partying’s sake. If the feasts ever become so trite that we are celebrating them merely because they are on the calendar and we enjoy good food, then let’s temporarily set them aside until we can obey God with a right spirit.

12. **Obedient** (v.13-14) *They found written...so they proclaimed.*

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<sup>2</sup> 1 Timothy 4:13

I want you to notice that verse seventeen says that they “had not celebrated like this from the days of Joshua, son of Nun until that day.” That means that even in the glory days of David and Solomon the people of God had neglected this command of God. Here was something that had not been observed for 1,000 years! Nevertheless, it was in the Book and for an obedient people that was sufficient.

Read just a little further in verse seventeen. It ends by saying “And there was tremendous joy.” That will always be true. Your circumstances may remain difficult. You may still be on unemployment. Your family may still reject you. You will still have enemies surrounding the walls of your life as these people still did. Never mind, you will still find tremendous joy if only you will obey your God.