

Vayera
Torah:

And I appeared
Gen. 6:2-9:35

Unrelenting Cumulative Pressure

(1) **6:9:** *“Thus Moses spoke to the children of Israel, but their anguish and their cruel slavery prevented them from listening.”* Sometimes the trials of our lives are making too much emotional noise for us to be able to really hear from the L-rd. This does not mean He will quit talking or that He will be angry and abandon us, it means that He will act to speak through this noise and teach us to eventually be able to listen in the midst of the storm as easily as we listen when things are peaceful and quite. How about you? Are you learning to listen, no matter what noise there is in your life?

(2) **7:25:** *“Seven days passed after the L-RD had struck the waters of the great river.”* The plagues occurred over a long period of time. At the beginning of each new moon, over a period of ten months, Moses went in to Pharaoh and the L-rd enacted another plague (the monthly sign of whichever G-d the month was dedicated to). The effects of the plague lasted varying lengths of time and had a cumulative impact on the resistance of Pharaoh and of Egypt. How is the cumulative impact of G-d’s hand doing in your life - In our life as a congregation? Are you letting it wear down and break whatever spiritual resistance the world, the flesh and the enemy are trying to exercise in your life (and in life as a congregation)?

(3) **8:11(15):** *“But when Pharaoh saw that there was a respite, he hardened his heart and did not listen to them according as the L-RD had said”.* When the L-rd works in people’s lives, sometimes they interpret His mercy as a respite where they figure the pressure is off and won’t come back, but they are just asking for more, until the cumulative pressure of His intervention overcomes their resistance to the point they actually listen – and in our lives, it may take longer than 10 months, but rather than getting discouraged, we just have to pray and watch G-d turn up the pressure – both on them and on us, because the whole point of the exercise is for us to come to the place of listening to the L-RD through His Word and to make this listening the lifestyle we adopt and the way we respond to the happenstances of our lives.

(4) **8:15(19):** *“And the sorcerers said to Pharaoh: It is the finger of G-d! Pharaoh’s heart hardened and he did not listen to Moses and Aaron, just as the L-rd had said.”* Once Pharaoh saw that he was dealing with a greater power than he could generate, he was faced with a choice of admitting he was not in control of the situation (that he was not the supreme ruler he claimed to be) and he was prepared to put up a fight – and he may have felt that if this was all the finger of G-d could do, he could ride out the storm and let one of his other gods deal with this threat to his reign. Sometimes stubborn people think they are tougher than G-d and they are not prepared to give up their “gods” or objects of worship (their cherished perspectives and attitudes) until they are cornered and forced to do so – and surprisingly very often when the L-rd begins to work in peoples’ lives, they harden their hearts and things have to get worse before they consider repenting.

Haftarah: Ez. 28:25-29:21

(5) **29:11:** *“No human foot shall pass through it and no animal foot shall pass through it; it shall remain uninhabited for forty years”* Here is an example of the literary use of “forty” to describe a painfully long period of desolation when the fertile, crowded Egypt shall suffer for refusing to surrender to G-d’s unrelenting cumulative pressure. Generation by generation and nation by nation, G-d’s pressure accumulates in the lives of people (peoples) and even the mightiest superpower shall crumble, eventually.

(6) **29:20:** " *For his salary for the service he has performed against Tyre, I will give him (Babylon) the country of Egypt, for they have worked for me.*" While I do not claim to understand all the complex inner workings of the generational, international diplomacy which is floundering its way from disaster to crisis in pursuit of so many selfish agendas, I do acknowledge who is in final control over the course of human history – eventually.

We should encourage our leaders to always follow principals of truth, honesty and integrity, so that they do not risk eventual annihilation under the relentless cumulative pressure of G-d as the foolish nations play a mixture of "I'm the king of the castle" and military "chicken", instead of doing the job which G-d calls all leaders to – and the United Nations description of the universal rights of man is (mostly) a good summary of the duty of government. I despair for them and for the nations of the world – G-d is not someone you want to annoy or play chicken with – He never flinches.

Brit Chadashah: Rev. 16:1-21

(7) **16:15:** " *Behold, I come as a thief, blessed is the one who watches and who cares for his clothing, in order that he would not walk in nakedness, with his shame exposed.*" In the midst of the awesome description of the seven last (generational) plagues of G-d, the L-rd pauses to give each of us a personal message. In the midst of whatever international or personal turmoil we happen to be wading through to our Father's house in glory, we need to keep our own spiritual integrity intact, so that the nakedness of our souls is covered (so the sinful tendencies which would want us to follow suit with the foolishness of the world) and we are not ashamed of the sinfulness we should have and could have dealt with. In other words, we cannot use the noise, the turmoil or any other temporary feature of our lives as an excuse not to look after our own inner spirituality (the place where we decide the priorities of our lives and make our personal choices).

How are your clothes doing – how well is your shame and nakedness covered? We are not be chameleons who blend in and take on the colour of our world – we are to be lamps and salt who bring the flavour of the Kingdom to our generation – if we do not, then the same relentless, cumulative pressure which will continue to crush the world, will set it sites on us and we should know better. How about you? The affairs of the world should always yield to the infinitely more important affairs of the spirit, whether we are watching Egypt crumble or the international debt crisis heat up. As disciples of G-d's final purposes, we should always let these final purposes guide us and not harden our heart – this world is one ship you don't want to go down with – it has nothing of enduring value to offer.

Psalms: 46 Jewish Hero: Lough Houle

There are two separate functions that people are always engaged in throughout their lives, whether they acknowledge it or not: **faith** and **spirituality** and the greater the distance is between these two personal imperatives, the weaker our grip becomes of the eternal truths which believer's are supposed to live by so that our personal pilgrimage is a success in G-d's eyes, no matter what we do or no matter what happens to us in our short lives.

Let me first distinguish between these two pillars of our personal paradigm and then let me examine how a distance can be avoided, so that they work together and not against each other. Then let me make a case

for the aggressive and progressive positive repentance which will renovate us and keep us from coming unglued as we bumble our way through the stages of our pilgrimage on our way home in Glory.

Faith is the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen (Heb. 11:1) and has to do with what we believe about reality – about G-d, about the universe and about our place in it. As believers we are called to a pretty well defined faith and though we are not given a faith which will answer all the questions we may have about everything which is going on in the world, we have access to the cosmic themes of G-d – both those which describe how the physical universe functions (and where it came from and where it is going) and those which describe how the affairs of men function, whether this function is good, bad or ugly.

We know that all of creation is moving towards the coming Kingdom and that all mankind shall be judged for the choices we have been making since Adam and Eve were excluded from the garden for violating the dictates of what they clearly understood to be the difference between right and wrong.

We also know what the whole spiritual duty of man comprises and you are here this morning to fulfill a part of that duty- worship. We know that Bible Study of all kinds and prayer for everything that is going on in our lives are also part of that duty, along with fellowship and outreach.

But this knowledge of how the physical universe works and how the affairs of men should work, along with a clear understanding of what our spiritual duty looks like is not always a guarantee that our faith will nurture a healthy spirituality, rather than choking it. There is a big difference between knowing what is right and actually doing what is right, which leads me to my discussion of true, authentic and healthy spirituality.

Spirituality is both a duty towards G-d and it is also a way of responding to the events of our lives as we establish personal priorities and habits that will either express our understanding of what is real and what is important or it will destroy our credibility – not because the truths we hold are wrong, but only that the way we live in response to these truths clouds them, rather than demonstrates them.

How can this be? Sometimes believers cheat, lie, and get angry and act out of jealousy and even fail to learn how to forgive and fall short of learning how to admit their own mistakes and seek the forgiveness for the problems they have created. Now if that did not make you groan inside and squirm a little bit, don't worry, there is more to come. In every situation we encounter, both in the long term and in the short term, we have to choose how to act – and even if we do not choose and just go with the flow, that is also a kind of passive choice which we are also responsible for.

I Tim. 5:22 says that we are not to participate in the sins of others – we are to keep our own noses clean. Whenever we say that the events of our lives or that the persons in our lives oblige us to act in ways which are not endorsed by G-d's Word, we are engaging in a compromised form of spirituality – because spirituality is the sum of choices and of priorities we maintain in light of our faith and often it has more impact on the lives of those around us than our faith does – because they may not listen to what we believe or why we do the things we do, but they cannot ignore the way we live and the choices we make.

It is this distance between our faith and our spirituality which is either our strongest witness for the L-rd or the weakest link in our personal armour. Being effective for the L-rd needs to be a dynamic balance between a healthy faith based on the clear teachings of the Bible and a vigorous spirituality which takes the personal picture we have of G-d's eternal truths and paints it for all to see in the way we live out our lives.

What does the painting of your life look like? Are there elements in your personal picture which should not be there? Are there elements which are missing?

Is there one consistent set of spiritual themes which make the picture a clear expression of your faith, or does there appear to be a conflict where two sets of values are battling for control, kind like a bipolar battle between what you know you should be doing and what you actually end up doing?

All of our pictures will contain conflicts, where we battle to make good choices and even where we recover from bad choices, but the overall, dominant theme of our personal paintings needs to be a healthy spirituality where both the good choices we make and the eternal priorities we maintain gradually and steadily win out over the challenges which our flesh, the world and the enemy throw our way.

In the Torah portion we looked at our need to maintain our spiritual wardrobe and not let our shameful nakedness appear through the foolishness of the decisions we allow into our lives. If the truth be told, even when we are temporarily overcome by the happenstances of our lives, as we age, we are more and more affected by the choices we make in our lives than we are by the circumstances of our lives and it is this reality which determines the health of our spirituality and which closes the gap between what we believe and how we live out those beliefs.

As I get used to the idea of being sixty, I want to work earnestly at closing the gap between my faith and my spirituality, so that the picture my life is painting and which is open for all to see, is a portrait of how my spirituality impacts my life and not how my life crowds out or diminishes my spirituality, which brings me to my final point and to our celebration of the L-rd's table.

How is the gap closed? It is only closes through aggressive and progressive, positive repentance. I wish I could tell you that mature believers never make bad decisions and that the more we walk with the L-rd the less liable we are to let the circumstances of our lives affect our spirituality, instead of the other way around. In my forty some years as a believer I have seen some mighty giants of the faith crumble and take giant dives away from a biblical spirituality – and some have never recovered. I have seen some fairly broken and wounded people come to faith and achieve some awesome progress towards an integrated wholeness that still takes my breath away.

Aggressive and positive, progressive repentance is the answer. This means that we are called first to do what we know is right and then to grow in our understanding of what the Bible says is right and apply both of these understandings to our lives. Why do I put our understanding of what is right first? Simple – if we do not do what we know is right, then we will not learn to do what the Bible says is right – and this is one of the most subtle and tragic shortfalls which believers fall into.

Repentance means living a life based on applying what we know is right to our lives and on removing what we know is wrong from our lives – and on admitting our own mistakes and talking steps to return to the place we should be, whenever we wander away from it. That is the only kind of aggressiveness we are permitted to exercise and once it is exercised, we need to stubbornly hold on to the progress we achieve – and this is the only kind of stubbornness we are allowed to have in our lives (steadfastness is redeemed stubbornness).

I call this kind of aggressive repentance progressive, because we will often have to exercise it more than once, because it sometimes takes more than a couple of steps to return to places we have wandered farther from and repentance needs to be a regular part of our spiritual lives, like the janitor who keeps picking up the messes we make and the repairman who keeps fixing the things we have broken.

It is also like the housekeeper who keeps bringing things into our lives which we have run out of, and which we need, even if we sometimes do not want to receive them. It needs to be positive, because the L-rd does not want us to punish ourselves or damage ourselves when we have allowed spiritual damage to occur, as if adding to our suffering will somehow pay for the foolishness of our actions.

He wants us to concentrate on making sure our painting reflects the victory of His intervention in our lives and that our repentance helps that process instead of trying to rip or tear up the canvas because we feel so bad about the foolish things we have done.

He wants us to understand what His Word teaches about the nature of the world we live in and about our duty towards Him and towards others in this often crazy, confusing world.

He wants us to take this understanding and make decisions and choices that will reflect this view of reality, so that the picture we are painting for people to see will contain the cosmic themes we believe in, even if they will not listen to what we believe about them.

He wants us to keep the distance short between what we believe (our faith) and how we live (our spirituality) and He also wants the picture we are painting for Him to contain the story of how we are constantly repairing our spirituality whenever it is damaged, either by the choices we have made, or by those painful experiences in our lives which temporarily damage our ability to make good healthy spiritual choices. He wants us to both recognize when we blow it and also how to get back up on our bikes and keep riding. We may encounter some pretty deep bruising and even be wounded along the way, but He wants both what we believe and how we live to be part of the healing and not part of the problem.

He wants us to maintain a faith which nurtures our spirituality, rather than choking it. He wants the picture we are painting for Him to be a masterpiece full of mercy and compassion, and which shows that we are learning to be slow to anger and to build lives which are becoming rich in goodness and in righteousness and in sound judgment – and which are also seeking healing and offering it as part of the way we relate to the confusion and turmoil we have to live through on our personal pilgrimage from conception to the grave and beyond, when it is our turn to rest in our Father's Home in Glory, to the Jew first and also to the Gentile.

May we never fall into the trap of allowing what happens to us in our lives and what is going on in the world around us to define how we live and choose and recover as believers! Life may not always paint us a pretty picture, but our lives can always be a pretty picture, as long as we aggressively, progressively and positively pursue the kind of repentance which will be our biggest and most effective witness to the world through which we are only wandering.

And may all the "whatever it takes" we are working on be blessed and be allowed to do their job – which brings us to one of the best places to help this work get done – the L-rd's Table.

Let's pray.

