

First Winter Series: Building Blocks

Goodness and Kindness

Vayishlach

And He Sent

G-d Holds the trump card

Torah:

Gen. 32:3-36:43

(1) 32:28. ***He said again, your name shall no longer be Jacob, you shall be called Israel for you have wrestled with G-d and with men and you have conquered.*** He didn't beat G-d, he was able to overcome his fears and all the obstacles which he encountered and he was able to fulfil what G-d had called him to do. No matter happens to us in our lives and no matter how many detours and setbacks we encounter, if we wrestle with the determination to do what we have been called to, we shall conquer our two greatest enemies – our own fear and our own stubbornness.

(2) 34:13. ***The sons of Jacob answered and spoke with guile to Sichem and to Hamor, his father, because Sichem had dishonoured Dina their sister.*** Both sides in this situation were wrong. It was wrong to dishonour Dina and it was wrong to deceive the inhabitants of the town where this occurred. Even when we blow it, G-d's purposes are not defeated in our lives – later we learn that Simeon and Levi would be scattered among their brethren for their violence. If they were not willing for the man to have their sister, they should have imposed a fine on him. Two wrongs do not make a right.

(3) 35:4. ***They gave to Jacob all their stranger gods that were between their hands and the rings that were on their ears and Jacob buried them under the oak at Sichem (Shechem).*** G-d was blessing and protecting them before they got their lives really together spiritually, but there will always come a time when we are told to abandon our idols and realign our allegiance to G-d so that it extends into every area of our lives. Are their areas of your life which you need to surrender to Him? Are there things you need to bury?

(4) 35:28, 29. ***The days of Isaac were 180 years and he breathed is last and died and was received unto his people, old and full of days and Esau and Jacob his sons buried him.*** Whatever troubles the brothers had, they worked them out so that no more hostility existed between them nor prevented them from seeking the full blessing of G-d for their lives.

Haftarah:

Obad. 1:1-21

(5) 1:15. ***For the Day of the L-RD is near for all nations and it shall be done to you as you have done and your works shall fall back upon your head.*** During a time when Israel was being ravaged (this time by Philistine raids that nearly destroyed the country), Esau neither helped, nor welcomed refugees and they were enemies when they did not have to be. We have to be careful not to kick people when they are down, and certainly not the people of G-d, for how we treat Israel is how we shall be treated.

(6) 1:21. ***Liberators shall mount up on the mountain of Sion to judge the mountain of Esau and the reign shall belong to the L-RD.*** G-d will always deliver His people and no matter how low we may fall, we shall overcome and He shall judge those who have mistreated us without cause. Edom was eventually forcefully converted to Judaism during the time of the Maccabees and one day all the nations of the world will acknowledge the reign of our G-d. The sooner we do this in our own lives, the sooner His purposes for us will be accomplished.

Brit Chadashah: Heb. 11:11-20

(7) 11:12. ***That is why from one man, already worn out in his body was born a posterity as numerous as the stars in the heaven and as the sand on the shore which cannot be counted.*** Esau and Jacob were part of the fulfilment of this promise and it is still at work in our world today, because it is never the circumstances of our lives which determine either their direction or their value. Our trust and confidence in the L-rd will always be the means He uses to trump the circumstances of our lives and accomplish His unstoppable purposes in the world – even through us and through these same circumstances. He holds the trump card -m which cards are you holding?

Ps. 140 (John pp. 85, 87) **Jewish Hero:** Jews who refused to worship pagan idols

As we go through this series and as we prepare to celebrate both Chanukah and Christmas, we want to discover both the abilities which G-d has built into each one of us and also the ways He protects us and guides us when we face various challenges in our pilgrimage through this life.

The fruit of the Spirit refer both to the character potential we are born with as the image of G-d and especially to the power of the redemption of our Messiah, which wants to repair this potential and set it free to enrich our lives, both as individuals and as a community.

So far we have looked at the first four of the nine fruit and while I am not sure we can break them into three separate categories, I would like to call the first three the celebratory fruit because they should form the cornerstone or all that is going on in our lives spiritually. Love and joy and peace give us an approach to life and to the L-rd that celebrate who He is and who we are in Him and what He is doing in our loves.

Patience refers more to how we manage what is going on in our lives whether it is what we do when what we do not want to be happening in our lives troubles us or whether we have to wait for things which are not yet happening in our lives.

It celebrates our conviction that everything in our lives, be it ever so good or ever so bad or ever so boring or exciting, is only temporary. It also celebrates our conviction that the L-rd will help us to relate to our lives as a journey towards the only permanent feature of a life of faith – the coming kingdom.

The next two fruit: goodness and kindness, gave me a run for my money as I was preparing this meditation during the week. You all know that I read my Bible in French and that besides several English translations, I am also able to access Greek and Hebrew study aids when the need arises. So in the relative comfort of my living-room and in the peaceful retreat of my basement, I began to look at how goodness and kindness were translated and I even went to the Greek New Testament and that is when my head began to hurt a little bit.

You see, the same Greek words for goodness and kindness are used interchangeably when they appear in the New Testament and rather than try and find Hebrew equivalents in the Old Testament, I asked myself why the apostle put them together in one of the first New Testament books to be written, if they are parallel terms with similar meanings. It was a fruitful study and allowed me to see that parallel terms can give an emphasis for us to see that how we treat one another is very important.

I would like to look at these two terms together and I want to use the model we have in how our King first revealed Himself to His people while they were gathered around the mountain in the wilderness. In Exodus 34 we have what is sometimes called G-d's thirteen attributes and they begin with describing Him as merciful and compassionate and slow to anger and rich in goodness and faithfulness.

From this description, which is repeated many times throughout the Bible, we see that G-d wants to both be good to us as He teaches us to be good and to do good, and also to show us kindness, when we fall short of His requirements, as part of the process of learning to walk with Him. In other words, at the rock bottom level in how the L-rd wants to relate to us is a double whammy of goodness and kindness. This goodness applies as the principle motivation in all He does for us and in all He wants us to do for Him, for both ourselves and for others around us.

He is not an angry G-d who is ready to pounce on us when we do not do things perfectly every time. He has our best interests in mind and realizes that we are dust and yet, He wants to guide us into His goodness and help us to discover how we can also show goodness to ourselves and to the members of our community – and indeed towards all the people we encounter in our brief pilgrimage through this life to our Father's home in glory.

His first thoughts of us are of peace and hope and joy – He actually likes us, with all of our flaws and quirks and He believes in our potential to learn to do our best and He also cuts us enough slack, so that when we do not get it right the first time (or many times after that), He wants to work with us to find out how we can get it right.

Now there is an element of discipline where He sets and maintains boundaries and allows us to reap the consequences of our actions. There is also a strong element of His immovable righteousness from which He refuses to budge and which He will always draw us back towards. He must never be seen as our sugar daddy in the sky who finds everything that we do cute and who is willing to give us everything that we want and to wink at our sinful behaviour as if it did not matter.

He is not a jolly fellow who will let us get away with everything and who always covers the bill for everything we ruin or break or steal or hurt as if His unconditional love gave us a licence to be as bad as we wanted and always get away with everything and anything without ever having to worry about the consequences.

This is balanced with His drive to teach us to walk in His righteousness and in His love and for us to discover the joy of repentance and of forgiveness. He warns us, comforts us and tells us that He is willing to forgive us when we are willing to let go of our sinful rebellion and even that He is willing to give us time to come to our senses with out swooping down to squash us like a bug when we step out of line.

His concept of authority is always redemptive and only becomes punitive to bring us back to our senses and to His righteousness. He is the best example of goodness and kindness in the universe and He wants us to develop this same potential, both with ourselves and with each other.

He wants us to be good and to be kind and not base how we relate to each other primarily on a desire to be punitive or vengeful, but to learn to relate to each other with the same kind and level of grace He relates to us with.

Now this does not mean that we abandon the need to enforce standards of righteousness and accountability, but that we do so from a motivation of wanting to exercise goodness and mercy with one another. I see goodness as primarily our first motivation with each other and with ourselves.

Yes, we are sinners who fail and who flounder and do things which are disappointing and sometimes even horrible, but there is a deeper core, a potential for righteousness and goodness which is waiting to be liberated and all and any intervention and participation we have in each others lives will want to tap into this spiritual potential.

Kindness is the side of goodness which is willing to work to clean up and to rebuild and to heal when goodness is either compromised or broken down and failing. It does not condone or excuse, but neither does it condemn or cut off as a primary objective. It wants to welcome back and to teach the difference between a reason and an excuse.

An excuse justifies sinfulness and seeks to avoid accepting responsibility or doing what is necessary to return to the position from which we have fallen. These were first used by Adam and Eve in the garden when they disobeyed G-d concerning the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and by Cain after he had murdered his brother.

When people say they couldn't help themselves and do not want to admit what they have done, it is an excuse that wants to escape blame and responsibility.

A reason wants to look at what happened and at why it happened and to design a strategy to both fix the problem and to make sure steps are taken to ensure that it does not happen again. When David was confronted about his adultery with Bathsheba, he came clean and took full responsibility and went as far as to say: "It is against You only that I have sinned. Cleanse me and I shall be clean, heal the bones which you have broken".

It is kind of like the difference between an inventor who is trying to figure out how to make something work and a politician who is trying to prove that it is not his fault and to shift the blame elsewhere, with no real concern for getting the job done or figuring out how to make it work. We want to be all about reasons and never just about excuses.

Goodness means we want to be good and to be good to each other and to all people. It means that our primary motivation is always for good and not for personal gain or revenge. It means that we want to do what we know is right and what we know is the best thing. It means that we want to help, that we want to serve, that we want to patiently prepare any and every situation we are in for the arrival of love, joy and peace.

Kindness means that when we encounter obstacles and failure and stubbornness and even wilful meanness and deceit and betrayal, we do not follow suit. It means that when something horrible happens to us, we do not do something horrible or worse in return.

It means that we are ready to help the one who has wandered and failed so that they can return from where they have fallen and join us in doing good – and in fixing the problem once we have discovered the reason it has happened. It also means we are not looking for excuses to justify foolishness or sin, but we are looking to find out how to fix the problem so that one small leak or one big defeat neither causes the boat to sink nor the war to be lost.

If you like, the two words or concepts are grouped together to show the positive and the negative sides of love and grace. Positive in that we firmly hold onto and proclaim the agenda of goodness and negative in that we are willing to do what is necessary to deal with all and any barriers to our first agenda in whatever circumstances we find ourselves in.

There is one more aspect of goodness and kindness that I want to mention here. We could look at goodness as that which we are able to do for others and at kindness, as the goodness we wish for others when we are unable to do anything to help bring this about. In other words, goodness is what we are able to do and kindness is what we wish for others when there is no avenue for us to explore in order to meet that objective.

I encourage all of you who are able, to explore practical means of responding to the crisis in the Philippines and also for those of you who are unable to make a practical contribution, to lift them up in prayer as they pull the fragments of their lives together and rebuild. We are not always able to respond but we are always able to pray and to encourage when we have no ability to help, but would help if we could.

Goodness needs to be our first and primary objective, since this is what drives how G-d has related to mankind from the beginning and how He continues to intervene in the generations of mankind until the kingdom comes. Kindness needs to be our willingness to reach out redemptively and help those in need or those who have wandered and failed to return to the place they need be – so that they can return to an agenda of goodness.

Goodness and kindness acknowledge both our potential for goodness and our addiction to foolishness and sin and are willing to do whatever is necessary not to let foolishness and sin become the agenda we live our lives by.

It can also mean that goodness is what we do when we can and that kindness is what we wish and pray and hope for when we have no practical means of helping this to come to pass.

May your commitment to goodness be unmovable and may your commitment to kindness be inexhaustible, both because G-d has built the potential for these two fruit in all of our lives and also because they characterize how He works in all of our lives as we complete our pilgrimage from conception to the grave and through the grave to our Father's home in glory.