

3 Tishrei, 5765 (Sept. 18, 2004) **Shabbat Shuvah: The Sabbath of Returning** J. M. Terrett

Ha'Azinu **Give Ear**
Torah: Deut. 32:1-52
Haftarah: 2 Sam. 22:1-51
Brit Chadashah: Rom. 10:17-11:12; 12:19; 15:9, 10 (L & F)

Special Haftarah Passages: **Hosea 14:2-10; Micah 7:18-20; Joel 2:15-27**
Tsom G'dal'yahu (Fast of Gedaliah [YHVH has become great]): Jer. 39-43:7 (Joel 2:13; Is. 58).

This morning, I would like to talk to you about two special features of the Ten Days of Repentance: the Sabbath of Returning and the Fast of Gedaliah and they both have to do with new beginnings. However one was a false start, which turned a potential blessing into a second disaster for the survivors of the House of Jacob. Let's talk about Gedaliah.

When Jerusalem was burned and most of the people were taken into captivity, the Babylonians placed the survivors under the governorship of a Jewish man called Gedaliah. Under his leadership, there was an initial return to the land by all the Jews who had taken refuge in other countries during the conflict, and they made an abundant harvest of the fruit crops which were generally gathered in at this time of the year. You can read about it in Jeremiah, chapters 39-43.

The intentions of the King of Babylon should have been obvious to these survivors. He did not burn the crops, nor did he destroy what remained of the cities in Judah. He allowed the Jews to set up a new administration at one of the old capitals of Israel – Mitspah (Watchtower in Hebrew). Jeremiah the prophet also decided to go there and some kind of restored temple ritual was established there in what was called the House of the L-RD (Jer. 41:5).

I just want to take you on one little side track about this house of the L-rd. A lot of nonsense keeps circulating about what happened to the Ark of the Covenant, and some may wonder if Jeremiah was able to bring it with him to Mitspah. Several locations around the world also claim to house this religious artefact, but they all miss the point. Until the presence of the L-rd took up residence in the golden box, it was just box. Let me say something a little scary, related to this. Unless the presence of the L-rd flows through our worship, it is just noise. How do you tell? Is it volume? Is it intention? Is it even content? James 3:13-18 gives us the lowdown.

The L-rd is present wherever His people seek Him in word and in truth. No location, no ritual object, and no series of special ceremonies and no dynamic worship can ever oblige the L-rd to be present. Jer. 29:8-15 outlines the only formula which will guarantee any measure of success. It's called repentance – repentance which leads to obedience, to an obedience which is not only willing to accept the consequences of foolishness, but is also willing to walk with the L-rd and to rebuild as part of that walking. Let's look at the failed obedience of the survivors of Judah, so that our obedience in 5765 might avoid failing according to their bad example.

I know it is not always useful to speculate on what could have been, but in many respects, true repentance needs to look at potential consequences and decide which kind of potential consequences to sow into the life of the returning believer who is truly repentant. So let's look at what was still possible, before the assassination of Gedaliah and before the people wrongly decided to flee into Egypt. The people had five advantages with which to rebuild their lives: (1) they had peace, (2) they had a restored community, (3) they had an abundant harvest, (4) they had a restored kosher worship under a recognised prophet who was also a priest and (5) they had the promise of the return, once the seventy years were over. Their current distress would only be temporary if they sought the L-rd and walked in obedience to what He had to say.

Now, despite all the loss of life and the great material damage which the community of Israel had suffered, they were still in possession of the Promised Land and from the locations where people came from, it would appear that Jews from both the southern and the northern kingdoms were also once again under the same administration and once again formed a single community. They

even had an intact priesthood who were once again offering sacrifices and worshipping the L-rd. What went wrong? They made bad choices based on a faulty obedience.

From a close reading of the text, it would appear that these survivors were not all kosher Jews and many of them were still practicing various forms of criminal idolatry. As well many of them still hoped to overthrow the Babylonians and not have to live under their rule. The assassin, one Ishmael, was of the royal blood, and was in the pay of the King of Moab, who may have wished to unite the remnants of Israel with his kingdom – either to rebel, or to rule over a bigger chunk of real estate. He may even have promised to make Ishmael a king under his control.

Even the military leader who tried to warn Gedaliah, a Jew named Johanan, wanted to take the people into Egypt, which was not yet under Babylonian control. He was afraid of what the Babylonians would do, since a considerable number of them had been slaughtered by Ishmael along with Gedaliah – which leads me to suspect that the King of Moab was preparing some kind of conflict with Babylon. Johanan wanted to take the people to safety in a powerful land, free from any potential Babylonian revenge. He wanted a solution to the problem, but he and the others, were not prepared to accept G-d's solution, which always involves an element of risk.

Instead, they refused to accept the consequences which the whole community was suffering, and which G-d promised would lead to a restored community, if only the survivors would remain in the land – and by association seek the L-rd deal with the Babylonians and stop practicing idolatry. They wanted help, they wanted to be rescued, but on their own terms, without having to stop the foolishness they were practicing. What kind of rescuing do you want from the L-rd? Do you want it on your terms or are you prepared to make according to His terms?

You see they misunderstood the true nature of repentance. Repentance is not just the expression of regret at the disastrous consequences of foolish actions. True repentance is at least three things. True repentance is first the acknowledgment of the folly which led to the disaster, and second it is a commitment to quit being foolish. There is a third element which is maybe the hardest to deal with.

True repentance is also the acceptance of the consequences of the former folly, and is a commitment to live through these consequences and rebuild, and fix and cleanse, until what was broken, what was defiled is restored to G-d's specifications, to G-d's satisfaction. It was the commitment of Jeremiah, who decided to remain with the remnants of the people (you know, the real survivors) and with them, to seek the L-rd until the community recovered and until the punishment had run its course.

He could have waited out the storm in Babylon, under the protection of the King of Babylon and he could have brought much comfort to the survivors in captivity. Instead, he wanted to remain in the land and rally the survivors to occupy the land and care for it until the captivity was over.

There was a lot of work to do. Many ruined cities had to be rebuilt and there were probably many enemies and invaders who wanted to take possession of the land – either the descendants of the Canaanites who had been driven out, or other groups who wanted to take possession of a land known for its abundant harvests. Sometimes people feel it is easier to run away and start over somewhere else, rather than stay put and walk with the L-rd in the midst of the survivors. Jeremiah made the right choice, and this year, during the days of repentance, we need to search our ways, and learn to make right choices in 5765.

But there is a caveat, a consumer alert. Sometimes believers get the false idea that repentance restores us to the place we were before all the folly was committed. In a way this is not a false idea and is so true and in a way this is a false idea and is never going to happen. It is so true because the only place of blessing, of strength and of healing is in walking with the L-rd – which may mean dwelling for awhile at Mitspah, until Jerusalem is ready to be rebuilt. Are you in that place this morning?

In a very real sense, it is never going to happen, because repentance does not fix what was broken, that is our job, and repentance gives us the strength and the wisdom to see this painful process through to completion (2 Cor. 7:11). Let me give you a recent example of what I am talking about.

Some of our neighbours to the south of us have experienced some pretty violent storms, which have caused a considerable amount destruction. Once the storm is over, it is time to rebuild, with the only

treasure they have which really matters – their lives (Jer. 39:18). Year by year, the community of Jacob and the body of our Messiah, may go through storms, may suffer great loss, but if we do not suffer the loss of our repentance, our true repentance, we have not lost anything we cannot recover from. Are we ready to make 5765 a year of true repentance and recovery?

If, however, we have a divided repentance, one which does not really abandon idolatry and personal agendas, then we have suffered more than a tragedy, we have become a tragedy. Tomorrow commemorates a tragedy as great as the destruction of the temple – the loss of a Jewish presence in the land, so that it filled up with strangers and had to be bought back and fought for unnecessarily.

For B'nai Chayim, the High Holy Days and especially Shabbat Shuvah have a special significance which will never be a pleasant memory for us. But as we continue to rebuild our community and learn the lessons we need, in order to fully recover and move on towards our full potential, both as individuals and as a community, let us do so with true repentance. What does that mean for us?

G-d's call on our lives will always be to have faith and to walk in obedience. Anything and everything which gets in the way of this double imperative must always be considered not only expendable, but undesirable and the greatest obstacle to our spiritual growth. We must not confuse the regret we feel when bad things happen to us, with the regret G-d wants us to feel when we fall short of the expectations He outlines for us in His Word. The cornerstone of our existence as a Messianic community of Jews and Gentiles will always be to examine our lives and continually bring them under the scrutiny of G-d's Word and into conformity with His Word. Ouch gadol!

Two verses which have haunted me for over 30 years outline the double imperative of true repentance. I Cor. 10:13 acknowledges His unlimited, limited protection in every circumstance of our lives. He is always there, not always to deliver us, but to give us the ability to endure, and to survive anything which our lives may encounter. There is always a reaction, a strategy which He wants us to adopt, whether it is hiding in a cave while our enemy relieves themselves, or appealing to Caesar when our enemies think they have us cornered. Are you willing to spend 5765 filling your life with His strategies as part of your commitment to true repentance? And you know it is never easy.

Heb. 12:13 says that we also need to move beyond survival to conscious recovery and eventual wholeness – our lives should not be lived in a constant state of crisis. Constant crises may come our way with alarming regularity (Matt. 7:24-27), but the inner processes of our lives – our life goals and lifestyle choices, need to be set up for stability, for peace and for rest. In other words, people may shoot us in the foot, but we need to stop shooting ourselves in the foot, to the Jew first and also to the Gentile – to the rabbi first and also to the mishpocah. But when we do, we still have to let that poor foot heal, every time. How is your poor foot healing up? Lets learn to aim somewhere else in 5765.

We are always called to make our lives turn around the cycles of the L-rd, and to be as involved as we are able in our local mishpocah, as we learn to make holy choices in our private, our social and our public lives – whether we suffer the fate of Gedaliah, or endure the tribulation of Jeremiah, because we know that the joy of Ezra and Nehemiah are coming – along with the real biggy – the eternal Kingdom of our blessed Messiah. How is your repentance doing? Let us celebrate His great faithfulness in giving us another year in which to learn to get it right, and keep it right. Let's pray.