

**Our Vision Statement: A Tree (Discipleship Function)**

**Vayera**                      **And He Appeared**      **The Promises Are Set in Motion**

**Torah:**                      Genesis 18:1-22:24

**Haftarah:**                2 Kings 4:1-37

**Brit Chadashah:**      Luke 1:26-38; 24:36-53

Readings: Denysia pp. 115-119 and Ps. 11. Jewish Hero: Josephus. Torah carrier: Teresa

This Torah portion covers: the sad story of Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham's sojourn among the Philistines, the birth of Isaac and the sacrifice of Isaac. The Haftarah portion deals with three miracles in the time of Elisha: the multiplication of the oil to pay a widow's debt, the miraculous birth of a son to the Shunammite and his resurrection after a fatal illness.

The New Testament portion deals with the angelic announcement to Mary of the miraculous birth of the Messiah and also the final verses in Luke where the resurrected Messiah appears to the astonished Apostles and tells them that all the was written about Him must be fulfilled. They are also told to take this good news to all nations.

When the L-rd appears to Abraham with two angels, He has two things to say. First He confirms that Sarah will have a son and then he tells Abraham that He will send the two angels to judge Sodom and Gomorrah for their great wickedness. What follows appears to be a bargaining session where Abraham seems to be trying to intercede for the two cities.

In fact Abraham speaks about a special feature of human history which is still at work in the world today: the righteous core. In the days of Noah, it had shrunk to just eighty people and the world was drowned while the core was preserved in the Ark. Abraham indicates that if it has shrunk to under ten people, then the judgment of G-d will fall upon it. In our world today we are seeing this same righteous core shrinking and sinfulness is even invading believing communities to the point that many of them are abandoning both what the Bible teaches and the spiritual morality it requires.

The story of the wickedness of these two cities should be a warning to our world and a comfort to the righteous core – as Noah and his family and Lot and his daughters were spared, so members of the righteous core will also be spared.

Two considerations and then we will talk about the binding of Isaac. When it says that Lot's wife looked back, it indicates that she went back and was overwhelmed in the destruction that fell upon the two cities. It is similar to the English expression: moving on, because there is no looking back (going back). Next the two daughters of Lot conceive two children with their father while he is in a drunken state. This is quite a disturbing end to the story, but it testifies to the promise made to Abraham that he would be a father of many nations and no more details are given about the founding of these two nations.

The account also deals with Abraham settling down just outside Philistine territory after the birth and circumcision of Isaac and it ends with was is called the Akedah or binding in Hebrew. It

also deals with Ishmael and Hagar being sent away and being blessed because of Abraham, even though the covenant of blessing will come through Isaac.

Much has been written about the meaning of the sacrifice of Isaac and there are many parallels between this action and the sacrifice of the substitutionary sacrifice of our Messiah. Just as the ram was given in Isaac's place, our Messiah, the Lamb of G-d was given in our place. At this point in his life, Isaac is a young man, so there must have been a great deal of trust for him to allow his father to bind him and prepare to offer him as a burnt offering. In any event, just before the knife descended, the angel of YHVH intervened and the ram was offered in Isaac's place.

The L-rd confirms that He will fulfil the double promise which He made to Abraham because did not refuse his only begotten son. Through this son, Abraham will become a great nation and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in his posterity. Abraham is the father of our faith, to the Jew first and also to the Gentile and here we see that he is also the father of our obedience, to the Jew first and also the Gentile.

The promises are set in motion both by the faith and by the obedience of Abraham. In our Messiah, the L-rd is calling the righteous core from all nations and we are called to do the same until it is time for the eternal kingdom of our Messiah is ready to be established over all the nations and generations of mankind.

In the prophetic portion we see a miraculous birth and a resurrection story, which are part of the thread of the Scriptures that leads up to miraculous birth and resurrection of our Messiah.

In the New Testament portion Mary is promised a baby who will be G-d incarnate in fulfilment to the promise made to our mother Eve that one day the seed of woman would crush the serpent. After His resurrection, our Messiah demonstrates that He is actually resurrected and then takes the apostles through the Scriptures to show them that all He said and all that He did was in fulfilment of what was promised throughout the Bible.

The promises were set in motion because of the faithful obedience of our father Abraham and even though we see our world sliding back towards the darkness which covered the earth in the days of Noah, we understand that our faithful obedience will mean that they will continue to be fulfilled through us as we reach out to the earth's righteous core, generation by generation. The events of our world may seem to be spinning out of control, but the L-rd will always make sure that His Word is fulfilled even in the midst of great confusion and folly.

We need to heed the warning we read in this week's portion and not look back, like Lot's wife and also not let the world pull us away from what the Bible teaches about the origin of the universe and purpose of life. A big part of this means we have to be careful not to let the immorality of our world cause us to abandon our spiritual morality – there are too many supposed believers defecting out of the redeemed righteous core and adopting values which will cause the wrath of G-d to become our inheritance as we move out from under the wings of His love by enshrining sinfulness in the place of righteousness.

### **Sermon: Our Vision Statement: The Tree (Discipleship Function)**

Our first winter series is taking us through our vision statement and the four metaphors which describe our ministry. This week we are looking at the second metaphor – our congregation is

not just a lighthouse, it is a tree where people learn to become rooted in the Messiah and grow spiritually. We begin our spiritual walk with the L-rd as infants, but He wants us to abandon our childish behaviour and learn to move into the fullness of spiritual maturity as grown men and women in the faith.

This growth process is both learning and unlearning as we examine all of our attitudes and habits and learn to be salt and light, both in our own lives and in our outreach to our darkening world. It does not involve a brainwashing where somehow a new personality is imprinted on us and we cease to be the people G-d created us to be.

Too many self help gurus and therapists and even some preachers feel that who we are is somehow deficient and the new man we are called to grow into means we need to undergo a painful, complicated and complete personality shift where we are transformed into so many carbon copies of their idea of what a complete or well balanced person should be.

When the Scriptures tell us to follow the example of the Messiah and to emulate the example of the apostles, it is referring to the same level and kind of spirituality which they developed and which will enhance and strengthen our unique individuality, rather than attacking and undermining it. When we are conceived, we receive a unique genetic makeup that some have called our own unique set of marching orders, because it is G-d who is working in us to give us the desire and ability according to His good pleasure.

We do not receive a new personality when we come to faith, rather, the image of G-d which we were born with is set free to develop spiritually and morally under the guidance of our blessed Messiah through His amazing Word. G-d is not threatened by our individuality and in the Messiah we need to learn to develop our gifting in community so that the entire flock is blessed and enriched by that which each member brings to it.

We will encounter any number of challenges along the way and even become periodically infected with all kinds of childhood spiritual diseases as we learn to put off the old man of our carnal nature and to be clothed with our new man who will keep the sin which crouching at our door out of our lives by the good choices and habits we develop. Our flesh will either be the wild horse which we lose control of and which will drag us away from the L-rd towards our eventual destruction or it will be the trained stallion we will learn to ride through all the twists and turns of this life as we move from victory to victory on our pilgrimage to our Father's home in glory.

In our Yeshiva, we are studying the Gospel of Luke where the parable of the four soils warns us that many who hear the Word of G-d will not learn to successfully integrate it into their lives. They will succumb to birds of doubt, to rocks of temptation and be choked by the weeds of the pleasures and riches and cares of this life. In our community we want to teach the basic spiritual disciplines of the Bible which will inoculate us against all the rabbit trails which the enemy of our souls and the follies of this life will try and distract us with.

When people come our way, we want them to encounter the L-rd and learn to walk with Him according to His Word in our Messianic Jewish context which is Sabbath powered and festival driven. Some will discover that this is not the context which they feel called to and they will move on. Sadly, some of them will succumb to the wiles of the enemy and adopt false teachings and even abandon the spiritual morality the Bible calls us to walk in.

Walking with the L-rd according to His Word is the calling which G-d addresses to all mankind, from conception to the grave and some people will become lost and temporally distracted and ignore this calling either for a short time or for a long time and our community wants to spare sincere believers from this loss of their time and energy.

We believe that all of us have a unique calling and coming to terms with the discipleship we are called to is a big feature of the life of our community as we come to terms with both our uniqueness and this common calling to walk in unity as part of a spiritually cohesive team.

As we grow and learn, the L-rd will regularly perform spiritual pruning to prevent weeds from growing in our lives and to make sure that dead and withered branches do not clutter our lives when we suffer loss or encounter difficulties which take us awhile to come to terms with. We believe that walking with the L-rd needs to occur at every stage of our lives, both when we are young and when we move towards the sunset years of our lives because He prepares both a strategy and a way of escape into every situation He allows into our lives.

Learning to take up the spiritual weapons of our warfare and not succumb to the carnal onslaughts which are prowling our world often means casting down fortresses and bringing into submission every thought which rises up against our walk with the L-rd. It is not something we can do on our own without the help of a community of like minded believers and often learning to walk together in community is one of the greatest challenges we will face if we truly want to grow in the L-rd.

Personality conflicts and misunderstandings are part of learning to accept each other and recognize each other's unique gifting to be part of a dynamic team where the truth is told and accountability is required, gently and firmly as we learn to settle our differences through sound biblical conflict resolution strategies.

There are many examples in the Bible of conflicts between believers which are not dealt with properly and they cause divisions, damage and great loss. In our community, we place a high priority on safety where everyone is welcomed to find their place in our midst and to learn to walk in the harmony which we are called to develop as we grow and mature in the L-rd. We do not accept any form of bullying or any attempts to hijack the goals and priorities which the L-rd has called our community to uphold as a redemptive, caring Messianic community of Jews and Gentiles.

We want to grow in both the knowledge and the grace of our blessed Redeemer and become skillful handlers of the Word of truth as we shine and are salty in a world which is becoming less and less friendly towards what the Bible teaches and towards the morality we are called to practice. We also want to grow together and be a healthy, well fed flock of spiritually mature disciples exploring how to relate our faith to our lost and dying world.

Walking with the L-rd will always mean to have faith in His promises and to walk in obedience to His Word and this does not mean perpetually turning out cloned copies or zombies. We believe in the unique potential of each one of us and of all of us together and we want to grow in our ability to develop this spiritual potential even as our world, the enemy and our own flesh try to distract us and imprison us with the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life. Some believers lapse into spiritual comas where there is no sign of spiritual life and our

discipleship function attempts to equip each of us and all of us so that we will not waste our time and energy on things which do not matter and which cannot satisfy.

Part of this process is deciding which influences we will allow into our lives and which paths we will choose so that we do not become lost or sidetracked during our pilgrimage through this life. We firmly believe that our biblical faith always offers a strategy for us to adopt whenever we encounter the myriad "whatevers" of this life. We refuse to see this life as anything other than a pilgrimage towards our eternal home.

We do not wish to boast in our wisdom, our riches or even in our strength. We want to allow the L-rd to lead us individually and together through our fast paced ever changing world without succumbing to any of its Canaanite ways where lies and deceit will present us with many new and improved versions of the same old spiritual lie: "has G-d really said?"

Discipleship is all about choices where we learn what His Word says and how we should walk based upon what this precious document teaches. Finding out who we are in the L-rd and what He is calling us to can be a tall order, but there is no other worthwhile endeavour for us to undertake as we travel through this life. Have you found your calling in the L-rd? Are you finding your calling in our community? Are you learning to be Sabbath powered and festival driven?

Are you allowing the L-rd's pruning to weed out folly and remove deadwood which is trying to clutter up your life? Are you regularly digging deeply into His Word, daily, weekly and annually? Are you learning the spiritual disciplines you need to adopt in order for you to remain healthy and growing in the knowledge and grace of our Messiah.

I did not select one particular passage to base my sermon on this week, but I did refer to many discipleship passages which have guided my life and smacked me upside the head whenever I have started to deviate from the straight and narrow path which the L-rd calls us all to walk on.

Discipleship is not for the faint hearted or for the part-time, fair weather (or foul weather) spiritual tourists who are merely seeking for an edge to enrich their lives and who are not willing to give their lives to the L-rd through His Word.

We offer enriching worship services, intense Bible training and times of fervent prayer as well as wise and focused outreach as the central part of the mandate our community has received from the L-rd. We do this in a unique Messianic Jewish context which welcomes both Jews and Gentiles to learn the ways of the L-rd and be renewed in our minds so that we can discern the will of G-d for our generation.

Next week, I want to explore more of the disciplines which we are called to integrate into our lives so that we do not grow cold or become distracted or entangled by the spiritual forces of darkness which are taking over our world. We do not do this by developing a sophisticated form of brain washing which prevents us from fully developing our unique giftedness.

We do this by aggressively and persistently searching the Scriptures and learning how to apply its teachings to every area of our lives, be they ever so good or ever so painful. We have a non negotiable agenda which focuses on the world to come and which shows us how to walk through this fading world without becoming infected or distracted by it no matter what it throws at us or tempts us with.

It is not always easy to learn to grow together and learn to walk together and to resolve our difficulties with grace and wisdom. It is not always easy to prevent the toxic influences of our world from taking root in our midst. It is not always easy to prevent anger and bitterness from causing us to bite and devour one another and lose our grip on the forgiveness we need to exercise in order to be forgiven by the Messiah.

It is exciting to see new people join us and to watch our children grow into adults and to come alongside our members as they encounter challenges. It is also exciting to learn to pool our resources and to share them with one another and not get upset and all twisted out of shape when we don't always get our own way.

Spiritual immaturity is a stage we need to grow out of and not become stuck in or fall back into and a community of growing disciples is the best place to learn the spiritual lessons which will equip us to succeed in the L-rd and be a safe place for others to join with us in this amazing spiritual quest.

Join with us. Grow with us. Learn with us. It is an exciting time to serve the L-rd and it is an exciting time to learn what it means to walk with the L-rd.

Four metaphors (a lighthouse, a tree, a bride and a repairman).

Four functions (prophetic, discipleship, worship and healing restoration).

We are a dynamic spiritual community of Jews and Gentiles which aims to provide great spiritual enrichment full of spiritual health and healing where anyone and everyone is welcome to explore both their individual gifting and the mandate which we believe G-d has called this community to fulfil as we explore the wonders of His Word and apply the power of the salvation to every area of our lives.

How attached to this tree are you letting yourself become? Discipleship is the calling of every believer and spiritual maturity needs to be the singular goal of all we learn and all we do. It is our stated objective and the agenda we will always follow. How about you?

Shabbat shalom.