

23 Tevet, 5777 (21/1/17) **Renewal: A Stitch in Time (Saves Nine)** J. M. Terrett

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| Shemot | Names | In The Fullness of His Time |
| Torah: | Exodus 1:1-6:1 | |
| Haftarah: | Isaiah 27:6-28:13; 29:22,23; Jeremiah 1:1-2:3 | |
| Brit Chadashah: | I Corinthians 14:13-25 | |

Reading: Tom pp. 151,153 and Ps. 99. Jewish hero: Melchizedek; Torah carrier: Teresa

This Torah portion covers a considerable time lapse between the arrival of Jacob and his family in Egypt, through a hostile regime change and the installation of Moses as the one who will lead G-d's people out of Egyptian bondage into the Promised Land. The Haftarah portions deal first with the calling of Jeremiah, a priest who saw the nation slide from the spiritual heights it reached under Josiah to the idolatry and folly which lead to the destruction of the holy temple and the captivity. Jeremiah had similar objections to his calling but received similar assurances to Moses that the L-rd was going to work through Him.

The passage in Isaiah outlines the crimes of Israel and the call to return to the straight and narrow, which is described as little by little, here a little and there a little until His Word is fully integrated into every corner and issue of our lives. The New Testament portion talks about tongues as a sign to confound those who do not believe and to convince those who are seeking the L-rd. At Babel, one people who spoke one language, became 70 nations who each spoke a different language. At Pentecost, Jews from many nations who each spoke different languages, became one people, hearing the 120 speaking their languages and praising the One G-d. The one was a redemptive scattering, the other a redemptive gathering as all peoples are called to be set free from the Egypt of this world.

Whenever there was a regime change in Egypt, there was usually a period of anarchy where the members of the toppled regime were slaughtered, along with their supporters, while the new regime took over the reins of power and created a new power elite – kind of like what is going on currently south of the border (although the slaughtering there has more to do with character assassination than actual murder, even with the noisy protests).

A new regime which did not recognize Joseph, began to persecute the privileged shepherds of Egypt and forced them into hard labour in an attempt to crush them and prevent them from rising up against their oppressors and leaving the country. Evidently, after spending several hundred years in Egypt, they had not assimilated and were still lead by an intact group of elders who were earnestly waiting for the promised deliverance of G-d.

The amazing story of the elevation of Moses from a Hebrew slave to a prince of Egypt prepared him to eventually be the spokesman of His people when he returned from his own exile after he foolishly tried to take things into his own hands to help his people. He was given a series of signs to perform before the people and because of his lack of self confidence, he loses the priesthood to his older brother and the house of Aaron remains prominent generationally in Israel because of this initial cowardice.

The place of his encounter with the burning bush is to be the place he is to bring the people to and after a bumpy beginning (his wife circumcises his son), he re-enters Egypt.

Pharaoh is not prepared to lose this pool of free labour because this is what the Egyptians had

always feared. The portion indicates that the current regime was probably a foreign one, not incredibly popular with the native Egyptians with a tenuous hold on power. Any revolt by the Hebrews, might lead to a revolt by the Egyptian population and the overthrow of another regime. History tells us that at one point, the quality of the bricks used by the Egyptians declined suddenly at one point and before things improved for the Children of Israel they had to get worse. This was when they had to cut their own straw.

The stage was being set for both a political and a religious confrontation between the Children of Israel and their G-d on one side and the Egyptians and their gods on the other. Egypt was the mightiest regime in the region and was not about to be dictated to by an oppressed group of despised foreign shepherds who had been reduced to the lowest levels of Egyptian society as the slaves who did the dirty jobs which were not considered fit for the noble Egyptians to perform.

It is no wonder that African Americans identified so closely with the cruelty of Egyptian slavery and the wonder and the joy of the defeat of Pharaoh and the ultimate liberation of the wrongly enslaved and oppressed Children of Israel. The Civil War in the States caused more casualties than any military conflict in American history and the cruelty which was inflicted on the coloured people was as harsh and as unreasonable as that to which the Children of Israel were exposed.

It took a long time for the situation to be dealt with because G-d did not want His people breaking out of Egypt or sneaking out of Egypt, pursued by their former masters, He wanted them set free in such a way as Egypt could never subsequently force them to return to the slavery that was designed to crush their resolve and destroy them as a people.

Jewish people have survived in the long, second dispersion by remembering how they first became a people when they were delivered from Egypt and by determining not to disappear among the nations in whose midst they have been forced to dwell. In the fullness of His time, G-d delivered our people and in the fullness of His time, He will deliver all peoples and bring His long-awaited reign over all the nations and generations of mankind.

We need to determine not to disappear back into the nations out of which we have been delivered and to hold onto the light and shine this light until all the Pharaohs of this world are finally forever overthrown, along with all their false gods, weird ideologies and the gross immoralities of the pagan darkness which is once again sweeping across our world at an ever-escalating pace. I want to live my life with my entire confidence placed in the fullness of His time and to never become discouraged by any set backs and short comings which seem to be doing their best to stall or derail His kingdom's inevitable victory. How about you?

Sermon: Renewal, A stitch in time (saves Nine)

Passage: "*But they that wait upon the L-rd (that have confidence in Him) shall renew their strength. They shall take flight like the eagles, they shall run and not grow weary, they shall walk and not be tired*". (Isaiah 40:31)

As we enter our fifteenth year as a congregation, I look back with amazement at all the ups and downs which our community has weathered and realize that there are only two reasons that we are still here and that we still have a future in the L-rd. First of all, it is because of the faithfulness of the L-rd that we are not consumed and because His mercies are renewed daily and

constantly. Believers, and especially Messianic believers, Jewish and Gentile, have more spiritual enemies than a camel has fleas and there are more things that can go wrong in a spiritual community than even the most pessimistic and paranoid fear monger could ever imagine. And we have lived through a few in our time.

We are like the bee's wings of the spiritual world – they are too small and we are too heavy, and yet we continue to fly, even if we remain the most popular snack for a broad spectrum of persistent predators. We attract so many different kinds of people with some many different kinds of personal agendas and with a considerable weight of diverse spiritual baggage and personal damage. We are so easily misunderstood by the world, the church and the synagogue and there are so many rabbit trails and side tracks waiting to lure us away from the straight and narrow path to which we are called. And we have seen some take them.

We have theological challenges, including that toxic collection of lies and legends with the innocent sounding name of evolution. We have spiritual and moral challenges where all manner of immorality and abuse wait to snare us into the anger and bitterness which will render us sterile and useless for the kingdom. Some are still floating around in that condition.

If it were not for the persistent goodness of the L-rd, we would have long ago been sucked back into the darkness of the world or scattered, running for our lives as we head for the hills far from life's disasters which work so hard to shatter our faith and undermine our confidence. But there is a second reason that our community is still around and is still vital and full of potential, even with all the challenges which work to sap our strength and weaken our resolve. And it ain't over yet, mishpocah!

From the get go, we have resolved to be faithful to the L-rd through His Word and to let our lives be truly Sabbath powered and Festival driven, even as we walk through the valley of the shadow of death as sheep in the midst of wolves who remain wise as serpents and harmless as doves. We first came together as a fairly diverse motley crew of Jews and Gentiles recovering from a painful split that damaged so many lives and scattered so many people.

But we determined to let the L-rd forge us into a cohesive, close knit community of stable, growing believers ready to do all that it takes to resolve our differences and heal our wounds and repack our baggage so that how we live and how we respond to the whatevers that roar through our lives, keeps our connection to our Messiah vital, firm and persistent.

We will continue to have a larger than usual turnover as visitors come and try out our distinct community, which they may initially find exotic and exciting as they experience, for the first time, a dynamic expression of the Gospel in a Messianic Jewish context – which is the Jewish space we cherish and promote so energetically. Once they see that we are not perfect and that we place a high premium on peacefulness, harmony and stability, they either adopt our priorities or they continue their relentless migration in search of greener spiritual pastures, which are high on dividends and low on commitment. That is not what renewal is all about.

We boldly proclaim our confidence in the faithfulness and goodness of G-d and we unashamedly declare our calling to restore a biblical Jewish perspective which has been too long excluded from main line Christianity. We willingly admit that there are a myriad of challenges lying in wait to rob us, hurt us and enslave us, but we have decided to do what it takes to live in the light and remain salty because there is no other way to serve the L-rd and remain faithful to His Word – even when this is not a very popular approach.

I entitled this meditation: A Stitch in Time (Saves Nine) because constant and persistent renewal is the only key to survival and revival in the fast paced, confusing world we are wandering through. Well, what does renewal look like and how can we own this vital spiritual reality in a world where spiritual decay constantly works 24/7 to undermine us and cause our faith and obedience to crumble? We are never called to live tattered lives.

Basically renewal first fosters a firm grip on the vital truths which the Bible outlines – and they are five ([1] The Bible is the Word of G-d, [2] Yeshua is G-d the Son, [3] He was born of a virgin, [4] He died on the cross for the sins of mankind, [5] He arose, ascended and will one day return). Each of these could be a whole sermon(s) in themselves. If we loosen our grip on any one of these, we begin the slide back into pagan darkness and the foolish and pernicious lies which any number of cults foster while they claim to teach the truth. How's your grip?

The other side of this coin is biblical (spiritual) morality (no murder, no adultery, no theft, no lying [malicious gossip] and no coveting [greed] of any kind). Sadly, historically, neither Judaism nor Christianity has shown much of a generational commitment to upholding these non negotiable standards. Too many believers and too many believing communities (to the Jew first and also to the Gentile) have fallen prey to the sad, stale demonic sidetrack of questioning: has G-d really said? and have allowed both moral (spiritual) and doctrinal departures to ravage our mandate and waste the time and resources which the L-rd continues to put at our disposal. I want us to be renewed and never wasted.

Well how do you head decay off at the pass and make a stitch in time so that we are renewed and are not torn asunder by the world, the flesh and the enemy during our brief, generational pilgrimage through this vale of tears?

We need to look at the testimony of Israel through the Scriptures and see that making sure that our lives are a constant reflection of His commandments, as we cycle through the festivals is the key to any enduring, significant renewal. Life has a tendency to move us away from the commandments and pull us towards the ditches where all spiritual progress is stalled and destroyed. Too many believers spend most of their spiritual lives wandering ditches.

However we decide to conduct our services and our congregational life and however we decide to walk with the L-rd as individuals and as families, whatever changes we make and whatever changes we resist, need to reflect our commitment to the truths of His Word and how they apply to our lives. Pat Boone once produced a series of children's cassettes which taught that we win or lose by the way we choose. How is your theology? Is the house of your faith firmly on the rock? Would you get a five out of five with what you believe? How is your spirituality (morality)? Is there any darkness lurking in your life? Would you get a five out of five in the way you live your life? Renewal is a constant commitment to spiritual success.

We have made many changes in how we express ourselves and live as a community and we are not afraid of change and we want to always exercise a dynamic flexibility so that what we believe and how we live is meaningful to our world and attractive to our own people, so that we do not lose our children and young people when they grow up and go out into the world.

We have something for everybody in our shul, from the cradle to the grave and while we will not always act on every creative suggestion we receive and while we will not make every interesting modification which people would like to see, we will never become rigid or hide

bound, clinging to the way we have always done things as some kind of comforter or baby blanket we cannot let go of. Our calling is to maintain a dynamic, meaningful "Jewish space" in our Messianic context and we will allow nothing to diminish this staple of our existence.

Nothing which diminishes the biblical nature of our community life will be encouraged and nothing which diminishes our obedience to a sound biblical, spiritual, morality will be welcomed into our midst. Renewal does not target the baby when it throws out the bath water and does not believe in change for the sake of change. Progress does come at a cost, but it must always aim for progress in the L-rd and in the things of the L-rd and never away from anything which constitutes our unique and singular calling.

I once had a poster in my office which I may dig out again. It read: change is inevitable, growth is optional. Growth both in depth and in numbers will always be the objective of this shul and the agenda of our excellent leadership. We will continue to share the load when it comes to the various ministries which make up our shul – and if shabbat School and Youth retain a special place in my heart it is because if I were not standing in the pulpit, I would be a regular volunteer for both of these groups. Where would you like to volunteer?

We will change how we worship, we will change how we do the Siddur, we will change how we set out our materials and we will even change how we set up our two weekly meetings (Prayer and Yeshiva Bible Study). I am actively praying for a younger person to train up as your future rabbi – becoming rabbi emeritus is becoming more attractive as I plan for what may be the final two active decades of my ministry. Well how do we make sure that renewal occurs in our midst and not just have change for the sake of change at the risk of sliding into the tyranny of trying to please everybody and ending up pleasing nobody?

Let me answer with a three pronged understanding which has stood me in good stead as I have wandered through five distinct cultures and four distinct linguistic groups in nearly 40 years of ministry alongside my esteemed actor colleague, Clint Eastwood. You know where I am going with this – I have seen the good the bad and the ugly and I have always done my best to aim for the good, to avoid the bad and to protect myself and my ministry from the ugly.

Along the way, I have also encountered pigs, dogs, wolves and sheep, all trying to take possession of various sheepfolds I have had supervision over. Sometimes things have gotten pretty dicey and while I have always been saddened at the departure of many good people who have wandered through our ministry, I have also been gladdened by the departure of others who only came to steal, destroy and even kill what the L-rd was trying to build as we laboured in His vineyard and proclaimed His coming Kingdom.

Well here is the three pronged approach to building and sustaining revival: principle, priority, practice. And while this understanding has not always been successfully maintained with some of the fractious and divisive contexts we have encountered, it remains our singular and stubborn approach to ministry, and I want to close with this.

The principle we want to maintain can be described as the five fundamentals of biblical truth and the five aspects of biblical spirituality (morality) which I have already outlined. They are the non negotiables we are called to adhere to and to never depart from and when we seek wisdom from the L-rd to enact changes in our midst this is the divine agenda which we will never depart from for anyone or for any reason whatsoever. Call us fanatics or fundamentalists or bigots or

narrow minded but sticks and stones may break my bones, but only departing from His word will ever hurt me. We know what we want to do, even if at times we are not sure how we are going to be able to do it. Enter the second stage of this approach: priorities.

We always have only so many resources and we have to set firm priorities with the deployment of our resources so that we do not exhaust them or over extend ourselves as we faithfully fulfil our ministry. Our resources have expanded and at times they have shrunk, but we will always want to use them wisely as we wait for G-d's faithful increase and as we weather the various storms and attacks which it is our calling to encounter and survive.

Instead of wailing and whining because we do not have what we would like to have, we are always going to pull ourselves together and do the best with what we have, because tomorrow will always be another day. It is this firmly, flexible approach which has ensured the survival of Judaism among the hostile nations it has been our privilege and our burden to wander through. What priorities are preventing you from overextending and collapsing?

Priorities means that we will adhere to the non negotiable principles and set priorities to deploy our resources in the best, most efficient and hopeful manner possible. We are pioneers who may occasionally miss the flesh pots of Egypt, but who will make do until we can grow and improve our ability to meet our needs in whatever wilderness we wander through, which brings me to the final point in my three pronged approach to healthy, dynamic biblical spirituality in our darkening days: practice.

I have a book in my library which illustrates the clothing Jewish people have worn over the millennia since we came out of Egypt. If people from different ages met on the street, how would they recognize each other? By the choices they made and continue to make. Practice is where the rubber meets the road and while our principles are never up for modification and while our priorities will always endeavour to maximize our impact, we will always be willing to modify our practices so that they remain meaningful and attractive to the lost and dying world through which we are wandering. We will always change so that we can encourage growth.

Our music, which translation we use, the length and location of our services, the menu of our Seder and our Noshes, how we dedicate our babies and perform Bar/Bat Mitzvahs and all and any of the practical details of how we conduct the business of this shul will never be set in cement. Will you join me in praying and working for constant renewal at B'nai Chayim as we wander through 2017 and 5777 and watch our children grow and our wrinkles deepen?

Our principles will never change and we will always try our best to articulate them and make them meaningful for us and for our lost and dying world.

Our priorities will always endeavour to make the best use of our resources so that we never run out of gas along the way, either as people or as a community.

Our practices will always be up for discussion, as long as they faithfully reflect the resource base which our priorities cherish and protect – and as long as they also reflect our unflinching principles and do not try to take us away from the straight and narrow or hijack us away from the Gospel and biblical spirituality (morality).

Where do you fit into all of this? Over the next few weeks, I want to take you into a discussion

of renewal so that we can all find our place in this dynamic community and work together to accomplish the call which the L-rd has entrusted us with.

And no amount of bumps, or bushwhacking side trackers will ever be allowed to push us into the ditch or take us on a painful joy ride down any rabbit trails as we grow and lie down in green pastures with our heads anointed and our cup running over – and as, time and time again, He regularly prepares a table for us in the presence of our enemies, to the Jew fist and also to the Gentile (with no spiritual McJunk food on the menu).

Shabbat shalom campers. Have no fear, spring is just around the corner and very soon you will be grumbling about having to cut your lawn, instead of just shovelling your walk.

How are your blue boxes doing?

Let's pray.