

At The Waters of Mara

Ki Tisa	When You Elevate	Last Gasps of Paganism
Torah:	Exodus 30:11-34:35	
Haftarah:	I Kings 18:1-39	
Brit Chadashah:	2 Corinthians 3:1-18	
Shabbat Parah:	Numbers 19:1-22. Ezekiel 36:16-36	
Reading:	Margaret p. 169 and Ps. 75. Jewish Hero: Baby Rachel. Torah carrier: Julie	

Today marks four Shabbats until Passover, which is both the most wonderful time of the year and almost the most daunting. We are remembering when the oppressed rabble was delivered from Egypt and began their journey to the Holy Mountain in order to get ready for their entrance back into the Holy Land. A small number of people initially entered the land of Egypt and some four hundred years later a mighty nation walked out, enriched by the Egyptians who had formerly oppressed them.

Every week, when I get ready for the Torah meditation and my sermon, there is so much I could say that it can be quite overwhelming, because G-d's Word and G-d's Spirit are fountains that never run dry. So I recommend to you the weekly portions, even though time would not permit for me to deal with all the wonders and treasures which His Word contains.

The Torah portion deals with the last gasps of paganism as the people waited below, outside the fiery cloud and figure perhaps that one of the Egyptian gods has done in Moses, so they decide to build an idol to honour him. I have always found it interesting that no one volunteered to go up the mountain to look for Moses (and Joshua) and it is likely that the idolatrous core which came out of Egypt is trying to seize the camp and move it away from the mountain to leave YHVH behind and skedaddle back to Egypt.

They may have had the notion that G-d was limited to a specific location and that the length of time it was taking Moses to negotiate with G-d meant that the Almighty had finally run out of steam and they had better head back home before it was too late.

Nonetheless, the idolatrous core took over the camp and Aaron and the seventy elders and the leaders of a thousand, of a hundred and of ten were apparently powerless to stop them. It was obviously a well planned putsch and I call it the last gasps of paganism because it was the last time any allegiance was shown to the defeated gods of Egypt.

It is astounding because they could still see the lightening filled cloud and there was no doubt that YHVH was still on the mountain and they had been told to wait until Moses came down to seal the covenant with the former rabble so that they could become the covenant people of YHVH. After all the wonders they had seen, there was a group of them determined to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory and return to the paganism from which they were delivered. I still get goosebumps when I think of the hand of G-d writing the Ten words on both sides of the tablets and wonder if He burned them on, etched them on or just stamped them on the two tablets Moses carved. It was to be a permanent record of an amazing experience because the mountain was only a temporary stage in their pilgrimage to the Promised Land and G-d wanted

to make sure that they were fully equipped before they moved on.

Two changes occur that impact how the people relate to G-d. First, the Levites side with G-d and perform a police action against the leaders of the last pagan rebellion. Those they missed were struck down later by G-d, but this tribe became G-d's special forces in the camp so that no future uprisings could occur.

Next the presence of G-d came down, not into the tabernacle, but into the personal tent of Moses which was moved outside the camp. Until the tabernacle was built, both the two tablets and the mighty presence of G-d refused to dwell in the midst of the stiff necked people. It was not because the L-rd feared another uprising, but He was letting the people know that He was displeased that they let the rebellion happen and did not rise up to stop it.

Aaron's and the elders' role in the rebellion has always struck me as dubious and there are two case scenarios which explain this role, one a best case and the other a worse case. Worse case, was that they actually embraced the last gasp of paganism and were willing to lead the people back into the paganism they had just been delivered from and when Moses asked who was on the L-rd's side, their military action was an act of contrition.

The best case scenario is that they were stalling and did not want to engage in a civil war without the help of Moses and Joshua. In a way it was a good thing that the hard core pagans in their midst came out of the closet so they could be eliminated before the newly organized camp moved out. The passage indicates that they practised a form of pagan worship which involved negative sexual behaviour, hence the great wrath of Moses.

He smashed the tablets of witness because the people had violated the covenant they had agreed to and after dealing with the leaders of the putsch, they had to start over from scratch, but with a difference. They were no longer the oppressed former slaves being delivered from Egypt, they were the idolatrous horde who had violated the terms of their deliverance and only the intercession of Moses prevented their immediate annihilation.

G-d did not relent solely because of Moses, but also because of the righteous core that still existed among the people. He is still not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance and it is only when the final darkness had spread irrevocably across our world that He will bring about the end of the world as He initiates the final judgement and the arrival of His eternal kingdom. Once the rebellion has been squashed, and the people are pi shamefully picking gold out of their teeth, YHVH replaces the broken tablets and carries on giving ritual instructions to Moses with one major change.

Moses spent another forty days (symbolic reference to a very long time) on the mountain, then the presence moved off the mountain and hovered over Moshe's tent.

To let the people know what would happen if another rebellion was attempted, the tent was moved to the edge of the camp because His presence still remains lethal and the rituals of sacrifice and atonement had not yet been set up to help the people deal with their sin and not give in to it.

Even today, our rituals of forgiveness are not designed for us to indulge our sin, but to root it out and remove it from us and us from it, so that His presence can reside in our midst unimpeded and undiminished. I entitled my meditation the last gasps of paganism because it is only as we

come to terms with our sinfulness that our separation from G-d can be bridged.

The Haftarah portion is one of my favorite stories to tell our children, because it is the story of Elijah on Mount Carmel. The prophets of Baal and Astarte have performed their own putsch in the northern kingdom and have removed the worship of G-d and replaced it with paganism. On the mountain, G-d ignites Elijah's offering and the idolatrous leaders of the rebellion are put to death.

The Haftarah portion for Shabbat Parah gives the promise of full restoration to the exiles and mentions the arrival of a new covenant where our hearts become the tablets and their stoniness is replaced by wholesome flesh, once His Spirit comes to reside within us in our beloved Messiah.

The Brit Chadashah portion reflects the Torah portion and speaks of our hearts as the tablets where the words of the New Covenant are written by the Spirit who now comes to indwell us. and instead of recreating the tabernacle with all of its limitations of access and reminders of sin, in a real sense, we all become Moses. Not Moses the lawgiver and charismatic war leader who takes the people out of captivity, but Moses who alone has unlimited and unrestricted access to the presence of G-d behind the veil.

This is our privilege as believers because our bodies are the only temple G-d will recognize and all the symbolism of the tabernacle if fulfilled in our hearts and lives because of the power of the blood of the Lamb and His resurrection. The tabernacle and both temples were glorious pieces of real estate, but they were great, not because of how beautifully they were built, but because they represented the willingness of Almighty G-d to take up residence in the midst of His people and to always be accessible to them.

Shabbat Parah records the giving of the atonement heifer whose ashes would release the people from the defilement of sin, after they were released from the penalty of sin. Our L-rd is both the Lamb of G-d whose shed blood releases us from the power and penalty of sin and He is also the Red Heifer who washes us free from the stain of our defilement as He cleanses us from all unrighteousness again and again, so that the memory of sin fades and our grasp of His love and His presence grows. In a very real sense, we are set free from sin to grow in strength and holiness as we shed the stains and defilement of sin and are renewed and cleansed as we wander through this life on our way to our Father's Home in Glory. May we be set free from all the last gasps of paganism in our hearts and lives as we take a stand on the L-rd's side and refuse to be sucked in to any paganism whenever it shows up in our midst.

Sermon: Passover Mini-series: At The Waters of Mara

Passage: *Moses made the people leave the Sea of Reeds and they took the direction of the wilderness of Shur and after walking three days in the wilderness they found no water. They came to Mara, but they could not drink the water of Mara because it was bitter. That is why the place is called Mara (bitterness). The people murmured against Moses and said what will we drink? Moses cried unto YHVH and YHVH indicated a piece of wood which Moses threw into the water and the water became sweet. It is there that YHVH gave laws and ordinances to the people and put them to the test. He said that if you listen attentively to the voice of YHVH your G-d and do that which is right in His eyes, if you lend ear to His commandments and if you observe all of His laws, then I will not strike you with any of the diseases which I struck the Egyptians with, for I am YHVH who*

heals you (Exodus 15:22-26)

As we come to the season of Passover, I want to give you a four sermon mini-series which will take us from the exodus out of Egypt to the Holy Mountain, because this destination was the objective of our people's deliverance from captivity. First I want to deal with the waters of Mara, then I want to deal with the giving of the Sabbath as Israel's main festival. Then I want to deal with the bushwhacking of the Amalekites and finish up with the organizing of the camp before Moses ascended the Holy Mountain. Then it will be time for our annual Seder.

Mara is on the shores of the Red Sea, a three day march into the wilderness which borders the Sea of Reeds. The people camped at Mara which was the first place they stopped outside of Egyptian controlled territory. We are not told how long they camped at this site, but they were now able to bake their bread, so after they left Egypt, it was seven days until they stopped at Mara. They walked for four days before they entered the wilderness, which is a term in Hebrew that indicates an area without any surface water.

They walked for three days without any water and any that they had been able to carry with them was exhausted and they could not drink the sea water. The first oasis they reached only had bitter water, which their flocks might be able to drink, but not the people. This morning, I want to deal with three aspects of this camping. The wood, the water and the people being tested.

The text indicates that Moses was shown a piece of wood which he threw into the bitter waters of the oasis. It does not say that it was a tree and many speculations could be made about its origin. There are plants which have the ability to make bitter waters drinkable, but making enough drinkable water for some three million people and their livestock is a tall order. It was either a naturally occurring bush or tree which Moses cut down and threw into the water in enough quantity to purify enough water for all the people for as long as they camped there, or it was a just an ordinary piece of wood which was given the miraculous ability to purify the water.

Since the passage does not give the wood any special consideration, I am going with it being a bush or a tree which made the waters drinkable – which is what sweet means.

The water was not made sugary like pop, it was chemically altered to be made drinkable, either by having the bitter chemicals filtered out or by having other chemicals added to counteract the bitterness.

Now when we are told that the people are put to the test, the text indicates that this test was actually drinking the newly purified water. I once heard an explanation that this water was a diuretic and that while the people drank it over a period of several days, it purged their system from any of the parasites they might have brought with them out of Egypt. It was a test because the thirsty people would have drunk the water in great quantities and it was a prolonged detoxification which may have been extremely uncomfortable.

Some speculation could be made as to which commandments, ordinances and laws were given at Mara and how different they were from those given at the mountain. One could also ask why these instructions are not specifically listed and are just referred to without being named. And you could ask yourself why the diuretic properties of the anonymous wood are not dealt with in more detail.

In all of this I would refer you ahead to Deut. 29:29 and remind us that we have to deal with what the Bible says and not speculate about what it does not say. The sweetened water is referred to as a testing, since no other activity is mentioned and the reference to the diseases of Egypt indicates that a purging occurred.

The laws and ordinances which the L-RD gave to the people were a threefold "if" injunction which He also extends to us as an essential prerequisite to walking with Him when we come to faith. They were being told that none of the infections which they brought with them out of Egypt would be allowed to travel with them on their journey to the Holy Mountain because of the sweet water detoxification they were undergoing.

Now I have done several kinds of detoxification and none of them were very pleasant and there must have been a constant line up at the facilities for as long as they stayed at the oasis of Mara. They were being shown that the L-RD does not only want to get them out of Egypt, He wants to get Egypt out of them and it is not an easy, pleasant experience.

The threefold "if" commitment to obedience dealt with both the intaking of His Word, which would occur once they camped around the Holy Mountain and the outputting of obedience which is just as vital a component in our lives as hearing or studying the Word is. Mara was a watershed in the life of the people. They were no longer just refugees hightailing it out of enemy territory. The first place they stopped long enough to be able to bake their bread brought them geographically out of Egyptian held territory.

The purifying waters of Mara were the first step in getting rid of all and any Egyptians influences. As we come to the season of Passover, I want to use this mini-series to remind us that our faith is not just about a onetime deliverance from the world, it is also about a lifelong process of integration when it comes to His word and of deprogramming when it comes to the world. We are also brought the waters of Mara and are tested in the same manner.

In our case, it is not about any physical infections we were exposed to in the world and which we need to be delivered from. I do not want to spiritualize too much about the piece of wood which made the waters sweet because all we need to understand is that beginning to live on a steady diet of His Word will both feed our souls and purge them too. He requires both that we remove ourselves from any aspects of the lifestyle of the world and that we are delivered from all and any influences we may have absorbed during our time in the world.

There is a proverb which says that we cannot make a silk purse out of a sow's ear, but in our Messiah we experience a radical transformation which goes beyond just turning a sow's ear into a silk purse. Some of us were wolves and dogs and even pigs, but when we come to faith in our blessed Messiah, we all transformed into His sheep and He doesn't want us to continue with any bad worldly habits which we may have acquired as wolves, dogs or pigs.

More than that, He wants us to adopt a lifestyle of regular purging and frequent detoxification so that we do not become infected with any sinful influences which swirl around through our world. The season of Passover and the entire festival cycle (including the two extras: Chanukah and Purim) is a call to examine ourselves and perform a complete systems check so that nothing of the darkness of this world is allowed to lurk or grow in our hearts and lives.

At the waters of Mara, our people were purged from the infections of Egypt by the G-d who continues to heal us and purge us whenever any Egyptian vestiges try to take root in our lives.

To the hungry soul every bitter thing tastes sweet, but in our Saviour, the bitterness of this world is removed by the sweetness of His Word as we change spiritual affiliations and let Him fill us with salt and light.

The Festival of Unleavened Bread is used as a symbol that we need to avoid all the leavening of sin and live as pure, unleavened loaves in the L-rd. The waters of Mara are also a reminder that He wants to change us from the inside out so that no habits or attitudes of this world are allowed to fester in us.

This process may take time and may have to be repeated more than once, but He does not want us to have any infections which could bring any of the diseases of Egypt back into our midst. How is your spiritual immune system doing? Have you picked up any infections?

If we listen to His Word and walk in ways which please Him and build our lives on His commandments, then we are ready to grow and mature in our journey with Him. If we persist in bad habits and bad attitudes, then He may repeatedly bring us back to times of purging because there should never be enough room in our hearts and lives for the darkness of this world and the light of His Word to peacefully coexist.

Is He working in your life and in our community to purge the germs of Egypt away? Year by year, we need to take stock and never allow our lives to return to Egypt or to become infected by its evil influences. What are you making room for in your life? Do you need a dose of Mara? Is your willingness to read and adhere to His Word faltering in your life? There is no room in the lives of believers for any of the baggage of Egypt. It has to be totally purged out.