

**Vayelech**                      **And He Went**                      **It is Not Always a Pretty Picture**

**Torah:**                      Deuteronomy 31:1-30

**Haftarah:**                      Hosea 14:2-10; Joel 2:15-27; Micah 7:18-20

**Brit Chadashah:**                      Romans 10:1-17

Reading: Aaron pp. 111, 113 and Ps. 65 Jewish Hero Rachel and Bilha. Torah Carrier: Isaac. L-rd's Table.

Moses is coming to the end of his ministry and he states that the people will have a double, if not a triple heritage. First of all, they will have the testimony of the words which the L-rd spoke to Him, which they shall all assemble to read at the Festival of Sukkoth. Second of all they shall have the reminder that the L-rd is aware of the negative potential of their choices and that He is not taken by surprise by the hardness of their hearts. Lastly, they need to remember that just as the L-rd was faithful in bringing them over the Jordan into the Promised Land, He remains there to welcome them back when they turn to Him in sincere repentance.

It is hard to come to terms with the rebelliousness of people who claim to be children of the King, but the resilience of the love of G-d will always far outweigh the impact of all and any human folly. Moses is neither being pessimistic nor optimistic when he comes to the moment of transition to the leadership of Joshua, he is being realistic. The people of G-d will always have the possibility of three destinies and G-d will always hold us accountable to our choices as we consider their impact in our lives.

First of all, the L-rd will always remain focused on His promises and all that He has promised will always come to pass as we progress generationally towards the arrival of His final kingdom over all the nations and generations of mankind. The ebb and flow of life pales in comparison with the eternal purposes of G-d and we will always be kingdom bound, no matter what weather we have to endure along the way.

Next, we are warned that it is our choices which have a bigger impact on the direction of our lives than any of the challenges we will have to face. Idolatry and fornication will always be dogging our steps, even when we are basking in the full blessing of the L-rd. He knows that we will always be vulnerable and we will always need to come to terms with this possibility of failure if we are ever going to be able to defeat and rise above its influence in our lives.

Lastly, even when we have fallen into the mud and have lost our way and have been overcome by the flesh, the world and the enemy, the way home will always be open and this is what we are celebrating today as we observe Shabbat Shuvah. While G-d will never plead with us to return to Him, once we have come to our sense, He wants us to know that our repentance will always open up for us the way home to the place of blessing and healing.

Our people had experienced two generations of incredible transition and they were on the verge of making their final transition into the Land of Promise and Moses is giving them another description of the parameters of what they are about to undergo. As long as we draw breath, we will always be presented with choices, not because the promises and the power of G-d are flawed or somehow incapable of providing all that the L-rd has said in His Word.

He requires that we be willing and that we may informed choices, even as we experience His blessing and see He promises fulfilled in our midst. He does not want us to fall victim to impact

of the happenstances of our lives, as if what is happening to us has the power to make us happy or sad.

Some people in our society live under the oppression of the morbid eventuality or have fallen prey to false supposition that they have the inner power to overcome everything and achieve all that they want, just by the power of their will and inner drive. Neither the worst case scenario nor the best case scenario have the potential of making much of an impact in the spiritual direction of our lives. From the Torah portion, through the Haftarah portion and into the Brit Chadashah portion, we see the absolute sovereignty of G-d's ability to respond to our choices and accomplish His purposes over and above what is going on in our lives.

In a very real sense, our lives operate on two levels. First, there are the circumstances we have to respond to, whether they be ever so good or evil so bad. Then there are the purposes of G-d which we can either be a part of or watch them be fulfilled in spite of our best and our worst efforts.

Moses wants the people to know that he is fully aware of all that they are capable of and that this realization of their ability to shoot themselves in the foot in no way discourages him, even if this reality is not always a pretty picture. Life can be messy and we should never place our faith in the unreliability of our human potential. However the absolute reliability of G-d's Word and His promises, fully takes into account our own foolishness and is never thwarted by it. He wants us to know that we should never be thwarted by it either.

His faithfulness is never shipwrecked or detoured by our unfaithfulness. When we see the unfortunate reality of our negative choices appear before our eyes, we need to rise above the mess we are making of our lives and behold both His ability to rescue us, seven times seventy times a day, and to make sure that the coming of His kingdom purposes remains on schedule.

What is happening to us in our lives may not always be a pretty picture, but our stubborn faith in the G-d who rules over and above the fading glory of the world we are travelling through, can motivate us to abandon the follies of this present age and return to the straight and narrow path. The wilderness generation had seen the power and the majesty of G-d and is being warned by Moses that even though the love of G-d is operationally unconditional, the blessing of G-d only remains accessible to those who abandon their folly and learn to walk with Him according to His Word.

This reality is clearly and powerfully reflected in both the Haftarah and the Brit Chadashah passages, because, while there is nothing which can stop our spiritual progress as we wander through this life, we need to focus on making strong spiritual choices if we want to be part of the solution and not part of the problem.

This Torah portion is a sobering reminder that it is only as we focus on the changeless purposes of G-d, that the choices we make in our lives will maintain our connection with them. It may not always be a pretty picture, but truly, in Him, all's well that ends well. How about you? It is never too late to return to the One who is always waiting with arms wide open.

**Sermon: Shabbat Shuvah: Where the Rubber Meets the Road**

**Passage: “Say to them that I am alive, says the L-rd, the Eternal One. That which I desire, is not that the wicked one dies, but that he turns from his wicked ways and lives. Return, return from your wicked ways and why will you die oh House of Israel?”(Ezekiel 33:11)**

Today is Shabbat Shuvah, the Sabbath of repentance or of return. It is just over half way between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur and is an opportunity for us to examine the practical nature of the kind of spirituality we need to maintain in order to be healthy and acceptable to the L-rd.

There are three issues that I want to talk to you about this morning: the relationship between faith and works, the relationship between grace and righteousness and the whether we are sinners by nature or by choice. One concept related to our discussion is *antinomianism*, a false teaching that claims that grace frees us from the need to obey any laws and uphold any moral or ethical standards of any kind. It could also be called cheap grace because our faith in the Messiah sets us free from sin to uphold the Law of G-d and never sets us free from our obligation to live according to the principles of G-d's Word.

As I was preparing this message, I realized that there is so much which could be said about the relationship between repentance and grace, that we could spend several days discussing the topic and only scratch the surface. You see, there are positive and negative spiritual tensions between the various doctrines which make up our faith and we can either learn to look at both sides of an issue or take sides and only see one side of the truths of G-d's Word.

So I encourage you to listen and examine what I am about to say and learn to do two things. First we are encouraged to examine all things and to hold on to that which is true. Second of all, we must learn not to strive and argue when it comes to understanding what the Bible teaches. We must be gentle and respectful, patient with everyone and avoid discussions where we merely bite and devour one another, convinced that we need to win the argument, even if we lose the war – along with the soul we are battling with.

One of the great drawbacks of the endless sea of dubious information which swarms and swirls around the internet is that so much of it is poorly researched and makes that which is sweet sound sour and that which is dark seem to be light.

An incredible amount of discernment and maturity is needed if we are not to be frequently led down the garden path away from the core truths of G-d's Word. Remember the Clint Eastwood internet principle – it is an endless puppy's breakfast of the good, the bad and the ugly. Be careful what you are feeding your soul with.

Prov. 19:27 warns us to cease listening to instruction which causes us to wander from the words of wisdom. Another way of looking at this verse is to say that we should avoid anything which causes us to wander away from instruction which teaches us the words of wisdom.

So what we are embarking on this morning is a journey fraught with potential controversy and controversy is one of the detours we want to avoid as we spend time discussing what the Bible teaches about the nature of true, authentic repentance on Shabbat Shuvah.

I firmly believe that the Scriptures clearly teach that we are saved by grace alone when we put our faith in the finished work which our Messiah completed when He died on the cross and rose again. He washes our sins completely away and freely gives us life everlasting.

But I also firmly believe that our faith in the Word of G-d obliges us to follow what the Bible teaches and in no way releases us from the need to obey the Commandments of our G-d. We are set free to obey and never set free from the need to obey. Sin can be defined as the carnal desire to rise up against the Law of G-d and the dictates of our conscience, but grace and faith

are firmly grounded in the commandments of G-d, which are not grievous.

Abraham believed and righteousness was imputed to him by faith, and this righteousness by faith, can never be earned by any effort we make in this direction. However, it was because he obeyed and was willing to offer up his only son, that G-d promised to fulfil all the promises which were made to Abraham. It was his faithful obedience which confirmed him as both the father of a great nation and the father of many nations.

He remains the natural father of the those who belong to the House of Jacob and He is the spiritual father of all those from the nations who put there faith in the great blessing which is our Messiah. James had two things to say about the relationship between faith and works.

He said that faith without works is dead and that you cannot show your faith without works, because authentic, biblical faith is shown by your works. There is no hostility between authentic faith and authentic works. We are never to try and earn our salvation by our good works. Rather we are to see that when we come to faith, we are the workmanship of G-d who prepares good works for us to do. It is also G-d who gives us the desire and the ability to accomplish His good purposes. Faith also empowers us to fulfil the righteousness of the Law.

There is no essential conflict between the Law of G-d and the grace of G-d, except in the minds of those who would set the two up against each other. In Hebrew, the word "law" has many meanings and we see the same variety of meanings for this word in certain passages of the New Testament. Essentially we must always distinguish between the Ten Commandments which declare the core of what we are to believe and how we are to live and the ritual obligations which were given as symbols to teach us about the grace which our Messiah was to one day win for us.

We are set free from the symbolic or ritual obligations of the Law, but we remain accountable to up-hold the moral and spiritual stipulations of the Ten Commandments. Sometimes the New Testament calls the Psalms and the Prophets the Law, because the term can also be a more general term and refer to any set of teachings. G-d's grace does not make us lawless.

There is also no difference between the G-d of the Old Testament and the G-d of the New Testament. The L-RD has always been a G-d of mercy and love, rich in compassion, and slow to anger, ready and willing to pardon sin, iniquity and rebellion. But He must never be toyed with, as if He were our sugar daddy in the sky, winking at our sinfulness and smiling upon us as we wallow in the muck and mud of this fading world. He hates sin and wants to set us free from it, so that we can bask in His love and reflect His righteousness by both our faith in His Word and our obedience to His Law. He does not hate sinners and neither should we.

Truly faith and obedience are two sides of the same coin, just as grace and works are. We are never to try and earn G-d's favour by our works and our righteousness, we are to demonstrate that we have received this favour by both our works and our righteousness. We are set free by His grace and His Spirit in the Messiah to do from the heart what we read in the Scriptures. Grace and faith never stand in opposition to good works and the Law.

In order to illustrate the relationship between faith and obedience, Paul talks in Romans about four kinds of Law which are battling for control of our hearts and lives. First there is the Law of G-d which was given to us by means of the Scriptures. Next, there is the law of our understanding, our inner man, which recognizes the validity and necessity of the Law of G-d

and which takes pleasure in its teachings. There is also the law of sin, which overpowers our understanding and uses the Law of G-d against us as a lethal weapon to steal, and kill and destroy. And by ourselves, we are powerless to win against this enemy in our own strength.

Lastly, there is the Law of the Spirit and Life in our blessed Redeemer, Yeshua of Nazareth. He snatches the Law of G-d out of the hands of sin and death and returns it to the law of our understanding, so that the righteousness of the Law of G-d may be accomplished in us who walk, not according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit.

The flesh, the world and the enemy will always gang up on us, so that we allow the sin which is crouching at our door to come in and take up position on the couch of our hearts. We need to let the L-rd empower us by His Spirit and His Life to use the Law of G-d as a weapon against the flesh and not let the flesh use it as a weapon against us.

This brings us to the ticklish double question of whether we are sinners by nature or sinners by choice and whether we are born with Adam's sin or if we acquire it by the choices we make and the habits which we adopt. The Scriptures clearly teach that we are only responsible for our own sins and not for the sins of our fathers or our children. We may have to suffer the consequences of the decisions of other people, be they ever so good or ever so ugly, but we will only be held accountable before G-d for the habits and decisions of our hearts and lives.

The Bible does teach that we will reap what we sow and we also understand that we will often reap what other people have sown, both for our good and for our destruction. The victims and survivors of the Holocaust should not be held responsible for what was done to them and they did nothing wrong to deserve the horror and madness they experienced. They will only stand before G-d for how they reacted to what was done to them.

Hinduism and Buddhism teach the concept of karma, where the impact of our actions can have a generational impact. There is truth about the future impact of our actions and the decisions we make, but because we only have one life to live, we do not experience it in future lives. It is those who will live after we are gone, who may continue to benefit from or suffer from, the consequences of our actions.

We are born in innocence as little children, with the ability to choose between good and evil. It is also true that we are born with Adam's nature as human beings, but we are not going to be held responsible for any sins which he or others that followed him committed.

When the Bible says that there is none righteous, not even one, it is not because we were born with a flawed or fallen nature, which was incapable of not sinning. It is because we were born in the image of G-d and have His Word written in our hearts and we have marred and violated this Word and desecrated this image by the choices we made and the habits we have learned. The tendency to sin is not part of the human nature we were born with, it is the tendency to choose which really part of the human nature we inherited from Adam and Eve.

Today, on Shabbat Shuvah, we renew our commitment to faith and to repentance so that our inner man will no longer carry the tarnished image of sin and death. We affirm that we were born to choose and that G-d places both light and darkness before us, so that who we become and how we live is the product of the choices we make, rather than the circumstances we encounter.

There is one more feature of this discussion which I want to deal with before we celebrate the L-rd's Table and adjourn to our Oneg. Once we become a believer, and receive everlasting life, is it possible to lose our faith and the eternal life which comes with it? Those who believe you cannot lose your salvation are called Calvinists and those who believe this tragedy is possible, are called Arminians. Discussions can get rather heated and people from both sides spout Scriptures at each other and cut and paste proof texts almost endlessly.

I believe that we are eternally secure as long as we believe and walk with our Messiah. The Sabbath of repentance is a reminder that our destiny depends on our choices and while I know of many believers who have lost their spiritual consciousness and have slipped into spiritual comas, the L-rd never gives up on people until the hour of their death. It is possible to lose it, but it is very difficult to do.

He will lose none who truly cry out to Him and on the day of Judgment if there is only a little speck of faith left in a heart, while the rest of the darkness and folly is consumed, that tiny soul will be saved as if by fire. I would always rather be an amoeba in Heaven, than a whale in hell. How fire proof is your life and your faith?

How is your spiritual health doing? Do you take regular care of your heart and life? Is your faith active and healthy? How much loss will you suffer when it is your turn to stand before the King? Is your faith empowering you to walk with the Messiah? Is the Law of Spirit and life empowering your inner man to crucify and expel the law of sin which is trying to settle down on the couch of your heart?

How much practical delight do you take in the Law of the L-rd? Is your faith without works? Are you allowing the L-rd to give you the desire and the ability to walk according to His good pleasure? Are you fulfilling the good works for which you were created?

Repentance which brings us back to both the grace and the Word of our L-rd, gives us both assurance in this life and in the life to come. Your eternal destiny is secured when you put your faith in the finished work of our Messiah. How you walk in this life will determine how much of this life will count for the life which is to come. May you allow your faith in the grace of G-d to equip you to walk according to His Word and His righteousness. Faith and works should stand together to both crucify the flesh and prevent sin from coming in the door. Are yours? Shabbat shalom and Shavua tov.