

22 Nissan, 5775 (11/04/15) **Safely Out of Egyptian Territory (Yizkor)** J. M. Terrett

Pesach

Passover

Torah: Exodus 13:17-15:26 (End of the Flight, Beginning of the Journey)

Haftarah: Ezekiel 37:1-14 (Vision of the Valley of Dry Bones)

Brit Chadashah: John 11:39-57 (Lazarus and the plot to kill the Messiah)

(Devorah p. 135) **Ps. 40 Yizkor** Jewish Hero: Lazarus

Yizkor: Four times a year, it is traditional in synagogues to observe Yizkor, which is a memorial ceremony which remembers the beloved departed of the community. In traditional synagogues, this usually means that those who have been bereaved stand during the reciting of Kaddish and the special prayers which are recited during this time. We do things a little differently as you can see from the tables set up on the platform with pictures of the beloved departed and the votive candles which will burn for the duration of the service. In Judaism it is said that no one is really dead as long as there are people who remember them and we want to remember our friends and family who have preceded us into the sleep of death.

The ritual of Yizkor follows the festival cycle with two ceremonies in the spring - one at Passover and the other at Pentecost, and two in the fall. This is because we understand that our lives are but temporary pilgrimages from conception to the grave and that beyond the grave we are waiting for the return of the Messiah and the establishment of G-d's eternal Kingdom over all the nations and generations of mankind.

It is because of this hope that we do not mourn as if our departed were gone forever. They are but resting in the sleep of death, awaiting the resurrection when all those who have died in faith will awaken in the power of Everlasting Life. As we light the votive candles, let us mourn in hope and be comforted because our Messiah defeated the power of death. Let us remember those who are resting until that glorious day when we shall meet again.

Let me ask my usual questions as we proceed with the ritual. First, what will people remember about you when it is your turn to take your place on the memorial tables? In the light of our skeptical, darkening society, are you letting your faith slip into doubt as you assimilate into the secular values which are dragging down all and any remnants of biblical spirituality? What we believe or what we doubt can never change that which is finally true, it can just determine whether we stand in the truth or wander away into the folly of the growing spiritual darkness of our foolish world. Stand in the light and be comforted, to the Jew first and also to the Gentile.

I Thess. 4:13-18 and I Corinthians 15: 51-58. Kaddish. After the service, please take time to mingle and meet with those who are being remembered, because some of them were incredibly interesting characters. We should never fear death, even when we miss those who have fallen into its temporary sleep.

Torah Meditation and Sermon:

There are 54 Torah Meditations in the annual reading cycle and twelve times a year, the usual readings are suspended, in order to accommodate the special observances of the annual festival cycle. To make sure that the Torah cycle is completed, five or six times the weekly portions are doubled up so that our lives revolve around the reading of the Torah and not around the changing circumstances of our lives. Also, seven times every nineteen years, we add a leap month, so that our lunar calendar stays in line with the solar year. What additions and deletions have you made in your life, so that the stages and cycles of your life remain in harmony with the L-rd and with the promises of His Word?

Today the regular readings are suspended and we will tell the story of our people's flight from Egypt and from Egyptian territory. There are four key events in this story. There is first the parting of the Sea of Reeds and the drowning of the Egyptian pursuers. Then there is the festival of unleavened bread to commemorate the seven days it took them to get out of Egyptian territory. Next there is the institution of the Sabbath and the provision of manna (and quail). Lastly there is the cleansing (purging) of Egyptian parasites at the waters of Mara.

In the prophetic portion, we will deal with the vision of the dry bones, where we learn to take the Word seriously for what it says, both when it speaks literally and when it speaks symbolically. You can get some pretty strange ideas when you miss this distinction and start adding and subtracting from the Bible to suit what you would like it to say.

Lastly, we will examine one of the last miracles which our L-rd performed before He made His final entry into Jerusalem during the season of Passover and where He became the true Passover Lamb who was about to be offered to pay the penalty for the sins of world.

After this combined sermon and meditation, we will promenade the Torah around the shul, before we are dismissed and once we have celebrated our second Kiddish ceremony with unleavened bread - because after shul, you are free to indulge in toast, donuts and all those leavened delights we have given up over the last seven days.

Let us begin by discussing the flight of our people from Egypt. After ten long months of spiritual conflict, Pharaoh finally capitulates and lets our people go. They left in the middle of the night, while the Egyptians were counting their dead and they gave our people many of their ritual objects of gold and silver and fancy cloth - because they had seen their gods defeated and were making a kind of appeasement offering to the G-d of Israel.

Without having much time to pack and to organize their departure, the people grabbed whatever they could and rounded up their herds and flocks and took off into the wilderness. Just so that you understand, the word wilderness is sometimes translated as desert, but in the Bible a wilderness is any area where there is no surface water, just a series of wells and oases. Around three million former slaves headed out into this barren area, in order to escape from Egyptian held territory by taking the unguarded southern route through the Sinai Peninsula - which ordinarily would not have supported such a huge crowd of people. They did not take the route by the Mediterranean Sea because it was guarded by a series of Philistine forts and the people were not ready to fight yet. They were preceded by a cloud during the day and by a flame in the night which allowed the people to travel day and night for the seven days and nights it took them to get out of Egyptian territory. They formed up into a

motley crew behind Moses and Aaron and the noise and confusion must have been quite disturbing.

Once Pharaoh and his people recovered from the shock of losing their first born sons, they were confronted with the loss of a major slave labour pool and a considerable amount of livestock. We are not told whether this realization happened the next morning or over the next few days, but such a large group of people would have moved slowly and would not have been hard to keep an eye on.

Pharaoh gathered his elite chariot regiment and all the chariots of Egypt and took off in pursuit of the undefended crowd of former slaves. He wanted to settle this man to man and knew that in a fight, he would easily defeat the unorganized rabble and he might have thought that during a battle, their G-d would not intervene, for fear of hurting His own people as they fought their enemies. It was a desperate move by a desperate man.

Now we come to a point of contention for Bible historians. The Jewish people lived to the north west of the Red Sea and fled into the wilderness to the north of the gulf of Sinai. Some commentators feel they were caught against the waters of the Red Sea, which had to be parted in order for them to cross into the Sinai Peninsula. Others, including the rabbinic commentators, indicate that there was a salt water swamp north of the gulf of Sinai, called the Sea of Reeds, which stretched almost to the Mediterranean Sea. It has since dried up.

In any event, G-d could have parted the waters of the Red Sea with no extra effort, but the real problem was that the House of Israel was trapped against the waters of the Reed Sea (Red Sea) and the Egyptians thought they were in for a turkey shoot because it seemed that the Jews had no option but to surrender or be slaughtered.

The people wailed and cried and said it would have been better to live in slavery in Egypt than to die in this wilderness, but they had forgotten to factor in the Hand of G-d. The fire and the cloud moved from in front of the people and took up a defensive position behind them. On the Jewish side, there was light and on the Egyptian side there was darkness and the L-rd set confusion among the Egyptian camp that slowed them down so much that a distance was maintained between the two camps.

The L-rd opened up a channel of dry land for the people to cross through the Sea of Reeds (Red Sea) and there was a wall of water on either side of the passage way, maintained by a blustery wind which would have impressed Winnie the Pooh. Once the people passed through, their Egyptian pursuers followed and were drowned, so there was no longer a military force capable of undertaking an effective pursuit. But the people were still in Egyptian territory and any number of garrisons could have mustered to block their path until they made it out of land directly under Egyptian control.

They did not march without stopping, they just did not stop long enough to be able to bake their bread and they caught whatever sleep they could and the L-rd did not let them stop until they were out of danger. It would have been an exhausting time but now there was no going back. Egypt was probably thrown into chaos by the loss of the primary army and any who went back would have been liable to a double vengeance - for the loss of the first born and for the loss of the primary army.

They kept on shuffling along and at some point in their travels they began to observe the Sabbath. At first they had enough provisions for themselves and their flocks, but they had not been able to prepare for an extended journey and their supplies began to run out and they complained. The first mention of the Sabbath occurs in conjunction with the provision of manna (Hebrew - what is this?) and quail. But they went from being a people who lived at the mercy of the Egyptian overlords to become a people who were learning to rest in the care and provision of the L-rd. Are you learning to rest in the care and provision of the L-rd?

One more consideration before we go into the valley of dry bones. The first place they could actually stop and catch their breath (and bake their bread) was at the bitter waters of Mara, which they could not initially drink. Moses "sweetened" the waters and the L-rd did something amazing. The waters acted like a diuretic so that none of the diseases of Egypt could hitchhike their way with the Jews into the Promised Land. They were put to the test to see if they would obey the L-rd in whatever He said. They were not given the Ten Commandments yet, but they had to demonstrate their absolute trust in the L-rd and their ongoing willingness to obey Him, no matter what He said and to follow Him, no matter where He took them.

How about you? How much do you trust the L-rd? Are you willing to obey Him no matter what He says? As we come to the end of the festival of unleavened bread, what have we learned about the provision and protection of the L-rd? He will always provide our needs as we rest in Him. He wants us to get out of any Egyptian held territory in our lives. He wants to cleanse us from any lingering Egyptian influences we may have brought with us once we are free from Egyptian territory. He does not want us to live infected with the folly of the world.

Now this passage of the Torah is paired with the passage in Ezekiel that deals with the vision of the valley of dry bones. Why? Our people, who were not yet really a people, were taken by G-d out of Egypt and Ezekiel is being shown that G-d will also bring back our people out of captivity and heal all the wounds and divisions which we encounter along the way.

The rabbis have an interesting take on this vision and I will mention it in passing so that we learn not to take such flights of fancy when we encounter the Scriptures. They say that before Moses lead our people out of Egypt, a false messiah lead 400,000 of our people into the Holy Land and they were slaughtered in this valley. So many people were slaughtered during the Babylonian conquest that Ezekiel and others were discouraged and felt that there were not enough people left to carry on. To help replenish the people, G-d caused a mini resurrection where these dead people came to life and joined their brethren in the captivity.

Again there is nothing impossible with G-d, but that is not what the passage says.

G-d told Ezekiel that the dry bones were the people of Israel who had gone into the sepulchre of captivity and would one day be released to come back into the Promised Land. Nothing more, nothing less. Our lives in the L-rd can encounter difficulties which may sometimes seem as severe as the captivity, but we are never pushed outside of the protection and provision of the L-rd and He is able to help us recover from all and any major or minor losses we may encounter.

We believe in a supernatural G-d who is capable of great miracles, but we do not have to invent new ones or twist the Bible to make it say things it does not. Ezekiel's vision was given to him to explain how Israel would one day return to the Holy Land, just as if they had come

back to life after having been completely annihilated. It was not a literal resurrection, nor was there literal bones - it was an instructive and comforting vision of the power and potential of the L-rd to restore and re-establish His people no matter what disasters they might encounter.

He took a motley crew of slaves out from their Egyptian captivity and now he was telling the prophet Ezekiel that this same powerful deliverance would also bring back the various motley crews of captives from the places they had been carried off to. He was going to bring the broken, scattered people home even if it seemed impossible - and He did it twice, once in the return from the Babylonian captivity and twice, when the modern state of Israel was formed. In the L-rd our lives are never a hopeless disaster and there is no disaster which can keep us down permanently as long as we keep walking with Him according to His Word.

Let us move on to the New Testament portion which deals with the resurrection of Lazarus from the dead. Yeshua was at the end of His teaching ministry and was making the final preparations for His entry into Jerusalem and His suffering and death and resurrection. There were lots of strange stories about Him circulating and Him and the things which He did and things haven't changed much. Many Jews felt He was just another magician using witchcraft.

To counter this rising tide of lies, He selected twelve witnesses whose job it was to make sure that the things He taught and the miracles He performed did not disappear amidst all the rumours and false stories which have always circulated around famous people and famous events. They put together a body of teaching called the apostolic tradition which was eventually recorded in the New Testament, and which has come down to us unchanged and unscathed despite the weird and wonderful nonsense which follows in its wake.

Yeshua said that He is the resurrection and the life and just before the horrific events which occurred during His arrest, trial and crucifixion, He gave His followers a sign of the incredible power which He has always had over death. Just before His own death, He defeated death in the life of one of His friends and the story must have been a comfort to those who were scared and troubled when they did not understand why He was arrested and crucified. They lost perspective and control, He never did.

Here in a crowd of people who were around to see what would happen next in the midst of the increased tension surrounding our Messiah, He quietly performs a powerful miracle. He does not do it like the circus entertainers who get the crowd all pumped up and perform feats of deception and illusion. He came to the tomb, had them unseal it and simply instructed his friend to come forth. He was not much of a showman and did not perform His miracles to impress people or to convince them that He was the Messiah. He did all that He did to prepare for His biggest task, which was to suffer and die for us and then to resurrect so that we could share everlasting life with Him.

In the Gospel of John, the term the "Jews" refers to the Judeans who were often in conflict with the Jewish people of the Galilee and in this account a large group of Judean Pharisees were hanging around the disciples to check out the One who claimed to be the Messiah of promise. Many of them eventually became disciples, but others who were really just spiritual tourists looking for the best and most entertaining deal (things haven't changed much have they?), went and told the Sanhedrin what they had seen and set off one of the final discussions about our L-rd before He came to Jerusalem to fulfil His mission.

The passage records that the Jewish authorities were afraid that if a leader arose who claimed to be the Messiah that this person would challenge the authority of the Romans and trigger a civil war which would destroy the Holy Land. To avert this disaster, the High Priest said they should assassinate the Messiah, because it would be better for one man to perish than the whole people.

He did not fully understand what he was saying, but it was a prophecy because the true Messiah was coming to die for the people and for all peoples, which is the event that occurred during the season of Passover two thousand years ago.

What does this mean for us in our internet global village? We have seen the way that the L-rd overpowered the most powerful nation on earth and delivered His people out of bondage. He is in the same business today. He not only delivered them from Egypt, He also delivered them from the influences of Egypt and set them on a pilgrimage to the Promised Land and taught them to take a weekly Heaven break, which is what the Sabbath still is for us. He is still capable of parting which ever Sea of Reeds (Red Sea) which blocks our path and He is still able to drown all and any opponents who rise up against us to block our path.

He is capable of helping us recover from any disasters and any captivity we may fall into and year by year, He wants us to learn how to live lives of spiritual freedom in His Word and not become assimilated in to the futility of the international secular culture with all of its tricks and deceptions. Is your soul languishing in captivity to the world or are you letting the King take your dry bones and restore you to spiritual life, time and time again whenever we call out to Him? It may take us time to make it out of Egyptian territory in our lives, but His peaceful hand and powerful Word are still capable of helping us make this journey and turn it into a spiritual lifestyle for as long as we are allowed to live as pilgrims wandering through this life.

Are you prepared to leave the crowd of spiritual spectators and join the community of faith which understands why the L-rd did what He did and who want to follow Him as firmly and as peacefully as our people did so long ago? He is in the same business today and so are we.