

Vayera**And He Appeared****His Guiding, Superintending Hand****Torah:****Genesis 18:1-22:24**

Abraham has an angelic visitation (theophany) where the L-RD appears to Him as an angel and tells him what he is going to do to Sodom and Gomorrah and why he is going to do it. He brings two angels with him who are going to execute His judgment and we see in the intercession of Abraham how the righteous core of these two cities has effectively melted away, despite the prophetic ministry of Lot (just as the global righteous core had collapsed in Noah's day, despite his prophetic ministry). His wife fled back to the city and died and his daughter's give a very inauspicious beginning to two future people groups: Moab and Ammon.

After Abraham flounders among the Philistines and blessed them when they bless him, the pivotal moment of Abraham's life occurs – Sarah's son is born and he is the first Jew to be circumcised on the eighth day. Just to make sure that Abraham does not become attached to the promise more than to the One who promised, he is asked to sacrifice his only son and the intervention of a ram saves the child – the symbolism shouts out the vicarious sacrifice of the ram of G-d for you and I. And because of this obedience, the promises are secure and we still feel their impact today.

Small events away from the carnal limelight of secular civilization impact the pace of human progress far more than the world will admit because his superintending hand still guides human history and we can be part of this greater (meta) story when we exercise both faith and obedience.

As key members of His global righteous core, while our redemptive behaviour may go unnoticed by those whose lives are full of popular futility and worthless nonsense, how we live our lives in faith and obedience have more of an impact on the ultimate direction and destination of mankind than all the glitz and hollow glamour of this spiritually hemorrhaging world.

Abraham floundered but never failed. Like Lot we live in the midst of a global society which is being taken over by idolatrous fornicators who are determined to extinguish our faith and our obedience (morality). As we live as lights, quietly in our corner, we will shine until our sad world collapses into total darkness and we witness the final redemptive act of the guiding superintending hand of G-d.

How we live may not matter to the world and what we say may not be received by the world, but our light and our voice are what are keeping judgment at bay until the final composition of the last righteous core is complete. Do you know how much your life matters in the economy of G-d – it matters a Lot!

Haftarah: 2 Kings 4:1-37

G-d is able to provide for our needs, even in the greatest adversity – He is the real cornucopia. He does not give us the goose which laid the golden egg, nor any magic ability to make our dearest wishes come true so we can write our own ticket with G-d, but He will never leave us

nor forsake us even when we suffer great loss and we have run out of options.

The birth of the baby to the aged Shunammite is an example of how the L-rd intervenes in the lives of His righteous core through all the storms and valleys of life, generation by generation until our work is done. We will come under all kinds of attacks and suffer all kinds of losses and setbacks, but He will always come through for us so that His purposes are fulfilled through us and through all and any others who will walk in His paths, to the Jew first and also to the Gentile.

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

Mary is the second Eve because she gives birth to the serpent crusher in fulfilment of all the promises which our L-rd made to Israel and to the world about His final redemption, which is still in the process of being guided and superintended. G-d's mill may grind slowly, but it grinds irresistibly and very small. Some Christian churches teach an odd doctrine about the status of Mary, the mother of our L-rd.

They wrongly talk about an immaculate conception and speak of a dormition and assumption of this very special lady. These fancy words mean that some believe that she was sinless and never died, but just fell asleep and was carried to Heaven from where she can intercede with both the Father and the Son on our behalf. While I understand the respect and even the special status which Mary should occupy, we should both never fall for things which go against the clear teachings of the scriptures and we should not rant and rail against those who hold such odd teachings.

The truth is, Mary is the second Eve and belongs to a special group of humanity called the righteous core and in the fullness of time, and both she and her cousin were selected to bear two key figures in redemption history. Nothing more, nothing less. The guiding, superintending hand of G-d works over and above and right through the folly of this world.

Our faith and obedience make us part of this redemptive process, even when we receive no recognition and especially when we encounter severe resistance. He does not rely upon us as if each of us were indispensable, because from the very rocks, He can raise up sons and daughters to Abraham and if any of us become unwilling, he will move on to those who are willing – just as he moved on from Terah and selected Abraham who both believed and obeyed. He will use us and move through us, but He is never limited to us.

We are the light which the enemy is trying to extinguish; however, we are the light which cannot be extinguished because the guiding, superintending hand of G-d is the only unstoppable generational people movement in human history.

Sermon: Regular Maintenance: Oil Which Reduces Friction. Ephesians 4:25-32 (read)

As I seek the L-rd during the week about what to share with you, I want to be spiritually relevant, tenaciously encouraging and biblically challenging all at the same time, without constantly repeating myself or going over the same issues endlessly. You see, each community in the L-rd takes on a life of its own which is constantly changing (morphing) as we joyfully receive new members and as we sadly lose former members. He brings us challenges as we face the spiritual resistance which is always waiting to extinguish us and

using a maintenance illustration, I would like to talk to you this morning about our need for regular spiritual maintenance, using His oil to reduce the friction which could slow us down and cause us to grind our gears and give off sparks.

You know that I ride my bike in all kinds of weather, but I have discovered that unless I keep the gears oiled and tires inflated, I go slower and slower until finally the bike refuses to budge. The passage which I have selected speaks of a kind of in house oiling (inflating) which will either keep our community going and growing or will cause us to grind to a halt and give off needless sparks. Let's get our oil cans out and our air pumps ready so that our community keeps on growing in strength and numbers as we head through our awesome, irresistible Canadian winter. Have no fear campers, Purim and Pesach are coming and Shavuot is just around the corner!

Paul begins this passage with a reminder which we need to be aware of. Whatever is going on in our lives or in the life of our shul, we are members of the same body and it is His will that we learn to maintain interrelationships with each other. Sometimes we are going to want to smack each other and sometimes our level of frustration with each other will boil over, but learning to manoeuvre through this necessary feature of community living will determine whether or not we will succeed and grow or fuss and fume and dwindle.

All of us have an upside and all of us have a down side and when we respond to each other as members of the same body, we pull together instead of falling apart, because getting along is not optional, it is required, no matter how much work it takes. One comforting thought which has kept me reasonably sane over the years is that other people find me just as annoying and impossible as I find them. But it is when we find that common ground and work out our differences that we become the kind of light which keeps the righteous core shining in our darkening world.

In too many cases, giving up on one another is equal to giving up on the L-rd. Now there are times when some will no longer want to walk with the L-rd and there will be those who find Messianic Judaism not where they want to shine and we have to let go of these ones and move on in the calling of our community. But within that calling, we have to learn to get along because a united flock becomes wolf proof. How do we become a united flock, since we are all so radically different and come at things from such divergent perspectives? Let's look at the rest of the passage.

First, Paul says that getting angry is not sin. Being stuck in anger is – which is what letting the sun go down on your wrath means. It opens an avenue of access to the enemy and all too frequently he uses disputes to ravage and divide communities and to scatter sheep that should be grazing together in peace and love. Until we have worked through our anger we are a spiritual liability to ourselves, because we need to forgive as we are forgiven so that the enemy does not use us to divide and conquer when we should heal and come together.

He moves on to speak about what kinds of resolution strategies are acceptable and which are not helpful. Why should believers be reminded not to steal? Besides the obvious point of not getting sticky fingers (especially with the rabbi's books!), we need to understand that we are not in the business of hoarding or seeking personal advancement at community expense. We are to work with our hands to provide for the needs of the community, whether we are the ones who help those in need or whether we are the ones who receive help because we are in

need. We need to remain those who do not take from the community, but who give to the community so that together we may perform regular mutual maintenance and participate in applying the oil of love and forgiveness which will reduce friction as we get to know each other better.

He goes on to say we should not pronounce evil words. Did you know you can express anger without resorting to abusive speech and for me this often means asking questions to establish motive (rationale), instead of making judgments which draw battle lines and call for conflict. In all of our intervention and participation in the lives of others we need to be working for edification as much as we can so that our words communicate grace to our hearers.

Now I know that there are some believers with a chip on their shoulders bigger than a Douglas fir, but that is not our problem. We are responsible for our reactions and our actions – and what we do and say to others and not what they do and say to us. When we are pulled away from our redemptive calling and bite and devour each other, it grieves the Holy Spirit. We can quench the Holy Spirit by not doing what He calls us to do, but we grieve Him when we do things He does not want us to do. As members of the righteous core of the L-rd, we have a different agenda and we have different objectives than the darkness dwellers who surround us and who try to suck us back into the nightmare the L-rd delivered us from.

The Holy Spirit is our seal for redemption because He teaches us to live in the grace and forgiveness of the L-rd for our own lives and to extend this same dual strategy when we relate to those around us, first in our community and then in our world. It is too easy to become impatient and angry with other believers and join the circulation of the saints going from offence to offence, instead of from glory to glory.

To drive his point home forcefully, he adopts a sevenfold exhortation with six things we should put aside and one spiritual reality we should embrace with all of our being, both in our personal walk and in the way we relate to our community and eventually to our world. It is funny that the six all relate to speech which we have with one another, because darkness is all the more obvious when we come to the light!

Our first enemy is bitterness, which is the internalized anger which makes it impossible to relate to the object of our anger without bringing up old anger out of context. This means when we are angry and it goes underground, it can resurface and lash out without any trigger other than the person's presence. Bitterness is being stuck in anger like an underground coal bed which refuses to be put out and it wants to ignite all and any other coal beds it encounters until the whole world is on fire.

Animosity is when anger gets in gear to act out the hostility we are locked into so that we can get back at the person and hurt them the way we feel we have been hurt. It uses all kinds of justifications, but according to our faith anger and rage are never holy, and when they are directed against sin, they are never allowed to be directed against the sinner. People may openly plot against us and our community, but we are never allowed to follow suit. We have protective measures we can take, but the objective never varies – reconciliation, just as we have been reconciled with G-d through our blessed Messiah.

Anger is mentioned again because it is so stubborn and hard to weed out and it is one of the greatest causes of friction which the oiling of forgiveness has to deal with. There are some

people (especially family members) with whom we may never be reconciled, but whatever legacy they attempt to foist upon us, we need to refuse to allow anger to be part of it. It may require avoidance, even shunning, but it should not be allowed to foster more anger.

It is funny, often the closer you draw to someone, the easier it is for them to make us angry. In the L-rd, it should be different – it should be easier for us to forgive and be compassionate. Don't let anger dominate you, even when it appears to be righteous, because the wrath of man does not work (accomplish) the righteousness of G-d.

Next we have wrangling (clamour – shouting vehemently, insults – throwing verbal kicks and punches). Now Jewish culture uses the playful use of apparent insults to express affection and to diffuse tension, to make things better and let off steam and not increase friction. It is too easy to allow the volume to rise and to want to overpower someone who has suddenly become our adversary and not our brother or sister.

This kind of malicious verbal aggression creates friction and sparks in the body and needs to be oiled quickly before it causes irreparable, unnecessary damage. It is an infiltration of darkness into what should be a realm of light!

Slander is related to it because it is the use of half-truths and is even the purposeful repackaging of the truth to sink or damage someone and to make them appear in a bad light. It refuses to give people the benefit of the doubt and is the equivalent of passing sentence on them in absentia.

It is not wrong to talk about people who are not present, it is wrong to do so to purposely paint them in as bad a light as possible to pass judgment instead of build an understanding.

Just in case he misses one of the spawns of the enemy's darkness which wants to sink us and our community he includes the phrase "all malice". Whenever our intention is to cause pain or damage and not to seek reconciliation and forgiveness, we have slipped out of the light and into the realm of darkness – and we have opened a portal to the enemy to shatter, diminish and scatter the righteous core which we should be protecting.

Now that he has nailed it concerning the negative strategies of darkness which we are to avoid, he finishes with a wonderful statement about how we should respond to each other, both when we are on good terms and when we want to smack each other.

It is the seventh of his exhortations, but it is also a triple whammy. We need to be good to each other, compassionate, forgiving as we have been forgiven. The weapons of our warfare are for the overthrow of the enemy, the world and the flesh, but they should never be turned against each other.

It is impossible for a community to function without producing the potential for friction and for sparks, but the oil of forgiveness and compassion is needed as a regular form of maintenance, especially when things begin to heat up.

We have just gone through a major move and we are settling into a new location, full of challenges and the need to learn to design new ways of fulfilling our mandate in a new environment. All of us are in different places in our lives and are living at different stages in

our lives, but there should be a bond of love which unites us, young and old, male and female, Jew and Gentile.

This bond should not weaken the more we get to know one another. This bond should not weaken when we come under pressure and encounter challenges that stress our relationships. This is the bond of love which comes with it the call for regular maintenance so that we do not wear out or grind to a halt – or split apart and scatter.

The graceful oil of forgiveness and compassion will help us as we grow in numbers and strength and as we welcome and integrate newcomers into our midst. It should help us keep our children as they go through the throes of adolescence. It should keep us connected as we face health and financial challenges. It should keep us growing together as we pass through the various stages of our lives from conception to the grave and beyond.

Our membership in the righteous core of the L-rd is dependent on which life strategies we adopt as we face down the world of darkness which wants to suck us in and dissolve our ability to shine and lead others into the light where we dwell. Regular maintenance will make sure we oil our relationships with the love and compassion which has been shown to us by the L-rd. Friction is inevitable, but conflict, anger, malice and all the rest are not. We can build and maintain a healthy growing flock which pulls together instead of falling apart.

This will always be our only goal, objective and strategy. We will always be a safe, well-oiled community. Nothing more, nothing less.

Let's pray.