

<b>Vayelech</b>	<b>And He Went</b>
<b>Torah:</b>	Deut. 30:1-30
<b>Haftarah:</b>	Hos. 14:2-10; Joel 2:15-27; Micah 7:18-20
<b>Brit Chadashah:</b>	Romans 10:1-17

Today is Shabbat Shuvah, the Sabbath of Return or Repentance and we are having a shorter service, so instead of the usual Torah meditation, followed by a sermon, we will have a meditation on the majesty of repentance which combines elements of both. As his time of leadership was drawing to its close, Moses wanted to be sure that both future leaders and future generations were equipped to face the challenges which would come their way and perhaps one of the greatest of these is the need to learn about the majesty of repentance, which is another way of saying the power of correctability. How correctable are you?

Moses knew that after his death, the people would stray from the way of the L-rd and he wanted to ensure that they always knew the way back. In the New Testament, there is the story of the prodigal son who abandoned his father's house and squandered his inheritance in riotous living until he had nothing left but life in a pig sty. The saving feature of the story is twofold. First he knew the way home and secondly, his father was waiting to receive him back and to allow him to again become part of the pig sty free household.

Part of the learning of the Law which the House of Jacob was instructed to undertake was the understanding that repentance is the way back to our Father's House, because He is waiting to receive us back into the household. There will always be an element of loss and of regret, but Israel has always known that the L-rd does not wish the destruction of His people, or the destruction of the scattered children of Adam and Eve. The way home is always open for those who are willing to take it, both by faith and by obedience.

The job of preaching repentance has always fallen to the prophets who both warned people not to wander from the Word of our King and who offered them the option of returning, once they learned the futility and pain of abandoning this path of faith and obedience. Now this presents us with a dilemma which I would briefly like to speak to you about as we celebrate Shabbat Shuvah as part of our welcoming of 5776 during the Rosh Hashanah season.

In the story of the prodigal son, the older son who never went to the extremes of the younger son was upset at the happy reception which was given to the sinner who had willingly wrecked his own life and yet whom the father was very glad to see come home. If the L-rd is so happy to receive the sinner back and rejoices in his or her return, should we not all wander a little bit or a lot, in order for the L-rd to happy with us when we return? And if the warnings of the L-rd are softened by the promise of being able to return, does that not take away from the hatred we are to have of sin and the fear we are to have of the L-rd? So says the snake!

Could we then say that getting to know the pleasures of sin for the moment is an essential part of our spiritual journey so that really knowing the light requires some time in darkness? Some would even go so far as to say that sowing wild oats is something every young person needs to do in order to develop a mature taste for the truth of G-d and the wonder of His Word. I have encountered this kind of craziness with people who want an excuse to indulge the lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh and the pride of life and our society is actually

developing to the place where righteousness is viewed as restrictive and sinfulness is viewed as a form of spiritual liberty. And where everyone needs to do what feels good and do their own thing so that they can somehow find themselves, even if that means violating all and any rules which get in their way. The snake is hissing this louder and louder in our globalizing community.

On Shabbat Shuvah, we want to both point out the flaws of this false reasoning and remind ourselves about the destructive power of sinfulness in our lives and in the life of the world in which we live. Part of the responsibility which comes with free will is to know that the sin which is crouching at the door of our hearts does not want to help us discover ourselves and teach us self-fulfilment. It wants to turn pleasures into addictions and destroy our ability to feel real joy and satisfaction as we embrace immorality and self-indulgence as a lifestyle.

In the days of Noah, the righteous core of humanity had melted away before the destructive influence of the descendants of Cain and the world filled up with violence to the point that truth and righteousness were nearly extinguished and the way back to truth and light was abandoned. The people who had given into this inclination were not happy and fulfilled, they were driven and insatiable to the point where the path home was seen as one of their principle enemies and we see this is becoming more of a reality in the world in which we live.

The pursuit of pleasure and stimulation are seen as the highest good and while compassion and doing the right thing are not completely abandoned, what is seen as right is changing and we are called to have compassion to the point of accepting and indulging sinfulness as we classify righteousness as old school and no longer relevant to our more tolerant and "larger tent" world. Instead of solving the problems which sinfulness creates, we are told to simply redefine what we consider to be sinful and protect people's right to do that which was once forbidden as the traditional spiritual and moral standards are becoming part of what is considered sinful and from which people now need to be delivered. Can you hear the snake?

The social consequences of this shift are beginning to create global damage and to block the path home to the light and the older son is being seen as a self-righteous villain, while the prodigal son is being seen as the hero of the story. Instead of developing a taste for the truth and for righteousness, our world is becoming more and more the realm of the prodigal where the way of repentance is vilified and seen as the way of the coward. Why? Because G-d doesn't really mind sin and wants us to find happiness in any way we can as long as we are free to do our own thing. True spirituality is seen as embracing both good and evil. Hiss, hiss.

The way home is being seen more and more as the way of captivity and the path of unrighteousness is being portrayed as the true path of spiritual freedom and fulfilment and not falling into this deceitful perversion of spirituality is becoming our greatest challenge as the new millennium gathers momentum and as we prepare to walk with the L-rd in 5776.

The L-rd is not happy with the sinner until he or she embraces repentance and does not welcome the prodigal son home so he can continue the pig feeding lifestyle which brought him so much loss. He is happy to see us abandon our folly and His moral and spiritual standards are the way home to help us escape out of the darkness which brought on the flood in the days of Noah. Our society is becoming very sophisticated in attacking our core beliefs as antiquated prescientific superstitions and our morality is seen more and more as needlessly restrictive and damaging to the development of our true self in a just society.

What is considered nice and desirable and good and acceptable is undergoing a change so that traditional values and beliefs are seen as that which we need to expel and keep crouching at the door; that which was defined as sinfulness is now being seen as acceptable and desirable and that which we should accept and embrace. Our society is not so much changing the meaning of repentance as it is changing what we need to repent of and instead of looking at the path of righteousness as the objective of our repentance, more and more it is being seen as one of the things we have to repent of and be set free from.

Religious beliefs are still tolerated as immature and very suspect and religious values are still allowed to be practised as long as they do not challenge the dynamic duo of inclusiveness and political correctness. Instead of the majesty of repentance which would return us to a place of faithful obedience, we are more and more being encouraged become spiritual prodigals and look at the way home as the way we have to avoid and even vilify as antiquated and no longer relevant to our modern sophisticated and inclusive world.

On this Shabbat Shuvah, let me encourage you to look carefully at what we are to repent of and what we are to embrace, both in what we believe and in what we value and practice. More and more we are going to have to defend our grasp of biblical spirituality and not allow the tragedy of the prodigal son to become the objective of our lives. The older son is the role model we should be looking to emulate, along with the love and forgiveness of the father in welcoming the prodigal home who has abandoned the spiritually and morally destructive, pig feeding lifestyle. Do not let the snake hiss so loud that you no longer hear the voice of G-d's Word and wrongly embrace what it forbids as somehow right and proper and acceptable.

Feeding pigs is not what walking with the L-rd is all about and both our core beliefs and our core spirituality need to be seen as the path back to the Father. He is willing to forgive and to redeem, but never to indulge those who hate His Word nor to consider the guilty as innocent. The desire to do it our way and to do what we feel, is really a spiritual Trojan horse which the enemy is using to bring back the darkness and the violence of the days of Noah and to overthrow the righteous core worldwide. When that which the Bible says is evil is considered to be good and that which the Bible says is good is said to be evil, we need to do a radical systems check and embrace authentic biblical teshuvah (repentance) as we shine before the prodigal leaning world so the way home is made available to future members of the righteous core even as the final darkness sweeps across our world and tries to drag us down with it. Shabbat Shuvah is an opportunity for us to reaffirm our grasp of biblical repentance and shake off the subtle darkness which continues to ask: Has G-d really said? Our answer needs to be: yes He has and we say so too, so go hiss somewhere else (stomp, stomp).