

Vayelech And He Went He is With Us Through Thick and Thin

Torah: Deuteronomy 31:1-30

31:6: Be strong and have courage. Do not be afraid and do not be dismayed before them; for YHVH you G-d Himself shall walk with you. He will never leave you and He will never abandon you. The people may have been afraid that with the death of Moses, the power and protection of the L-rd would be gone or diminished. Moses assures them that He will be with them just as firmly and fully after his death as He was during His tenure in their midst. They have been through some pretty tight spots and they are about to embark on the final campaign without the commander in chief who has lead them successfully thus far. They are told in no uncertain terms that the L-rd will be with them through thick and thin – the same applies to us today.

31:12: You shall gather the people, the men, the women, the children and the stranger who shall be in your gates, in order that they would hear, and that they would learn to fear YHVH, you G-d, and to observe and put into practice all the words of this Law. They were to read the book of the Law once every seven years, when they gathered together for the seven days of Sukkoth because even though their battles to win the land would be victorious, there was an even bigger, generational battle waiting for them in the land – and this is the same battle waiting for us as we enter 5777. Putting into practice all the words of this law is still our calling today because faith in Him and obedience to \His word needs to be how we live and indeed needs to be the place where we live, through thick and thin.

31:14: YHVH said to Moses: Behold, the moment is approaching when you shall die. Call Joshua and present yourselves in the tent of meeting. I will give Him My orders. Moses and Joshua went and presented themselves in the tent of meeting. Joshua has only ever come to entrance of the tent of meeting – Moses was the only one who went in during their wilderness wandering. Here Moses takes Joshua into the tent and he is to receive his personal mandate from the L-rd. When it is time to pass the baton to the next generation, the new leadership must have the same personal contact and commitment o faith and obedience which will always be the mandate of believers, to the Jew first and also to the Gentile. Have you gone in and received your orders from the L-rd? Have you received your mandate, your task? It is not necessarily going to be a call to climb every mountain or to ford every stream, but it will always be a call to personal faith in our Redeemer and complete obedience, because this is the only way to walk with Him, through thick and thin.

31:27: For I know your spirit of rebellion and the stiffness of your neck. If you rebel against YHVH while I am still alive and in the midst of you, how much more so will you do so after my death. Moses had no illusions about the fickle potential of the people and He knew that they were headed for trouble. He is warning them ahead of time so they will know that they can come back and that nothing is going to change, either as it concerns the requirements of G-d or the provision of G-d. Rebellion moves us out from under His care and faithful obedience restores us to His care, through thick and thin. May we surrender our fickle spiritual potential and learn to walk under His care and never away from it.

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

Joel 14:9: Let the one who is wise take heed to these things. Let the one who has intelligent understand them. For the ways of YHVH are righteous and the righteous will walk in them, but the rebels will fall therein. Over the centuries, our people have seen the mighty hand of G-d guiding them and weighing heavily upon them when they have walked away from His Word. The actors and the players may change, but the story remains the same, those who are spiritually wise will walk with Him in His ways, through thick and thin, because He will never change them to suit us – they will always change us to suit them and Him.

Joel 2:25: I will replace for you the years which have been devoured by the grasshopper, the canker worm, the caterpillar and the palmerworm- My great army which I had sent against you. Spiritual folly and backsliding comes with considerable price tag and those who walk away from the L-rd suffer great loss at the hand of the troubles which the L-rd sends against them – not to destroy them, but to bring them to their sense. Once we grow tired of feeding the pigs and of seeing our lives crumble and get eaten up before our eyes, He gives us a wonderful promise – He will restore all that we have lost, not necessarily with the same things we have lost, but, like Job we will return to the abundance from which we have fallen. Which army is going to send you way, the kind which devours you in your folly, or the kind which restores and heals – its up to us because neither His grace nor disciplinary intervention are going anywhere, through thick and thin.

(Micah is the tashlikh passage)

Brit Chadashah: Romans 10:1-17

Romans 10:12: There is no difference, in effect between the Jew and the Greek, because the same L-rd is lord of all and is generous for all those who call upon Him. Jews and Gentiles have the same mandate, even if we have a different calling. Jews are called to be a great nation and to be salt and light before the nations. Gentiles are called to walk with the L-rd according to His Word and be just as salty in the same light of His Word. Both the carriers of the blue print and those who build faith and obedience into their lives from the model of Israel, have equal access to the amazing generosity of the One who calls both of us to His light and to His love.

There are no second class citizens in the Kingdom. We are all called to the same level and kind of obedience, whether we are poised to conquer the land, or whether we are poised to walk with Him according to His Word in whatever land we are wandering through towards our singular destination, our Father's Home in glory. Let Him be your guide in 5777 so that neither the thick nor the thin can trouble you or cause you to lose either your grasp of His Word or your commitment to faithful obedience. It is always worth it to walk with Him and it is never worth it to walk away from Him, to the Jew first and also to the Gentile, no matter what is going on in your life and no matter what stage you are in in your life.

Reading: Tom pp. 83, 85 and Psalm 65. Jewish hero: Priscilla. Torah carrier: Bernie. Oneg **Sermon for Shabbat Shuvah: He is Always Waiting to Take us Back**

Today, as we observe Shabbat Shuvah, the Sabbath of Return, I want to talk to you about one of the most comforting realities found in the Bible. Despite the fact the His standards will never be diminished and can never be compromised, the door back to the straight and narrow path

is never closed. It is true that He knows what we are capable of, both for good and for evil, but He still calls us back to Him so that He can teach us to successfully battle evil and make room in our hearts and lives for the goodness of His Word and the wonder of His love.

He has to remove His presence and His blessing from those who wander away from His Word and from those who move themselves out from under the protection of His wings, but He does not slam the door in their face and tell them that He never wants to see them again. In the Torah portion, I spoke about the return of the prodigal when he grows tired of feeding pigs and as we contemplate what we may be feeding in our lives, we can be comforted by His love which is always ready to take us back.

This never means that we can bring the pigs back with us, or the dogs or the wolves or any of the bad company or the bad habits we have been keeping company with as we have wandered away from the L-rd. He stands patiently at the door of our hearts and remains persistently calling out to us at the entrance of all the noisy places we try to hide in far from the safety of His love. While He is never willing to change the principles of His Word and is never willing to compromise the righteousness and justice which our biblical faith requires us to embrace, as long as there is breath in our bodies, He leaves the door back to His love and care fully ajar and none of our foolishness or bitterness or anger can ever shut it or cut us off from it. The end will come when the last one who is willing slips through this amazing door.

Does this mean we can live the way we want and roll in the mud as often as we please, declaring that we want to eat and drink and be merry because we can always dart back through the door when trouble calls or when things heat up in our lives and the pressure gets too much for us? Never. Some people are so damaged and get choked by the cares, the riches and the pleasures of this life and it takes time for them to realize that the bitterness of sin and rebellion is not the place where they want to spend the fleeting years of their lives.

Some people are bitterly disappointed with how they have been treated and allow their negative encounters with believers and with compromised or legalistic spirituality to cause them to turn their backs on the open door and it sometimes takes years or decades of pouting and wandering for them to digest their experiences and come back to their senses.

Briefly this morning, I want to examine a passage which talks about the power of returning to the G-d who will never compromise either His standards or His love for each one of us.

Judges 10:6-16: *The Children of Israel again did that which displeased the L-RD; they served the Baals and the Astartes, the gods of Syria, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the sons of Ammon and the gods of the Philistines and they abandoned YHVH and did not serve Him any more. The wrath of the L-rd was inflamed against Israel and He sold them into the hands of the Philistines and into the hands of the sons of Ammon.*

They oppressed and crushed the Children of Israel that year and for eighteen years, all the Children of Israel who were on the other side of the Jordan in the land of the Amorites in Gilead. The Children of Ammon crossed the Jordan to also fight against Judah, against Benjamin and against the House of Ephraim. And Israel was in great distress.

The Children of Israel cried to YHVH, saying: we have sinned against You, for we have abandoned our G-d and served the Baals. YHVH said to the Children of Israel: did I not

deliver you from the Egyptians, the Amorites, the sons of Ammon and the Philistines? And when the Sidonians, Amalek and Maon oppressed you and you cried out to Me, did I not deliver you from their hands?

But you, you have abandoned Me and you have served other gods. That is why I will deliver you no more. Go and call upon the gods which you have chosen and let them deliver you from the time of your distress!

The Children of Israel said to YHWH: we have sinned; treat us as you think best, only please deliver us today. They removed the strange gods from the midst of them and served YHWH, who was touched by the distress of Israel.

The Book of Judges deals with a four hundred year period which I have called the yo-yo years between the death of Joshua and the arrival of Samuel. It was a back and forth time where the people abandoned G-d and suffered until they came to their senses and then a new generation arose to repeat the sins of the previous one.

In this passage, we read that they were thoroughly and fully backslidden into an incredible array of criminal idolatry as they adopted the false religions of their neighbours and even of those whom the L-rd had given them victory over during the conquest of the Promised land.

Our passage begins with a recital of seven categories of idols they served and in His response to them, the L-rd mentions another category of seven enemies from which He had delivered them. They had reached a place of no return and they had watched helplessly as their brethren across the Jordan were crushed and oppressed by their old foes the Ammonites and now those of the Children of Israel in the Holy Land were the next on their enemies' menu.

It is not unusual for people to call out to G-d in moments of distress and then to wander away from Him when the distress is resolved. This had been the case with Israel at least seven times previously. Here the use of the number seven means that they have abandoned G-d thoroughly and fully. He tells them that He is not their big sugar daddy in the sky who will always come to their rescue and chase away all the bullies so that they can get back to sinning in peace.

It would appear that He has had enough of them and is willing to abandon them to the gods they have chosen and He was not kidding around or making an idle threat. G-d is in the business of delivering those who choose Him and who walk with Him according to His Word.

He is not a lucky charm or a force which people can access and use for protection and for victory against their enemies, like the gods of the nations which surrounded Israel. Religion for these people and for many people in the Ancient Middle East was seen as a buffet, where you could pick and choose from among any number of gods, depending on what you wanted to accomplish. There were gods who promised to meet any number of specific needs the people had and the general understanding was that this took a plurality of gods – divine team work, and it was unreasonable to expect people to just access the services of one G-d and to serve Him alone.

However, this was and is the requirement which has to be fulfilled if we want to walk with the L-rd. He is able to meet all our needs and we are called to serve Him alone, and to abandon the worship of false gods who function as servants of men instead of the other way around.

With great patience, the L-rd reached out repeatedly to His people and delivered them from a broad array of adversaries over an extended period of time. In fact there was no problem too hard for Him to deliver them from and there was no situation they could stumble into which would be too difficult for Him to handle. But the people wanted to cover all their bases and did not see a problem with serving multiple divinities because that was the accepted custom of the day.

In our world there are also many voices and influences calling for our primary allegiance and the L-rd will never accept a divided loyalty, but at the same time He will always leave the door open for us to repent. Now there are people who bounce back and forth between walking with the L-rd and walking away from Him, but they should be seen as people who are fascinated by starting over at zero and losing what they have built up, time and time again.

Some even only return to the L-rd for a season until they recover and then they plunge back into the darkness and into folly. This was apparently how Israel had been living in the sophisticated religious world they lived in where religion was seen as a means to get the best deal from a broad spectrum of competing deities.

Israel had abandoned the L-rd, even though they thought that they were only trying to cover all their bases and fit in with their neighbours. The protection and blessing of G-d was removed and they reaped what they had sown and G-d told them that He was no longer willing to deliver them because of their persistent idolatry and disobedience. Not only had He taken them out of Egypt and given them the promised land, but He had also shown Himself more powerful than any enemy who rose up against them.

Their basic misunderstanding was they came to feel that the L-rd was there to serve them instead of the other way around and they saw the nations around them adopting this same approach.

In His discussion with the Children of Israel, G-d firmly and clearly outlined His complete opposition to divided loyalties. As we observe Shabbat Shuvah we have to ask ourselves if we need a reality check to deal with all and any dividing of loyalties which may be occurring in our hearts and lives.

G-d knows that some of us will make several failed attempts before we learn to walk with Him with undivided loyalty, but there are three things He wants us to know about how to walk with Him. First of all, He will always call us out of darkness into His marvellous light and whenever we wander out of this wonderful place, He will always leave the door open for us to return.

He is not a G-d who takes pleasure in judging and punishing sinners and does not want us to think of Him as the grumpy G-d with a big hammer, ready to smack and smash anyone who does not live in total submission to His Word every time we make a mistake or a make a poor decision. He warns us and gives us amply opportunities to return to the straight and narrow path before He institutes punitive measures against us.

However, next He wants us to balance this understanding of His great patience with the realization that returning to Him always means abandoning the darkness and every connection we have with it. Israel wanted to cover all their bases instead of realizing that G-d alone can

meet all of our needs and His Word is the only base we need to cover. He is neither fooled, nor is He mocked and many who make emotional, shallow commitments to Him when they are in trouble, are just looking for a free ride until the weather clears.

There will always be a period of triage where the commitment is tested to see if it is total and authentic, or if it will return to darkness at the soonest opportunity. And there is a sobering truth about the point of no return which I want to close with this morning as we remember that the door is always open for us as long as we live.

Israel made an authentic repentance and abandoned all their false gods and served the L-rd. This remains the singular objective of G-d and this will never change. It may take time for believers to learn to abandon all and any connections to the darkness from which they have been delivered and all through this process the L-rd will always welcome us back.

However, if the day should come when we only want the L-rd's help and do not want to abandon our darkness, we cannot be forgiven if we do not repent. On the one hand, there is nothing so dark and evil which we cannot repent from and on the other hand until we repent, even the little foolish things can trip us up and cause us great spiritual loss. Seven times seventy times a day speaks of the limitless, inexhaustible love and forgiveness of the G-d who is always ready to welcome back those who have wandered into the dark.

However, repentance which does not make a clear break with sin cannot fit through the door which leads to forgiveness, because repentance is non-negotiable. Some have a long, hard struggle with sin because of the damage and pain they have encountered and G-d will never lose patience with anyone who sincerely seeks Him no matter how much darkness they have to wander through until their connection with it is finally broken.

I remain constantly surprised and very happy that He is always waiting to take us back, just as He also took Israel back, time and time again. There is a big difference between playing games with G-d and really trying to work things out. May 5777 find us working things out and abandoning all and any links with darkness (and anger and lust and greed), even if it takes a while – our Messiah never loses patience with anyone who is sincerely seeking and we shouldn't either. Shabbat shalom.