

Learning to walk with God like Abraham

Message for the third part of Parasha Lekh L'cha , Triennial Cycle

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The Readings for this Sabbath are from Parasha Lekh L'cha:

Torah: Genesis 15:1-21
Prophetic: Zephaniah 3:8-20
Apostolic: Romans 4:1-9

Learning to walk with God like Abraham

“When Abraham was 99 years old, the Lord appeared to Abraham and said to him “I am God almighty walk before me and be blameless that I may make my covenant between me and you and may multiply you greatly.” Genesis 17:1-2

The apostles teach that disciples of Yeshua are all to be regarded as sons and daughters of Abraham **BY FAITH**; while Jewish people are regarded as his legal descendants under the law, all disciples of Yeshua are to be regarded as Abraham’s spiritual descendants by faith in that we all share in the faith of Abraham and are recipients of the promise that God made to Abraham: “in your seed all families of the earth will be blessed and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations”.

All of this comes to us not naturally but only through the merit and virtue of our master, Yeshua, the seed of Abraham, the fulfillment of the promises. He draws those of us who were far away near and he raises up sons of Abraham even from these Stony hearts. By merit of Yeshua’s relationship to father Abraham, we are sons and daughters of Abraham, even as we find ourselves declared sons and daughters of God by the merit of his own sonship.

All this comes to us, to both Jews and Gentiles, through the name of our master, Yeshua, so says the testimony of the apostles. But let's set aside theology and talk in practical terms. In practical terms, what does it mean to be a son or a daughter of Abraham by faith? Yeshua cut to the chase and says: **if you were Abraham’s children you would be doing the works Abraham did**. How quickly he dismantles centuries of tortured handwringing and pious rhetoric over the whole false dichotomy of faith versus works. The tongue of Yeshua is like a sharp sword piercing to the division of soul and spirit, discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. Therefore, according to our masters teaching, to be truly the sons and daughters of Abraham and Sarah, by the faith of Abraham, means more than just reciting a dogma or assenting to a belief system. It's more than being a Christian or part of a religion. **Abrahamic paternity is tested in the field of deeds.**

What are the deeds of Abraham? We could speak of the “chesed” (kindness) of Abraham; His compassion for his fellow; His hospitality to strangers; His fierce loyalty to his family; His fearlessness; His perseverance; His conduct toward outsiders; The many tests he endured; His perseverance in the face of disappointment; His long suffering; His love for Sarah his wife; How he looked after the affairs of his children; His attention to detail finding a spouse for his son; How he attended to the dead, and on and on. There's a whole study we could conduct in this one concept from Yeshua: “if you were Abraham’s children, you would be doing the works Abraham did.”

Today, however, our attention would be riveted upon one particular aspect of the Abraham story and **the expression of his faith and that is his personal walk with the Lord.** Near the end of our Torah portion when the Lord makes a new covenant with Abraham to be sealed with the sign of circumcision he says to Abraham **walk before me and be blameless. Abraham walked with God.** Just as his ancestor Noah walked with God; and as Enoch had walked with God. In my last teaching, while we were in Parasha Noach, I opened this new topic for discussion: the concept of walking with God. We were looking at the verse that says Noah was a righteous man blameless in his time. Noah walked with God. Genesis 6:9. We spent some time exploring this idea of what it means to be blameless and what it means to walk with God. I suggested that we should understand the word blameless not as sinless or perfect but rather as unblemished, complete, that is, to be a full human being accurately representing God's image on earth rather than a self driven by the compulsions of the flesh and carried along with the insanity of human appetites and ego. And we define the concept of walking with God as the exercise of true godliness; that is, imitation of God and reflection of God as the Torah enjoins us **to walk in the ways of God, to love God, to fear God, to cling to God.** And we spoke about each of these things briefly but ultimately we arrived at the conclusion that to walk with God encompasses more than any set of virtues, merits, or behaviors. It does not consist of any certain ceremony, religious behavior, habit of study, observance of laws, social deportment, personal disposition, nor of certain acts of merit and charity, instead all of those things are the **fruit of the essential thing which is -- to constantly cleave to the presence of God,** keeping him ever fixed before us, in every circumstance, in every moment, continually shedding the self in the divine presence of the most high. This is what it means to walk with God.

Toward this goal, we want to move. Not just the goal of understanding a concept **but the goal of living the concept out.** The goal is that we should all be ever mindful of the presence of God and interacting with him like the apostles instruct us: pray without ceasing. **This is the FAITH OF ABRAHAM from which the DEEDS of Abraham are forthcoming.** *If I begin to do the deeds of Abraham without the faith of Abraham, I won't expect to get too far before becoming discouraged.* After all I am a human being which is to say a habitual failure in the fields of godliness and righteousness and piety. But Abraham did not do the deeds that he did because he was trying to be pious. He did not travel to Canaan or give a tenth to Melchizedek or plead for the godless men of Sodom and Gomorrah because he was trying to be pious, trying to be a better person or trying to improve himself. Instead, **his piety came from his relationship with God,** the unseen deity before whom he walked. His self-played little role in the story. Regarding his self, Abraham admitted **I am but dust and ashes.**

As I read the stories of Abraham in this week's Torah portion, I catch glimpses of this unique relationship between Abraham and God in small details. For example, everywhere that Abraham camps it says: he pitches his tent and then he builds a "mizbeach", an altar to the Lord, and calls on the name of the Lord. He declares holy places in every place that God appears to him and he worships the Lord in those places. You don't just go around making altars arbitrarily. That's not how it worked. You didn't find an inspiring spot with a good view and say I think I'll build an altar here and worship the Lord. It's not like putting up a church or building a synagogue. Instead, you built an altar in a holy place. And a holy place became a holy place because you, or someone encountered God in that place. That's how it worked. For example think of the story of Jacob at Bethel. It's not called Bethel it's called Luz. Jacob doesn't think of it as a holy place whatsoever. Instead, he camps there. Actually, he goes to sleep there with his head on one of the stones. During the night, however, he has a dream in which he sees the Lord at the top of a ladder that stretches into the sky, and he sees angelic beings ascending and descending between heaven and earth. In the morning he declares: *"how awesome is this place, I did not realize that the Lord is in this place."* He declares it a holy place. He sets up the stone as a pillar. Anoints it with oil to mark the spot as a holy place. He vows to return there and offer sacrifices in the future, which he does 20 years later, returning to that same spot. And he names the place Bethel, House of God.

What made that spot a holy spot? What transformed Luz into Bethel? What made it a House of God, where an altar was built and God was worshipped in sacrifice? It was the experience of God in that place. That's what made it holy and set it apart from the normal. This is what Abraham is doing as well. He's setting apart places as holy. Declaring holy places and building altars on them, not just because he thinks he's found a neat place to put up an altar but because everywhere he goes in the land of Canaan, everywhere he pitches his tent, he seems to be having this experience of God appearing to him.

Genesis 12: 6-8 *"Then they came to the land of Canaan. Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem to the oak of Moreh. Then the Lord appeared to Abram and said "to your offspring I will give this land".* So he built there an altar to the Lord who had appeared to him. From there, he moved to the Hill Country on the east of Bethel and pitched his tent with Bethel on the West and Ai on the east. And there he built an altar to the Lord and called upon the name of the Lord.

Abraham finds God everywhere. He walks with God. This is like how our master taught us to be in the presence of God, **like a child with his father.**

The Zohar (**Note: This is outside the biblical cannon and has to be taken with caution**) tells a story about young Abraham as a child seeking God as an explanation of our haftorah (in Isaiah 41:2) *“who has stirred up one from the east”*. This refers to Abraham who received his first impulse to seek God from the east. For when he saw the sun issuing in the morning from the east, he was first moved to think that that was God and he said, *“this is the king that created me”* and he worshipped it the whole day. In the evening when the sun went down and the moon commenced to shine, he said *“verily, this rules over the orb which I worshipped the whole day, since the latter is darkened before it, and does not shine anymore”* so he served the moon all that night. In the morning when he saw the darkness depart and the east grow light he said, *“of a surety there is a king who rules over all these orbs and orders them”* so when God saw Abraham’s longing to find him, he revealed himself unto him and spoke with him as it is written: **“whom he calls in righteousness”. Isaiah 41:2**

Abraham found God not in the material created order, but neither did he find him outside the material created order. He found Him over the material created world, above the sun and the moon, but not without the sun and the moon. Thus, Abraham finds God everywhere, in all things, in all places, in every moment. Observe the relationship between God and Abraham in the Torah. God speaks with Abraham. Abraham speaks with God. They weighed upon one another, they argue, they negotiate, they come to terms like two friends. And what is written of Abraham? It says, he was called the **“friend of God”** James 2:23, **“But you Israel my servant Jacob whom I have chosen the offspring of Abraham my friend”** **Isaiah 41:8.**

When I was a starting Messianic my ardent faith began to unravel in a personal theological crisis. Not in the way you might expect. I did not begin to doubt in the existence of God. I did not doubt the resurrection of our master. But I did begin to doubt the existence of my relationship with God. I tried to test the Lord and force him to reveal himself to me. To speak to me. To give me some word or evidence that He was in fact my heavenly father. I sought a miracle, a sign, an answer to prayer, some undeniable proof or evidence by which I could know this with confidence. One morning, I was on my condominium balcony at the 42nd floor to pray. I asked God to give me a sign. Or anything at that moment that will prove that He and I are there. But I heard no answer or response except the rustle of the wind flowing to my face. I did not know that what I was doing is actually **against** the rules and in fact it's one of satan's temptations to which our master applies: it is written you shall not put the Lord your God to the test. We don't try to force God's hand or force him to reveal himself. It doesn't work that way. It's not magic. I didn't know the rules. I just wanted to hear a voice, but instead I heard silence.

We can't read the Bible narratives and assume that the miracles and epiphanies and theophanies were just ordinary everyday experiences. They are exceptions to the ordinary.

God doesn't manifestly pop in on people routinely in such a common way that everyone should expect to have that experience. The stories in the Bible are not ordinary stories about experiences with God, they are extraordinary. And that's fair. There are long dry spells in the life of Abraham where God does not necessarily appear to him, perhaps decades elapse between some episodes and he goes through some serious testing. On the other hand, the theophanies (manifestation of God) don't seem so extraordinary for Abraham. They seem almost routine. Abraham doesn't seem to be suffering any acute spiritual crisis of faith. It's now been almost 10 years since I stood in the that balcony whispering into the wind. And if I could speak to that younger man I would tell him this: God is also wondering where you are. He is also looking for some indication that you are his son. He's not impressed by your beliefs. He is not flattered by your conviction about his existence. He's not beholden to your beckon call because you happen to have inherited a belief in the resurrection of Jesus from your parents.

I would tell my 25-year-old self: **if you want to know God and know him as your father, learn to walk with him.**

I did struggle to develop some sort of devotional routine of daily prayer and study but I had no idea how my inflated sense of self blinded me to the revelation of God. I wanted God. I wanted a relationship with God. I wanted to experience God. It's always "I". I did not really understand God's presence. To me God remained in heaven, in the clouds, beyond the stars, transcendent and far away. **I had little concept of imminence.** I wanted to experience the Holy Spirit. But **I did not yet realized that the sound of the wind and feeling of it as it touches my face was the presence of the Spirit of God, as our master says: "the wind blows where it wishes then you hear it sound but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the spirit." It's beyond definition. You don't point to it and say there it is.**

I have a favorite moment in this Torah portion when Abraham is sitting in his tent down in Hebron, meditating, communing with God. It's night time. He is praying. Speaking with the Lord like a friend. And the Lord is speaking with him, the Lord says fear not Abraham, **I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward.** Based upon this verse, we address God with the title *Magen Avraham, shield of Abraham*. He says I am your shield, which is to say, your defender, and he says I am your reward. This episode comes immediately after Abraham refused to take any reward or compensation from the wicked king of Sodom. From the world's point of view this was foolish, he should have taken the spoils of war, he had surely earned them. But Abraham refused. Lest people attribute his success to the king of Sodom, rather than Hashem. Abraham was not concerned for his own reputation, but for **his friend's reputation.** So the Lord says: "fear not, I am your shield" as demonstrated by saving you in the battle with the five kings. And **I am your reward,** a better reward than all the wealth that the king of Sodom might have offered you.

What was Abraham's reward? not the land of Canaan ... not to become a great nation... not the promise of a great name ... not the hope for a son... not the future Kingdom... not even the world to come... **God himself was his reward.** I am your exceedingly great reward. English bibles sometimes translate **Genesis 15:1** to say : "**your reward shall be exceedingly great**" but that's not correct, there is no verb in the Hebrew, It just says: "you're exceedingly great reward". Hashem himself is Abrahams exceedingly great reward...

But Abraham presses God on the point of his promises and complaints that he remains childless despite the promises that his heir will inherit Canaan. Then it says: "*and he brought him outside and said: look toward heaven, number the stars if you are able to number them, so shall your offspring be.*"

A clear nighttime sky offers an incomparable vision of the majesty and grandeur of God. We obtain a sudden sense of perspective. From that view into what seems to be infinity, we human beings have derived our sense of awe and reverence for the divine. This is like what it says in Isaiah 40: "lift up your eyes on high and see who created these? he who brings out their host by number, calling them all by name, by the greatness of his might because he is strong in power not one is missing.

The Lord tells Abraham that every one of those uncountable stars, corresponds to a human being among the sons and daughters of Abraham. God calls them by name, **he determines the number of stars, he gives to all of them their names Psalm 147:4**

Not one is missing.. And this means that you too, as a son or a daughter of Abraham, by the faith of Abraham, can be numbered among that starry host. God has already called you by name. You have not gone missing from his attention.

*God is not up in the sky, if he was in the sky the birds would reach him ahead of you. He's not in the depths of the sea, if he was, the fish would reach him before you. He's not in the future nor in the past, **He is here, now, inside of you, and outside of you, all around and within, in the tree and in the leaf, always present in the present.** But we miss him because we're looking for him beyond the sky, below the sea, in the future, in the past, Learning to walk with God is a difficult spiritual discipline, perhaps the most difficult of all.. It's a mind game that requires us to constantly keep in mind that the world and circumstance around us is not the whole story, that God is present. It's very difficult, but it's also the easiest and most simple thing you can imagine. There's nothing to it at all, except to know that God is now, here. God is now with you, and his attention is fixed upon you with love.*

Paul Levertov, the author of "LOVE & THE MESSIANIC AGE" says:

"if you want to know God, you must first have the certainty that he knows and loves you".

That's the basis for a friendship, such as Abraham experienced with Hashem. The faith of Abraham begins with belief in the existence of the one God, basic monotheism, but it does not stop there. The faith of Abraham walks with God. If you were Abraham's children you would do the things that Abraham did.

Shabbat Shalom!

Marvin is an Elder at Calgary L'chaim Bible Fellowship, a Messianic Bible Community in Calgary, AB, Canada. We are in Fellowship with the Asia Pacific Messianic Fellowship (APMF) and United Messianic Jewish Assembly (UMJA). We believe that Yeshua is our Messiah and the Torah is our way of life as practiced by Yeshua himself. For full Statement of Faith, please check our website at www.lechaimbiblefellowship.org