

The Father's Love: I never knew you

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Parshat Tsav

A sermon given at Or Haolam

Overland Park, Kansas

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Shabbat shalom, to the members of Ohr Haolam, to my friends, relatives, brothers and sisters in Messiah, and those who are investigating the claims of Messiah among us. What a pleasure to return to KC again this soggy spring, and especially to Or Haolam, a true home away from home. Some of you will know my biography in measure, that I grew up in Prairie Village, attended Somerset Elementary and Meadowbrook Junior High, then graduated Shawnee Mission East in 1969. I grew up and still visit Kehilath Israel Synagogue, especially when I'm in town for the *yahrzeits* of my parents, brother and others. They are buried at Blue Ridge. So my roots sink deep and my affection for this town and the messianic expression of our faith only increases over the years.

If you didn't receive a white card from Jews for Jesus, please receive them just now as the ushers come through the aisle and pass them down each row. Thanks. You can fill that card out anytime during my talk. And if you do, please drop it off to me at the end of the service or mail it in, if you prefer. For those reading this online, just write me and I will see to information being sent you.

I am especially grateful to Shmuel and Jim and those in the leadership here who continue to cheer me on from afar, as we work in a way together, for the salvation of the Jewish people. And that topic, once again, is my topic today as we consider Parshat Tsav, and the message of the Haftorah, from the prophet Jeremiah.

Yes, today is Shabbat Hagadol, the Sabbath immediately before Passover, and thus we would read an alternate Haftorah portion from the prophet Malachi. I will mention it en passant, but I felt the ordinary reading of Tzav's haftorah (Jeremiah 7-8) is God's word for us at this time.

As Hagadol, the Great Sabbath, it readies the congregation for Passover. It might be better titled Shabbat HaSeh, the Sabbath when we commemorate the Lamb.

1) The primary event commemorated on this Shabbat is a great midrashic miracle which occurred on this day, several days before the Exodus. According to the stories, we Jewish people were commanded by Moses to take a lamb and tie it to our bedposts on Shabbat, the 10th day of Nissan, four days before they were to leave Egypt. When the Egyptians asked the Jews why they were buying lambs en masse, they were told that these lambs were intended for the Paschal Offering, which would be sacrificed in preparation of the Plague of the Firstborn. For obvious reasons, this information bothered the Egyptian firstborn, who immediately asked Pharaoh to grant the Jews the freedom they demanded. When Pharaoh refused their request, the Egyptian firstborn waged war with Pharaoh's army, and many Egyptians who were guilty of atrocities against the Jews were killed on that day.

2) The Egyptians were theologically upset, when they found out the Jews were planning to slaughter lambs, an Egyptian deity -- but were incapable of doing anything to prevent this action.

3) Some suggest that this Shabbat earned the title "Gadol," because it is the day when the rabbis traditionally deliver extensive lectures about the laws of Passover, and teach long about the lessons to be learned from the holiday.

4) Finally, the Haftorah read in many communities from Malachi on this Shabbat speaks of the coming of Messiah,

referring to the day of his arrival as "Yom Hashem hagadol v'hanora" -- the "great" and terrible day of the Lord. So you can see that I have plenty of other stuff I could be teaching in this time, and even take extra time since this could be granted as D'rash hagadol.

That said, I still believe the Lord wants this particular word at this time for you at Ohr Ha'olam and any who might be listening online or reading this manuscript later. Please, just now, ask God to teach you, deep into your heart, of the Father's love for you. (pause)

In our reading of the Haftorah, Jeremiah is writing to the Jewish people his first real prose sermon starting in chapter 7, and thus I feel it is acceptable to borrow from it directly to hear what God is saying to us.

He chides Judah for all their boasting, their confidence in their building by which they are safeguarded, and warns them to amend their ways. He, as is typical of prophets, lists our sins, one by one, and sometimes with repeat, until we finally might actually acknowledge our sinfulness and repent.

What sins are listed in Jeremiah 7 and 8?

He starts with:

"if you truly practice justice between a man and his neighbour, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place, nor walk after other gods to your own ruin" (7.5-6)

And

"Will you steal, murder, and commit adultery and swear falsely, and offer sacrifices to Baal and walk after other gods that you have not known, "Has this house, which is called by My name, become a den of robbers in your sight? Behold, I, even I, have seen it," declares the Lord. "And now, because you have done all these things," declares the Lord, "and I spoke to you, rising up early and speaking, but you did not hear, and I called you but you did not answer" (9-13)

What will be the result? Dispersion and the ruin of the Temple, "as he did at Shiloh." (verse 14)

From where does this sinful activity come? It boils down to a misunderstanding and disobedience to the First commandment. What is that First commandment? Love God, and Him only. "I am the Lord thy God who brought you up out of the land of Egypt." It's barely a commandment at all; just an appeal to know Him.

"The children gather wood, and the fathers kindle the fire, and the women knead dough to make cakes for the queen of heaven; and they pour out drink offerings to other gods in order to spite Me. "Do they spite Me?" declares the Lord. "Is it not themselves they spite, to their own shame?" (7.18-19)

Often our response to God's conviction of our sins is something we could call Rehabilitation. We will make it right with God. We will fix our own lives. We will daven more. We will fast twice a week. We will rise early and make food for our neighbours. We will donate to charity. Honest, Lord, we'll do better next week.

Now, don't get me wrong. I think repair is great. I think restitution is often right with people. But rehab and doubling down on our efforts of religion is not going to ever impress the Almighty. Our righteous deeds are like filthy menstrual rags in his sight. We can never out-manuever and out-religion God. He knows our hearts. He sees our insides. He understands our motives, way better than we do, and certainly more than our closest friends.

Listen to Jeremiah's next lines:

"Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, "Add your burnt offerings to your sacrifices and eat flesh. For I did not speak to your fathers, or command them in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices. But this is what I commanded them, saying, 'Obey My voice, and I will be your God, and you will be My people; and you will walk in all the way which I command you, that it may be well with you.' Yet they did not obey or incline their ear, but walked in their own counsels and in the stubbornness of their evil heart, and went backward and not forward. Since the day that your fathers came out of the land of Egypt until this day, I have sent you all My servants the prophets, daily rising early and sending them. Yet they did not listen to Me or incline

their ear, but stiffened their neck; they did more evil than their fathers.” (7.21-26)

The point is this: be personal with the Living God. Listen to Him. Love Him. Hear Him. Be real. Be His person. Your religious chatter and pretend devotion stink in His nostrils. Idolatry, the replacing of the Lord with Anything less than Him, whether the Queen of Heaven, and getting dysphoric about God, or championing the rights of those who oppose Him, is entirely worthy of judgments.

“For the sons of Judah have done that which is evil in My sight,” declares the Lord, “they have set their detestable things in the house which is called by My name, to defile it. They have built the high places of Topheth, which is in the valley of the son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire, which I did not command, and it did not come into My mind. (7.30-31)

Neither the false ideas and proclamations in the ‘safehaven’ of the Temple, nor the afternoon picnic to the Queen of heaven can safeguard the Jewish people. Just two decades later, we were taken captive by the Babylonians and God’s judgment fell on us severely.

We had leaders who calmed us with words that predate, but channel Neville Chamberlain, but are nothing of real healing. We had teachers who taught of their own initiative, but didn’t really bring us the powerful words of the Almighty. And we did nothing. We spread out bones and saw death all around us, but didn’t turn to Him.

“You shall say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord, “Do men fall and not get up again? Does one turn away and not repent? Why then has this people, Jerusalem, turned away in continual apostasy? They hold fast to deceit, They refuse to return. I have listened and heard, They have spoken what is not right; no man repented of his wickedness, saying, ‘What have I done?’ Everyone turned to his course, Like a horse charging into the battle. Even the stork in the sky knows her seasons; and the turtledove and the swift and the thrush observe the time of their migration; but my people do not know the ordinance of the Lord. How can you say, ‘We are wise, and the law of the Lord is with us’? But behold, the lying pen of the scribes has made it into a lie. The wise men are put to shame, they are dismayed and caught; Behold, they have rejected the word of the Lord, And what kind of wisdom do they have? Therefore I will give their wives to others, Their fields to new owners; because from the least even to the greatest everyone is greedy for gain; From the prophet even to the priest everyone practices deceit. They heed the brokenness of the daughter of My people superficially, saying, ‘Peace, peace,’ but there is no peace. (8.4-11)

Dear friends, this is what the Lord wants us to get today. A relationship with Him, in the Messiah Yeshua. That happened to me about this time of year 46 years ago and I remember it like yesterday.

All my good deeds, my mitzvahs were fine, but in terms of gaining God’s approval, as if those were enough to bring in God’s amazement and satisfaction, is laughable. What had to happen? I had to acknowledge my own sin, not only my sins. Let me explain. Sins are the deeds I commit against God or people. Lying, cheating, hating, etc. Sin is the inner fault in my heart that actually makes me do those misdeeds. In other words I commit sins because I have sin. Sin is the attitude; sins are the actions. I am not a sinner because I sin. I sin because I am a sinner.

Can we read a bit from the Brit Hadasha just now? I want to read two portions and show you a famous painting from Rembrandt.

The two portions are taken from the Gospels, one in Matthew and one in Luke. Both equally famous. In Matthew, Yeshua is teaching His talmidim and the crowds about the Kingdom in what might be titled the “Sermon on the Mount.” He says this and it’s hard to hear on Shabbat Hagadol.

“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, You who practice lawlessness.’ (Matthew 7.21-23)

Who casts out demons in the name of Yeshua? Believers in the New Covenant. Who prophesy in the name of Yeshua? Teachers of the Bible. Who perform miracles in the name of our master? Great preachers and TV Bible thumpers. (incredulous) And to them he says, "Depart!" What? This is horrible. If they don't get into heaven, how can I get in? It's as if there is no guarantee.

The Judeans in Jeremiah's day counted on the presence of the Temple as their safehaven; some in modern days are counting on the religion of Jesus-proclamation to save them. Their quiet times and their fasting and their other religious activities are something they would highlight if questioned about their faith.

But 600 BCE and today God's answer is still the same, "I never knew you.... Because you do not know Me!"

Obedience is fine, as long as it's honest and personal and real. And one more thing. As long as you are not counting your mitzvahs as ENOUGH to get you God's approval. That's the rub.

Listen to what the disapproved people said, "Did we not prophesy? Did we not cast out? Did we not do miracles?" Every one of their punch list of approval considerations were things they did. All good to be sure. BUT if you are seeking to be in God's pleasure, then you have to RECEIVE God's kindness and stop trying to earn it. It's a gift.

No wonder He said, "I never knew you, (and I add) because you do not know Me." Maybe we should go back to the most basic of beginnings in the story of the Prodigal Father and see what this really means.

Luke 15 features three short stories of lost things, and the joy in finding them. First is a sheep that is lost and the owner searches diligently, leaving the 99 others in the flock, and finally finds the missing one, and there is rejoicing. I get that. Like searching for my keys just yesterday.

The chapter continues with the story of the lost coin, and again the long search and finally the finding. And again rejoicing.

Each story ends with this tag line: Luke 15.10 "In the same way, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

Then comes the story I want to end with today. And the painting by Rembrandt. The story is the Prodigal Son or lost son who leaves his father and family and lives riotously, squandering his entire inheritance, and wakes up in the pig pen. He realizes his life is in ruin, and he decides to change, to amend his ways, and to go back to his father. You have heard this titled the Prodigal Son. But friends, prodigal means lavish, not wayward. And the son and the father were both prodigal in my understanding.

This image by the famed artist Rembrandt is worthy of deep appreciation.

It's a simple and rather basic painting, with five men and dark shadows. That's it, really. So it's an artistic study of the people. There is barely any other reference point.. no scenery... no landscape... no fruit bowls... no animals. Just five men, like a basketball team.

Look closely at the image, though and the light shines brightest on the two on the left and the furthest to the right.

My friend Amer Olsen works in New York City and is an artist by training. I asked him to unpack what he saw in the painting here of the return of the Prodigal and he wrote me a long description, parts of which I highlight here. "Visually, the strongest light in the picture falls directly on the location of the returned, received son - his back, the father's face and hands - falling onto the ground around them, though the son's face is turned toward the shadow. But the son's face isn't so much turning from the light, as it is being enveloped by the father's figure, resting in his bosom. In fact, when you look closely at the son's face it looks surpassingly serene and beatific. This is in great contrast to his tattered rags, worn sandals and calloused feet - even his shorn head reminds me of a slave or forced-labour victim. Also, the son's face is the centre point, not of the dimensions of the canvas, but of the vanishing lines of perspective (only hinted at by the two steps to the bottom right), which is the artist's way of saying: "This is where I want your eyes to be drawn. This is where the heart of the message is."



Do you know the whole story? It's complete at the end of the sermon here in the notes. Please read the whole thing. Back in those days, fathers didn't run to meet their sons. They didn't run at all! It was undignified. But in this story the father runs. Nothing else mattered to the father.

The father seemed to take everything in stride, even the negative attitude of the older brother. So many stories we could discuss; so many trails to follow.

The emphasis is clear. The father has run back to rescue his returning son. The son has no pretense of good works. He falls on the mercy of his father. The father has no consideration of the son's waywardness; he only is seeking reconciliation and restoration of the relationship. The son doesn't say, "I have done great things in your name." The son doesn't even say a word of self-honor. He actually says, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

The father only welcomes the son. At the beginning of the story, the son says, "Father, give me my inheritance." That phrase is shocking. He is saying, "Dad, I wish you were dead." And the father gives him the 1/3 of the estate. At the end, the son practices his lines in the pig pen by saying, "Dad, make me as one of your servants." In the beginning, "Dad, give me." In the end, "Dad, make me." That's the essence of the son's amendment. It's not about himself; it's about the father.

I grew up an Orthodox Jew, practicing my religion with great dignity, and shame in my failures. I went beyond my family's commitment to their practices and sought God through that effort, but to no avail. Only when I threw myself on the mercy of the Almighty, found in Yeshua, the Messiah, my salvation, did I ever come to know Him. I am the lost son, the kneeling one, tattered shoes and cropped hair, the loser, the failed, the needy—that's how I come to God. And that's how God wants us all to come to Him.

Jeremiah says, “Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the Lord who exercises lovingkindness, justice and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things,” declares the Lord. (9.23-24)

So will you do this just now? Will you confess Yeshua as your messiah and Lord? Will you turn to Him in faith and ask God to make you into the man or woman you should be? Will you acknowledge that without Him, you have no hope for eternal life? Yeshua died for you, that’s what next week’s titled holiday “Good Friday” is all about. He died to restore you to the Father. It’s “good” because hopeless mankind, separated from the Almighty, now has a single method of real restoration—the death of Messiah, to bring us back to relationship with Daddy, with our Father in heaven.

Then we will hear Him say, “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter.”

And again, “His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful. You were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’ Matt. 25.23

The joy of your master is eternal life. Let’s go there!

Shabbat shalom and chag pesach s’meach