Parshat Masei

Complete Readings Selected Readings

Numbers 33:1-36:13 Numbers 32:6-19

Jeremiah 2:4-28, 3:4 Jeremiah 2:11-21

James 4:1-12 James 4:1-12

“Bless the Broken Road”

I set out on a narrow way, many years ago

Hoping I would find true love along the broken road

But I got lost a time or two

Wiped my brow and kept pushing through

I couldn't see how every sign pointed straight to you

Every long lost dream led me to where you are

Others who broke my heart, they were like northern stars

Pointing me on my way into your loving arms

This much I know is true

That God blessed the broken road

That led me straight to you

Shabbat shalom. This morning’s portion is Parshat Masei. Masei is from the Hebrew word that means “to set out” or to “journey.” So it is translated as “the journeys of.” It is also the final reading from the book of Numbers. At the end of each book of the Torah, we recite the words chazak, chazak, v’nitchazeik. It means, be strong, be strong, and may we be strengthened.

This line is not to be found in the Scriptures word for word, however the theme is all over the place. The closest we come to finding the phrase is Daniel 10:19. And he said: 'O man greatly beloved, fear not! peace be unto thee, be strong, yea, be strong.' And when he had spoken unto me, I was strengthened, and said: 'Let my lord speak; for thou hast strengthened me.' In the Hebrew, Daniel is told chazak, v’chazak. U’ch-dab’ro imi, hit’chazakti. Be strong, and be strong. And when he spoke to me, I was strengthened.

The chazak blessing is one that is recited at a milestone. It commemorates an achievement. In that sense, it is not unlike the Shehecheyanu. It marks a place on our journey. But it is more than that. It is an acknowledgement that when God speaks, we are strengthened. Furthermore, it is an acknowledgment that God does in fact speak, and that He speaks in this place. And as a result, we are strengthened.

The word chazak through the rest of the Scriptures is most often accompanied by another word, ematz. Chazak ve-ematz. Be strong, and of good courage is how this is usually translated. Amatz is a word that means to be stout of heart, or strong. So this phrase could actually be translated as be strong, be strong. But the second strength is an inner strength, courageousness, or a boldness. A steadfastness that comes from within.

As we finish one book of the Torah and move on to the next, we are challenged by these word. First, be strong. It will take a certain amount of strength to be able to put the words that we have just read into practice. Second, be bold and courageous, as it will not be a common thing to put them into practice. It cannot be, for it isn’t common, it is holy. And third, through the reading of the Word, that is to say, through God’s speaking to us, may we be further strengthened and emboldened to continue the journey to the next book.

Part of the strength that we are given is drawn from looking at where we have been. Another part of it is from knowing where we are going. There is strength in each, but when you combine them together, it becomes more than the sum of the parts. And that’s what is happening to the children of Israel.

Camped on the east of the Jordan, across from Jericho, with the destination in view, Moses takes a few moments to remind everyone of just how they got where they are. The path wasn’t straight, and it wasn’t easy. And it wasn’t over. But they remembered where they have been on the verge of where they were going. And they drew strength from it. That’s what we are going to talk about this morning.

PRAY

VIDEO - Wholehearted

So, was he strong? Was he strong in determination? Was he strong in character? Was he strong in odor? Was he physically strong? And when?

Was he strong before the workout? Was he strong during the workout? Was he strong after the workout?

Where did he get his strength from before the workout? Where did he get his strength from during the workout? Where did he get his strength from after the workout?

There is no doubt that when the whole thing was said and done, and he took that blindfold off, he drew strength from turning around and seeing where he’d been. It doesn’t make the workout any easier, but it is definitely encouraging.

At the beginning of the Torah portion this morning, we are given the journeys of the children of Israel. I think it is interesting to note that it doesn’t say, Vayidaber Adonai el moshe l’emor, daber al b’nai Israel v’amartechem, eleh masechem. And the Lord spoke to Moses saying, “Speak to the children of Israel and say to them, ‘These are your journeys.” It doesn’t say that. It says that Moses wrote down the starting points at the command of the Lord. It is quite possible that the children of Israel didn’t get this encouragement until the entire Torah was read to them later on.

Nevertheless, here were there starting and stopping places, listed out, in order. Now, I would like you to create a list of the places you have lived, going back as far as you can remember, and the list should be from oldest to most recent. For most people, it is not possible to generate such a list without recalling a picture of the house, perhaps the neighborhood, and quite likely some of the stories of your life that happened while you were there.

Similarly, with each place that Moses named in this portion, there was a story. They were there for a while, things happened, and in fact, sometimes he included that in the list. For example, he mentions the 12 springs at Elim. He mentions the death of his brother, Aaron. And I would bet that when the children of Israel heard the list, it brought back other memories to mind. Remember this is over a 40 year period of time. And stuff happens over 40 years. Both good and bad.

We know that it was a difficult journey. Yet, here they were. They had made it, at least this far. Looking back, they could probably see just how impossible it really was to do what they had done without the help of God. If He had not been leading them and guiding them, feeding them and clothing them, and most importantly, if He had not been WITH them, they could not have done what they had done.

There is a lot of encouragement in that. To look back, see where you have come from, see where you are, and say to yourself, Holy Cow! God had to have been with me, cause there’s no WAY Id have been able to that on my own!” It reinforces the promise that He made to never leave nor forsake us. And we draw strength from that.

Looking back, we can not only see and remember specific things that we did, but often we can remember specific things that others did as well. Sometimes it’s a family member, sometimes a friend, sometimes a complete stranger. For example, Moses talks about the slaying of the firstborn in Egypt. While these are events that are in the past, the children of Israel, and in our portion this morning, I think specifically Moses, could be encouraged and strengthened by the recounting of the things the Lord had done.

God likes us to remember those things, too. He always reminds us of them, which is a good thing and a bad thing. It’s good, because it shows that He cares about us, and He wants us to know just how much He loves us, and the things that He is willing to do for us. But it’s bad, because more often than not, He’s reminding us because we have forgotten. And we have a tendency to forget a lot. And not just the little things, either.

We sometimes forget Who it is that made us. And so God tells us that He is the Creator of heaven and of earth. He does that a lot. And we forget that we were once slaves, but now we are free. And whether that conjures up an image of the exodus from Egypt or Messiah Yeshua giving His life for us, it doesn’t matter. We have a tendency to go back to that with which we are familiar, even if it isn’t in our own best interests. And we forget that God intended the very best for each one of us when He made us.

Jeremiah shares that with us clearly. God says through His prophet that He has broken our yoke and burst our bonds. And here’s the important thing. The verb to break and the verb to burst are presented here in the perfect. shavar and natak. That means the speaker sees them as being completed actions. I broke your yoke. Done deal. I caused your bonds to tear away. Done deal. And our response to our freedom? We play the harlot.

Even more importantly, is what we find in the next verse. K9yt<1i4e-n$ yk1Ona=v$

 tm3a6 ir\_z# hOl<k<5 qr@oS

V’anochi n’ta’tich soraych, culo zerah emet. The verb to plant is natah, and it is presented here again in the perfect tense. I planted you a choice vine, completely a true seed. And He asks the question how did something that was created so true, and so good, and so choice, become a strange vine. But just because something happened to it doesn’t mean it wasn’t created good, and noble, and choice, and true.

But here isn’t it interesting that God says that we are true seeds? In the context of the true vine, Who is Yeshua, were have become true seeds.

Getting back to our journey, how much easier would our journey be if we all simply remembered that God created us all good? I had an interesting conversation with some people who were trying to help a woman who was being abused by her husband. They had a daughter, so the situation was pretty serious. And the advice that was being given to this woman was to get out, take her daughter, go to a shelter, a friend, anywhere, but get out. There were all kinds of suggestions for shelters, and places to get assistance. And amid all of the helpful comments were comments like lets kill that SOB. He should be this and that, or I’d like to whatever. But no one suggested praying for him. Yes, she should get out. Yes, she needs assistance. But we cannot forget that this man was originally created as a choice vine, a completely true seed. And that something happened to him along the way. We call it sin, and it needs to find a cure in Messiah Yeshua, just like everyone else.

James seems to have a handle on this. He suggests that wars and fighting come from that twisted place within us, and are a result of a struggle between our redeemed nature and the old nature, what he calls the desires for pleasure. This is ultimately the struggle between self-reliance and the reliance upon God for everything we need.

Writing to believing Jews who have been scattered abroad, he tells them not to speak evil against a brother. This immediately follows the sentence that reads humble yourself in the sight of the Lord and He will lift you up. Humbling oneself includes not speaking evil against your brother. Or your sister. Or anyone else you can think of. They, too, were created as choice vines, noble vines of wholly true seeds.

We look back at our journey. We see the people who hurt us. We see other who tried to hurt us. And we see pain. We see difficulty, we see hardship, we see darkness. We see struggle, and we see injustice, injustice in the world and injustice toward us. It just isn’t fair. And our nature is to do unto others. Sometimes before they do unto you.

But that isn’t strength. It doesn’t strengthen others, nor are we strengthened by it. So where is this elusive strength? What was the point of going through all that stuff? The strength comes from knowing 3 things.

1. God was with you then. Sometimes it’s not easy to see. He is the one who got you through it. It is like the footprints poem, when you can only see one set of prints, that’s when God was carrying you.
2. God is with you now. He is the one who got you here, and He has you here for a reason.
3. God will be with you moving forward. Our journey isn’t over.

Does that make the pain go away? No. Does it give us the vengeance that we feel we are due? No. But does it strengthen us to a boldness to press on? It should.

 Although the pains of the past, and the memories that accompany the journeys God has us on may not disappear, all of a sudden, it is as if it were ok. Because God has included it in our lives, it, too was for a reason. That pain that we went through was part of our journey. Now, we can accept it. We can bear it. And that means that we are stronger.

 We can see where God has taken action in our lives. We can see that when caught between a rock and a wet place, God can part the water. When we are faced with a situation where we have no idea where our next meal is going to come from, God can feed 5,000, so 10 or 5 or 2 is not a big deal. Does it mean we like being in those situations? No. But it does mean that we can face them with a confidence that God, Who has always provided before, will provide again, even if that provision doesn’t look like I thought it would. That makes us courageous, and that means that we are stronger.

 The road that each of us has taken to get to where we are has been one uniquely designed just for you by God. And the fact that you are here means that He has blessed that road. Notice in the lyrics how things often start out really good. He started out on a narrow road a long time ago. But he got lost a few times along the way. Does that describe anyone?

 When we look back at our personal journeys, we will find there are dreams that have been lost. We will find that there are those who broke our hearts. We will find circumstances and situations that are unique to just us. And we will find that God uses every last bit of it to bring us to where we need be, in order that He can take us to where we are going. When we understand that fact, there is nothing that we cannot bear, because He is there to bear it with us. And that makes us stronger.