

Sermon/ Drasha: Shavous: A River Runs Through It (Yizkor)
Rabbi Ze'ev Smason **5-june-2014**

One of the most beautiful movies in recent years was *A River Runs Through It*, based upon the novel by the same title. The movie told the story of the Maclean family, who lived in Montana early in the twentieth century. The father of the family was a minister—stern but loving. His wife was supportive and nurturing. They had two sons: the oldest, first-born Norman, who tells the story, and a younger son, Paul.

We meet the Maclean family when the boys are young, squirming in the front row while their father preaches in church. We watch them grow up through childhood, stormy adolescence, and crossing the threshold into adulthood. Norman, the older of the two, is cautious and studious. He eventually goes off to college and becomes a writer and a professor. The younger son Paul is the daredevil, a lady's man, with a quick wit and a winning smile.

These are the characters in the novel, but the real protagonist in the story is the river that runs through their part of Montana. That river becomes the focal point of their family life and the catalyst for everything significant that takes place in their individual lives. It was walking along the banks of that river on Sunday afternoons that the father forged a relationship with his young boys—turning over rocks, teaching them about the world, about life, and about the G-d who made it all. It was the river that the boys ran to after their studies were over, and sibling rivalry and brotherly affection flourished as they fished for trout together on that beautiful stream.

The Maclean family knew failure and success and laughter and fighting and change and disappointment, but always the river was there. It was the defining force and the spiritual center of that family. Montana would have been just a wilderness; their home, four walls and a roof; their individual lives just sound and fury—if not for the river running through it all.

I would like to suggest that there is a river that runs through the lives of all people, especially for those of us who are Jewish. That river is the Purpose: The purpose and the mission for which the Almighty has created us.

Our Shavous tefilos (prayers) refer to today as *Zman matan Torasaynu*, *The season of our giving of the Torah*. What is the Torah, if not our 'river' -- our defining force and spiritual center of our existence?

The Torah is compared in many places by our rabbis as water. And as we'll see later, the Torah is compared explicitly to a river. Our Torah is a river that runs through the wilderness of this wild, untamed, dangerous, unsettled world in which we live.

Successful people are constantly addressing 3 questions:

- 1) Who am I? What makes me tick? What am I living for? What drives and motivates me?
- 2) What do I want? What do I want to achieve? What do I want to accomplish? What is my mission and ambition?
- 3) How do I make it happen? What's my strategy? My modus operandi? My game plan in life?

These three components of a successful life are represented by the *Shalosh Regalim*, the three Pilgrimage Festivals -- Pesach, Shavous, and Sukkos.

Perhaps we can discuss at a different time how Pesach and Sukkos fit in. But it's clear that Shavous, the giving of the Torah, is about our purpose, our mission, our ambition, and what we as a people and as individuals want to accomplish. The Torah, the purpose for which we were created, is the river that runs through us. I'd like to discuss with you today this topic from two perspectives: Our National Purpose, and our Individual Purpose.

1) Our National Purpose

Just before the Almighty gave us the Torah we were charged with a mission. At Mount Sinai, G-d informed us that we would be a *mamlechet kohanim* ('kingdom of priests') as well as a *goy kadosh* ('holy nation') (Ex. 19:6). Many hundreds of years before, however, our national purpose was presented in a more concise manner. No sooner did Abram discover G-d than G-d told him that the time had come for his name to be changed. (Gen. 17:5)

Your name defines your mission in life.

"Abram" implies that he is the "father of Aram", leader of a small locale. The name change told Abram that now he had to become Avraham (the Hebrew of Abraham), meaning, "father of many nations." Now that you know the truth, it imposes upon you a mission of spread the word to the world. How?

Hashem promised Avram: "I will make you into a great nation; I will bless you, and I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing (*heyei bracha*)" (Gen.12:2). Rashi comments that the words "heyei bracha" mean: "the blessings are put in your hand."

In what way are the blessings are in our hands?

G-d didn't bless Abraham as much as He imposed upon him what is the major responsibility of the Jewish people: To BE a blessing to the entire world.

So how do we do that?

This past September Rabbi Noah Muroff was trying to move an ordinary desk he had bought for \$150 on Craigslist. The Connecticut rabbi and his wife couldn't fit the desk through the door, so they had to take it apart. When they looked in the back of the dismantled desk, they saw \$98,000 in cash in a plastic bag hidden behind drawers.

Within 20 minutes of finding the money, Rabbi Noah called the woman from whom he bought the desk and said, "I think I have something that's yours."

"She was speechless, without words," he said. Rabbi Noah said the former owner told him she put her inheritance in the desk and after a while forgot it was there. The woman wrote in a thank you note to Rabbi Noah, "I do not think there are too many people in this world that would have done what you did by calling me."

The story went national. That's how we, as a people, fulfill the charge G-d gave to Avraham to "be a blessing": By acting in such a way that G-d's name becomes beloved by the world because of us.

2) Our Individual Purpose

The newspapers carried an interesting story sometime back about professional basketball player Nat "Sweetwater" Clifton, who starred with the New York Knicks and Detroit Pistons in the 1950s. This was just before the salary explosion made millionaires out of even moderately talented players. Clifton's starting salary with the Knicks was \$2000 a year. Like all players in those days, he did his own negotiating -- and never made more than \$7500 a year. After his pro basketball days, Sweetwater Clifton took a job driving a cab in Chicago.

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Looking back on his basketball career, he regretted that he never made much money. He didn't hold it against the owners, though. He said,

"The guys I negotiated with were nice guys. They gave me whatever I asked for. I just didn't ask for enough."

Can you relate to that? If you don't value your work and your worth, how can you expect anybody else to? If you don't know what you've got going for yourself -- your skills, your talents, your unique potential - how can you achieve your purpose and mission in life? How can you be a blessing?

The Talmud (Pesachim 68b) relates that that Rabbi Yose would exclaim each year on Shavuos, "*Were it not for this day [on which the Torah was given] there are many Yoses in the marketplace (from whom I would be indistinguishable).*"

There are a lot of 'Joes' out there. But I have to discern my unique mission. If not, I run the risk of being like everyone else. I may succumb to social pressure. I may live an ordinary life. I won't be able to recognize my true mission and fulfill the purpose for which Hashem put me here on this earth -- to be a blessing to others.

A line from the movie "Joe Versus the Volcano" fits perfectly here. Told that he has six months to live, Joe (played by Tom Hanks) marched up to obnoxious boss and proclaimed, "I was too chicken to live my life, so I sold it to you for \$300 a week!"

The Vilna Gaon offers a beautiful comment to a passage in Proverbs (14:2) concerning the phrase, "Holaych b'yashro Yirei Hashem", "He who walks in his uprightness reveres the Lord":

*Every person needs to go in the way that he needs. For each person's character is unique. And therefore one must walk in 'his' way, even if it's seen as bad in the eyes of others, for he doesn't know what it is that he needs. And when he walks in **his** way, he is considered G-d revering.*

How am I supposed to play out my life's plan? On a personal and national level, that's what Shavuos is about -- to understand that we're here to be a blessing. Our task is to figure out, with the guidance of the Torah, our purpose.

The second chapter of Genesis describes a river that flowed from Eden to water the Garden, and from there it split into four fountain-heads. Three of the rivers that then flowed out of Eden symbolize the pathways of envy, desire, and pursuit of glory, which would be open to Adam and his descendants. But a fourth path exists, represented by the river *P'ras* (Euphrates) that circles the Holy Land; the path of all that is holy and good. The path of the purpose of G-d.

A river runs through the wilderness of this life. That river is called the Purpose of G-d. The purpose of G-d is to restore that world to its original splendor, to inform and empower we, the Jewish people, to play our part in that Purpose, and to enable us individually to experience the glorious possibilities for which we were created.