

## “A New Tree Will Grow”

Rabbi Jonathan Slater

The prophet Isaiah begins a prophecy of hope and messianic promise in this manner:

But a shoot shall grow out of the stump of Jesse, a twig shall sprout from his stock. The spirit of YHVH shall alight upon him: A spirit of wisdom and insight, a spirit of counsel and valor, a spirit of devotion and reverence for YHVH.

(Is. 11:1-2).

Jesse is, of course, the father of King David, the ideal ruler of Israel. The ultimate leader of the Jewish people, the anointed one who will redeem them from exile, will be his descendant. Isaiah, living before and after the destruction of the first Temple, senses the despair of his fellow Judeans. He knows that the loss of the Temple, the center of Jewish life and ritual, the symbol of God’s enduring presence among the Jews, could signify the end of the line. Bereft of the rituals of sacrifice and atonement, the people may feel abandoned and without hope. His prophecy here, is meant to overcome despondence and inspire a sense of a future.

In classical biblical form he begins with what on its surface appears as a mere parallelism: shoot and twig; stump and stock. But, this image is rooted in the natural world and communicates much more than this surface reading. The “stump” is that which remains of a tree once cut down. It signifies a life ended prematurely. What had been hope, life, a future now seems barren and hopeless. Isaiah promises that from this stump, seemingly lifeless, a shoot will emerge. A new tree will grow, promising a future; the potential of that which appears as if from the dead now promised.

This new growth is immediately visible, and its relationship to the stump clear to all. That which seemed doomed now grows anew. But, what of the other image? The “stock” is the root of the tree, buried in the ground. It is invisible; its vitality unknowable. Moreover, it might seem that if the tree is cut down, the roots naturally die. But, not always. There are times that the roots remain alive, moist and vital. In time, they initiate new growth which later pushes up from the earth. This “new” tree is actually nothing new, but the original now bursting forth into life, revived and full of the strength and blessing of before.

We all, over the course of life, experience times of darkness, of feeling cut off, cut down, bereft of what came before and unsure of any future. Isaiah’s image of the tree stump can offer hope for each of us. What resources do we have internally to “regrow” what was lost? What of our hearts, bodies, minds and souls is able to burst again into life? What is there that can once again reach out to connect, to transform light and love into new life?

And, what is there that is buried, unseen, perhaps even unknown, that might send up tendrils, sprouting a twig, bringing forth new life? What have we yet to discover about our own roots – in family, in our tradition – or of our own inner resources, that might grow even invisible to us?

However unlikely it may seem, “redemption” is promised to all of us; exile is not terminal. So long as the life-force flows in us – in stump or stock – the possibility of renewal is present. The energy is there, flowing of itself, doing its own work – and accessible, when we turn intentionally, with a spirit of wisdom and insight.