

# New Beginnings

by Michael Rudolph

Delivered to Ohev Yisrael December 27, 2014

January 1 is only a few days away, and most of the world will be looking forward to the New Year. Will it be a better year? We hope so. Some of what the year brings will be under our control, and it is customary in some quarters to make New Year resolutions – promises to ourselves to do things that we have thus far put off, and to stop doing things that we should not be doing. In biblical vernacular, we call these things "acts of repentance," so why do we often wait until the New Year's Day to address them? It is because there is something about a brand New Year that gives us hope for a fresh start – renewed strength, and determination for new beginnings. But of course that is only in our minds – or is it? New years, and repeated cycles of times and seasons, are built into God's calendar and into His creation, and all of them imbue us with hope for new beginnings.

According to the Bible, the New Year does not begin on January 1, for as Exodus 12:1-2 tells us:

"*ADONAI* spoke to Moshe and Aharon in the land of Egypt; he said, "You are to begin your calendar with this month; it will be the first month of the year for you."

The verses that follow speak of when God brought the Israelites out of Egyptian slavery, and Exodus 23:15a tells us that that was during the month of Aviv, for it says:

"Keep the festival of *matzah*: for seven days, as I ordered you, you are to eat *matzah* at the time determined in the month of Aviv;"

The month of *Aviv* is the month of Spring when the barley in Israel becomes ripe, so the first day of *Aviv* is on the New Moon of what the modern Jewish calendar calls the month of *Nisan*.

*Aviv* was certainly a month of new beginnings for the Israelites, but it was not their first. In order for there to have been a "new beginning" there must have first been a beginning, and the beginning of beginnings is, of course Genesis 1:1:

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth."

Reading further in Genesis 1:26-27:

"Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, in the likeness of ourselves; and let them rule over the fish in the sea, the birds in the air, the animals, and over all the earth, and over every crawling creature that crawls on the earth.' So God created humankind in his own image; in the image of God he created him: male and female he created them."

That was the beginning, and the first "new beginning" for mankind was God's grace in allowing Adam and Eve to remain alive after Adam sinned in the Garden of Eden. Had God not done that, none of us would be here today.

The next "new beginning" occurred when God allowed a remnant of mankind to survive the flood at a time when all but Noah and his family had turned away from God; we read in Genesis 6:5-8:

"*ADONAI* saw that the people on earth were very wicked, that all the imaginings of their hearts were always of evil only. *ADONAI* regretted that he had made humankind on the earth; it grieved his heart. *ADONAI* said, "I will wipe out humankind, whom I have created, from the whole earth; and not only human beings, but animals, creeping things and birds in the air; for I regret that I ever made them." But Noah found grace in the sight of *ADONAI*."

Centuries later, the beginning of what was to become the Jewish People was God's covenant with Abraham; we read of it in Genesis 15:1-6 & 19a:

"Some time later the word of *ADONAI* came to Avram in a vision: "Don't be afraid, Avram. I am your protector; your reward will be very great." Avram replied, "*ADONAI*, God, what good will your gifts be to me if I continue childless; and Eli'ezer from Dammesek inherits my possessions? You haven't given me a child," Avram continued, "so someone born in my house will be my heir." But the word of *ADONAI* came to him: "This man will not be your heir. No, your heir will be a child from your own body." Then he brought him outside and said, "Look up at the sky, and count the stars- if you can count them! Your descendants will be that many!" He believed in *ADONAI*, and he credited it to him as righteousness." (verses 1-6)... "That day *ADONAI* made a covenant with Avram .." (verse 19a).

And Genesis 17:4-8 completes our understanding of the Abrahamic Covenant:

""As for me, this is my covenant with you: you will be the father of many nations. Your name will no longer be Avram [exalted father], but your name will be Avraham [father of many], because I have made you the father of many nations. I will cause you to be very fruitful. I will make nations of you, kings will descend from you. I am establishing my covenant between me and you, along with your descendants after you, generation after generation, as an everlasting covenant, to be God for you and for your descendants after you. I will give you and your descendants after you the land in which you are now foreigners, all the land of Kena'an, as a permanent possession; and I will be their God.""

Moving forward in time from the Abrahamic Covenant, a "new beginning" for the Jewish People occurred when God brought the Israelites out of Egypt, led them through the wilderness to Mount Sinai, and made a Covenant directly with them. In Exodus 19:3-6a we read:

"Moshe went up to God, and *ADONAI* called to him from the mountain: "Here is what you are to say to the household of Ya'akov, to tell the people of Isra'el: 'You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you will pay careful attention to what I say and keep my covenant, then you will be my own treasure from among all the peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you will be a kingdom of *cohanim* [priests] for me, a nation set apart.'"

The Sinai Covenant consisted of, not just those words, but of many others that span Exodus 19 through 24, in which God gave the Israelites everything they needed for their new nation – statutes of law, judges to administer the law, a Tabernacle for conducting sacrifices, a priesthood to intercede and conduct the sacrifices, prophets who could speak God's will to individuals and into the community, a government structure, and a promised land. The Tabernacle sacrifices enabled the Israelites to enjoy renewal by having their sins covered over, and the cycle of appointed times and repetition of the seasons inspired the Israelites to leave behind the old, and embrace God's provision of "new beginnings."

Thus far, we have identified five separate incidences of "beginnings" and "new beginnings;" they are (1) the creation, (2) God's allowance of mankind's redemption following Adam's sin, (3) God's continuation of mankind through Noah, (4) God's covenant with Abraham, and (5) God's covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai. One would think that those would be enough, but our God is a forgiving God, and His grace is replete with the offering of "new beginnings," each one better than the last. Note that all of these "new beginnings" are referred to as "covenants." That is because, in order to help us out of our apparent habit of repeatedly sinning against Him, God graciously adjusts the manner in which He relates to us so as to give us opportunities to change our ways:

Isaiah 43:18-19: "Stop dwelling on past events and brooding over times gone by; I am doing something new; it's springing up- can't you see it? I am making a road in the desert, rivers in the wasteland."

Lamentations 3:21-24: "But in my mind I keep returning to something, something that gives me hope – that the grace of *ADONAI* is not exhausted, that his compassion has not ended. [On the contrary,] they are new every morning! How great your faithfulness!"

2 Chronicles 7:14: *Adonai* said to Shlomo: ".. if my people, who bear my name, will humble themselves, pray, seek my face and turn from their evil ways, I will hear from heaven, forgive their sin and heal their land."

During the time of the Divided Kingdom, Israel had strayed from God so many times that God determined it was time to announce another "new beginning." The Lord therefore put these words in Jeremiah's mouth and told him to speak them:

Jeremiah 31:31-34 (30-33): ""Here, the days are coming," says *ADONAI*, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Isra'el and with the house of Y'hudah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their fathers on the day I took them by their hand and brought them out of the land of Egypt; because they, for their part, violated my covenant, even though I, for my part, was a husband to them," says *ADONAI*. "For this is the covenant I will make with the house of Isra'el after those days," says *ADONAI*: "I will put my *Torah* within them and write it on their hearts; I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will any of them teach his fellow community member or his brother, 'Know *ADONAI*'; for all will know me, from the least of them to the greatest; because I will forgive their wickednesses and remember their sins no more.""

Years later, during the Babylonian Exile, Ezekiel prophesied the coming of this New Covenant as well:

Ezekiel 11:17-20: "Therefore, say that *Adonai ELOHIM* says this: "I will gather you from the peoples and collect you from the countries where you have been scattered, and I will give the land of Isra'el to you. Then they will go there and remove all its loathsome things and disgusting practices, and I will give them unity of heart. "I will put a new spirit among you." I will remove from their bodies the hearts of stone and give them hearts of flesh; so that they will live by my regulations, obey my rulings and act by them. Then they will be my people, and I will be their God.""

Ezekiel 36:23b-29a: " The nations will know that I am *ADONAI*,' says *Adonai ELOHIM*, 'when, before their eyes, I am set apart through you to be regarded as holy. For I will take you from among the nations, gather you from all the countries, and return you to your own soil. Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your uncleanness and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit inside you; I will take the stony heart out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my Spirit inside you and cause you to live by my laws, respect my rulings and obey them. You will live in the land I gave to your ancestors. You will be my people, and I will be your God. I will save you from all your uncleanness."

This New Covenant that was prophesied by both Jeremiah and Ezekiel promised new beginnings for Israel indeed.

My friends, we are so blessed to be living in the age in which we are living, because we are witnesses to, and recipients of, the New Covenant that I just spoke of. The New Covenant came in several stages, all of which were connected to Messiah Yeshua. First, was His birth – God the Son, born as a natural man. Second, was the selection of His disciples and His instruction of them during his adult life here on Earth. Third, was His sacrificial death and resurrection that obliterates the sins of those of us who repent in His Name, and that imbues us with eternal life. Fourth, was His forty-day return to earth to live among, and give further instruction to His disciples. Fifth, was His ascension from the Earth to join His Father in Heaven. Sixth, was the Holy Spirit, whom Yeshua sent to earth in His stead ten days later, to dwell within us, to give us spiritual gifts, power, and communication with God previously available only to the prophets. And seventh, was the spread of Yeshua's message of love and hope for new beginnings (through His disciples) to the furthest reaches of the Earth. There are other stages yet to come, and each promises to bring "new beginnings" for mankind.

The Scriptures of "new beginnings" I have thus far shared are of times prior to the New Covenant, and those earlier "new beginnings" pale in comparison to the ones available to us today. Consider these New Covenant Scriptures in comparison:

2 Corinthians 5:17-19: "Therefore, if anyone is united with the Messiah, he is a new creation- the old has passed; look, what has come is fresh and new! And it is all from God, who through the Messiah has reconciled us to himself and has given us the work of that

reconciliation, which is that God in the Messiah was reconciling mankind to himself, not counting their sins against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation."

John 3:16-17: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only and unique Son, so that everyone who trusts in him may have eternal life, instead of being utterly destroyed. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but rather so that through him, the world might be saved."

Revelation 21:3-5a: I heard a loud voice from the throne say, "See! God's *Sh'khinah* is with mankind, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and he himself, God-with-them, will be their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will no longer be any death; and there will no longer be any mourning, crying or pain; because the old order has passed away." Then the One sitting on the throne said, "Look! I am making everything new!"

1 Peter 1:3-4: Praised be God, Father of our Lord Yeshua the Messiah, who, in keeping with his great mercy, has caused us, through the resurrection of Yeshua the Messiah from the dead, to be born again to a living hope, to an inheritance that cannot decay, spoil or fade, kept safe for you in heaven."

These "new beginnings" are beckoning to us, are available to us, and along with the promises in Scripture that we are a new creation and that all things have become new, Ephesians 4:22-24 assures us that we are empowered by the Holy Spirit to:

".. strip off [our] old nature, because [our] old nature is thoroughly rotted by its deceptive desires; and [we] must let [our] spirits and minds keep being renewed, and clothe [ourselves] with the new nature created to be godly, which expresses itself in the righteousness and holiness that flow from the truth."

I began this message by reminding us that January 1 is only a few days away, and that most of the world will be looking forward to "new beginnings" in the New Year. Will it be a better year, I asked? God's Word assures us that, regardless of our individual circumstances – regardless of wars – regardless of evil in the world – it most certainly will be a better year if we take hold of God's promises, put ourselves in His trustworthy hands, and fearlessly do that which we ought to do with our new nature, and with the power and authority He has given us through the Holy Spirit.

I also urge us to be cognizant of, and not eschew, the several days asserting themselves as the "New Year" but that do not fall on *Nisan* 1, provided that we use them to further God's agenda of new beginnings. What is known as the "Jewish New Year," *Rosh HaShanah* (that falls on *Tishrei* 1), is such an example because of its connection to *Yom Kippur*, and its theme of renewal in the coming year through repentance.

So, the next time that someone wishes me a "Happy New Year" (whichever New Year they mean), my reply to him might be: "I can't predict if it will be "happy," but it is certain to be joyful because I intend to take full advantage of the many opportunities for "new beginnings"

that God has already provided, and that He has promised to provide in the future. More likely, though, I will just say: "God's blessings in the New Year to you as well."