

Vayeshev And He Settled G-d's perfect was can be quite unsettling

Torah: Gen. 37:1-40:23

(1) 37:11: "**So his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the memory of these things**". Age gives you a perspective to understand that unlikely things are as liable to happen as those which are more predictable. Jacob had seen enough to know that when G-d spoke, He acted and also that He is indeed able to do exceedingly abundantly above what we can think or ask. When you look at your life and the calling and promises of G-d – how about you? Are you limited by your perspective, like Joseph's jealous brothers or are you able to see further, like Jacob?

(2) 37:27. "**Come, let's sell him to the Ishmaelites, and let us not put a hand on him, for he is our brother, our flesh.**" Two of Joseph's brothers tried to save him – Ruben, perhaps to regain his father's favour came up with a stop gap solution; Judah took the lead to place him out of harm's way. Sometimes the distresses we encounter are really G-d's way of getting us out of harm's way and preventing the plotting of our "brethren" from causing us permanent damage. Temporary disadvantage can never overpower the long term promises of G-d. **Note the traders are called both Ishmaelites and Midianites – not a mistake, because both groups were traders who dwelt in the same region variantly.**

(3) 38:26: "**Judah recognized them and said: she is less guilty than me, because I did not give her to Schela my son. And he knew her no more.**" There were at least two time lapses in this side story in the history of Joseph's troubles. It took place over some twenty or thirty years and dealt with Judah's family troubles, which he blamed on his daughter-in-law, who turned out to be the best of a bad bunch and it is through her, a Gentile, that our Messiah descends. Sometimes, G-d can turn even our mistakes into blessings in the most surprising ways. What happens to us and even the things which are our fault, can be used by the L-rd, when we take responsibility and turn them over to Him.

(4) 39:3: "**And his master saw that the L-rd was with him and that the L-rd caused everything that he did to prosper at his hands.**" Joseph had many trials and almost constant opposition to the visions he had received and he was rarely in the place he wanted be and he seemed to go from danger to more danger – yet the L-rd was with him in the midst of his trials. Shouldn't we rather look for the blessing of G-d in our trials, rather than always asking G-d to deliver us from the trials, which, as it turns out where the eventual vehicles which G-d used for both greater blessing and to assure that His purposes were, carried out? We ought to strive to be the people we should be in the places we find ourselves, even when they are not the places we want to be in – who we are will always be more important than where we are or even than what is going on in our lives at the moment.

Haftarah: Amos 2:6-3:8 (Zech. 2:14-4:7)

(5) Amos 3:6: "**Is the shofar sounded in the city, without the people being afraid and does disaster befall a city unless the L-rd has done it**" In His faithfulness, G-d is constantly messing up our plans and bringing things into our lives that have to do with His greater purposes and not with our limited agendas. May we always be afraid of the shofar, out of respect for Him and may we understand that the raging of the heathen, either at home, in the Middle east or in Nigeria, is nothing but ripples on the pond over which He has final control. Are you focused on His final control or does He have to shake your life up some more?

(6) Zech. 4:6: ***“And then he spoke again and said to me: this is the Word of the L-RD to Zorababel: it is not by might, nor by strength, but by My Spirit, says, YHVH of Hosts.”*** When we look at how history has unfolded, it could either be seen as a series of traumatic events where mankind has repeatedly flirted with the brink of disaster, or it can be seen as the relentless grace of G-d repeatedly interrupting the folly of mankind to make sure that His purposes are fulfilled despite our best efforts to the contrary. How you choose to see your life will affect which side you end up living on – the winning side, always interrupted before disaster strikes, or the losing side, repeatedly pouring over the edge of destruction like so many generations of blind, carnal lemmings, laughing, mocking and misbehaving themselves into oblivion.

Brit Chadashah: Mt. 1:1-6, 16-25

(7) 1:16: ***“Jacob was the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, from whom is born Yeshua, who is called the Messiah”*** There has been a series of disturbing, unexpected births in the Scriptures, which beginning with our mother Eve, relentlessly lead up to the birth of our blessed Messiah, Who is the Stone of stumbling upon which all the plans and purposes of all mankind shall be shattered repeatedly until His kingdom is established over all the nations and generations of mankind. Are you letting Him repeatedly unsettle your life, so that His purposes are accomplished through you, and not in spite of you? We shall not always be where we would like to be, doing what we would rather be doing, but in Him we can always be the kind of people He wants us to be, doing the kinds of things He wants us to be doing, time and time again, until the end. The choice is ours.

Ps. 112 Jewish Hero: Matiyahu Ben Yochanan

Tonight begins the annual festival of Sukkoth of the month of Kislev, also known as the Festival of Dedication and the Festival of Lights. Every night for eight days, Jewish homes worldwide will light the chanukiah, adding one candle until next Saturday night, when all nine will be kindled. It celebrates a timely victory in the history of our people when one family of priests rose up to prevent the total assimilation of Israel into the pagan Greek religion of their conquerors.

When our people came back from Babylon, they began the slow, steady process of rebuilding a viable Jewish community in the Promised Land and, initially, they had the full cooperation of Persian authorities. This same cooperation was transferred to the Greek empire which took over the ancient Middle East for many hundreds of years. Alexander’s successors split the empire into four unequal parts and once again the Holy Land became a battleground between Egypt (the Ptolemies) and Syria (the Seleucids).

Rather than trying to disperse conquered people among a larger dominant population, as the Assyrians had done, the minority, foreign, Greeks decided to hellenize the entire regions under their control. People had to use the Greek language and to adopt both the Greek culture and the Greek religion and what was really occurring was the development of a syncretic mixture, where the older, native gods were identified with various Greek deities and ended up being worshipped under two or three different names.

The Greeks said something like this: your gods are really just local versions of our Greek ones and we shall show how to worship them better. Many of the conquered people succumbed to this trickery and almost the entire Jewish community initially converted to this enforced “ecumenical” (politically correct) paganism. Under the Ptolemies, they had been left alone and had kept their faith intact, while they adopted the Greek language and many positive features of the Greek culture, but in a war with Egypt, the Seleucids gained control of the Holy Land, which had remained loyal to the Ptolemies.

Rome forced them to abandon any designs on Egypt and so, under the ambitious Antiochus Epiphanes (whose name means god manifest), the embarrassed and frustrated Greeks took vengeance on the Jewish community in the Holy Land. They turned the temple into a sanctuary for Zeus and forced every Jew to adopt the Greek religion on pain of death.

Many of those who refused were killed and during an attack on Jerusalem during the Sabbath, its entire population was slaughtered. There was no organized resistance and the reigning High Priest converted and began a program to stamp out Judaism. Circumcision and Sabbath observance was forbidden and all the sacrifices in the temple were given over to Greek deities and pagan altars were erected in every Jewish village throughout the Holy Land.

One family of priests, the Hasmoneans, which was composed of an old father, today's Jewish hero, and his five sons rose up and began an armed struggle against both the Greeks and their paganized Jewish allies. Under the leadership of Judah, called the hammer (Maccabee), the temple was purified and temple worship was restored. He did not live to see the end of the war, which lasted another few decades, but eventually, the entire Holy Land was liberated and many of its pagan populations were forcibly converted to Judaism (Philistines and Edomites). A pocket of hellenized Jews (the Decapolis or ten cities) resisted a return to Judaism and survived into the Roman era and it was their sacrificial pigs that our Lord drowned at Gadara.

What can we learn from their stubborn resistance and refusal to assimilate? First of all we need to also remember those who also refused to assimilate and who were slaughtered in their thousands when Antiochus began his program of forced assimilation. We have to understand that not every attempt to stand up and defend the truth will be successful and too often in the past, believers have paid with their lives when they have made a stand for the truth.

Secondly, we have to determine that come what may we will live by the dictates of our conscience and not cave in whatever popular ideologies or beliefs take possession of the society where we live, both inside and outside the community of faith. Lastly, we need to understand that if we in the habit of taking a stand for the Lord in our daily lives in the small and big issues of our lives, then when we are called to make a stand like the one the Maccabees, it will not be a stretch that will upset our lives, it will be the most natural thing because we are already doing it every day.

Those who give their lives for the kingdom, may be the last in this life, because they take pleasure in the things of the world to come, but they shall be first in the next life, when this world and all of its temporary folly and shame is finally swallowed up by the victory of the everlasting truth of God's Word. We can hear their cries from under the heavenly altar and we can encounter them as they wander this life, ignored, abused and persecuted, because they have fixed their eyes on the final truth, instead of being sucked into the popular lies of this temporary world.

The acclaim of this life may come legitimately, but it is not the kind of recognition believers should seek, because it is unreliable and is often based on the false, exterior values of a society which is blind to that which truly matters in life. In the past I have often said that to be despised by the despicable is better than being worshiped by fools. How about you? Even if our stand and our life does not get the press that the Maccabees got, our sacrifice is just as valid and important in the eyes of the One whose opinion is the only one which matters.

Being prepared to make a stand, whether it succeeds or not or causes us to lose our lives, is the mark of a true spiritual hero. May we all aim to be spiritual heroes in this darkening age of compromise and deceit, because the same spirit who inspired Antiochus and all the other historical world dictators is at work in our world to demand the worship and the allegiance which belongs to G-d alone.

Unfortunately, being part of the community of faith is no guarantee that we shall be able to escape the carnal influences of the world, the flesh and the enemy. Corry Ten Boom's father once said that just because a mouse is in the cookie jar, doesn't make him a cookie. People become believers for many reasons – some good, some questionable, but the reason people stay believers is more important, because the L-rd does not want us to come Him by default or because we don't have a better choice. He wants us to come to Him because He is the best choice – in fact, when we look at things from the highest global perspective; He is the only choice worth our soul's allegiance.

He does not just want us to make a stand for Him in theory, while we fill our lives with our own little agendas and turn into yes, but believers. He want us to turn our lives inside out so that the values of the kingdom and the morality of His Word is what we are all about, from the littlest detail of our lives, to the great decisions and directions of our lives which define us as individuals of quality or of folly.

To whom does your conscience belong? How many of the issues of your life are lived according to the dictates of His everlasting kingdom? We may come to days when living for the kingdom will again cost us our lives. If we are living for His kingdom in our lives, then it will not make much of an impact in how we live because we are carrying the torch which has been carried from the time of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and which was almost dropped during the time of the Maccabees.

Finally, how is your grip on the torch of His Kingdom and of His Word? How is your grasp of His Son, our blessed Messiah doing? Are you living like a Maccabee or are there areas of your life which have assimilated to the pagan culture we live in? Are you a light, living in the light, or does your menorah need more light, so that it can be set upon the bushel of your life and give light to all those around you.

The choice is yours. May the blessings of the spiritual courage which we are celebrating at this season be yours and may they be ours for one more year, come what may. Chag Chanukah, Mishpocah.

Let's pray.