

27 Kislev, 5774 (30/11/13)

Chanukah, Dedication, Not Complacency

J. M. Terrett

Miketz At The End Of Our Enemies Will Never Prevail for Long

Torah: Gen.41:4-44:17

(1) **41:16:** *Joseph answered Pharaoh saying: It is not me, but G-d who shall give you a favourable response.*

(2) **41:49:** *Joseph gathered the wheat like the sand on the shores of the sea in such a considerable quantity that they ceased to count it because there were no more numbers high enough.*

(3) **42:21:** *They said therefore to one another: Yes we have been guilty towards our brother, for we saw the anguish of his soul when asked us for pity and we did not listen. It is for this reason that this affliction is happening to us.*

(4) **43:14:** *Let the Almighty G-d make you find favour before this man and may he let you return with your brother and with Benjamin! And if I must be deprived of my children, let me be deprived of them.*

Haftarah: Zech. 2:14-4:7

(5) **3:8:** *Listen therefore, Joshua the high priest, you and your companions who are seated with you, for these are men who will serve as signs, I am going to bring my servant the branch.*

(6) **4:7:** *Who are you, great mountain, before Zorababel, you shall be made flat. He shall lay the chief cornerstone in the midst of acclamations: grace, grace to it.*

Brit Chadashah: Mt. 27:15-46

(7) **27:37:** *To indicate the subject of His condemnation they wrote above His head: this is Yeshua, King of the Jews.*

Psalm 30, 118 (Mike) Jewish Hero: Simeon

Chanukah remains the most popular festival with Jewish people for several reasons, but it is one of the two non biblical, martial festivals that occur during the winter months.

That is to say that that the festival does not have a divine mandate, but along with Purim, it celebrates the victory of the Jewish people over their enemies at two crucial times in their history.

Chanukah has also become a festival of Jewish heroism in the face of forced assimilation and the lighting of the Chanukah menorah has become a symbol of solidarity so that the light of Judaism will never go out.

I want to review its origins with you and explore the rationale behind our Messianic Jewish celebration of this popular holiday. Now you all know that I am not above popping bubbles and getting to the truth of things amidst the urban spiritual myths which our society is increasingly prone to, so please understand that I am not saying we should boycott Chanukah or try and combine it with Christmas or replace Christmas with Chanukah. You will not hear me wishing anyone a Merry Christma-kah, though my son does sing a good song with this in the lyrics.

You see, spiritual complacency and spiritual assimilation remain two very real spiritual threats for us as a Messianic Jewish community and Chanukah's theme of dedication is one we would do well to pay attention to in our lives, both as individuals and as a community. Unless our lives are seen as places to apply the principles of our faith and of our obedience, we run the risk of being both complacent and also slipping into assimilation. How dedicated are you willing to be for the Lord? Let's look at the story of Chanukah.

After the return from the exile in Babylon, Jewish history began well after the rather violent arrival of the Greeks under that ambitious young conqueror, Alexander of Macedon. Soon after his untimely death, his empire split up under several of his generals and the holy land initially fell under the control of the very tolerant Ptolemys who were based in Egypt. Jewish people prospered under this Greek regime and many Jews moved to Egypt itself.

They even turned Alexandria into a Jewish town with over million Jewish inhabitants. However, soon the ambitious descendants of Seleucid, a general who set up an empire based in Syria, went to war with the Ptolemys and eventually gained control over the Holy Land. This regime was not as tolerant as the Egyptians and they wanted all the people in their empire to assimilate into Greek culture and to adopt the Greek religion.

When the Jews of the Holy Land resisted, the forces of the Seleucids stormed into Jerusalem, knocked down the walls and slaughtered the entire population. The worst Seleucid offender was a ruler called Antiochus Euphianes, or Antiochus the manifestation of G-d, but he is known in Judaism as Antiochus Epimanes (Antiochus the crazy man).

He outlawed the practice of Judaism, forbade circumcision and Sabbath keeping. He even required that every male Jew perform an annual sacrifice of a pig to Zeus on altars he had installed in every Jewish town and village and he even set up a statue of Zeus in the temple at Jerusalem.

All who refused were executed and it looked like Judaism was doomed and many Jews just gave in and assimilated in both the Greek culture and the Greek religion. One old man, a Jewish priest called Mattityahu, along with his five sons from the town of Modein in the hills near Jerusalem, began a rebellion against Antiochus.

When he saw a Jewish man performing the pagan sacrifice, he killed the man and the guard who was sent to supervise the ritual.

He and his sons fled to the hills and began a campaign of guerrilla warfare against their Greek oppressors. Many Jewish warriors joined them in their fight, but they had a problem. Their enemies knew they would not fight on the Sabbath. To avoid being slaughtered on the day of rest, they decreed that the warriors could defend themselves on the Sabbath but could not initiate an attack on that day.

After much vicious fighting with lots of loss of life, on the 25th day of Kislev they were able to drive the Greeks out of Jerusalem and they cleansed the temple and repaired it. In that year, no one had been allowed to celebrate the eight day festival of Sukkoth, so they declared a second Sukkoth and Jewish people began to celebrate a second Sukkoth annually in honour of the heroes who liberated the temple.

At first the rabbis resisted the celebration of a second Sukkoth because they did not want to have a festival of the L-rd that celebrated a military victory. So it was suppressed, but it remained a popular folk festival with one main theme – just as Judah Maccabee (whose name means the hammer or whose troops carried a banner with MKBA on it – Mi Kamocha bay alim Adonai -who is like you o L-rd) came into the temple and cleansed it, so one day Messiah would come into the temple and declare the Messianic kingdom.

It was a season of political unrest and even of rioting and rebellion, especially once Jerusalem came under foreign domination again. Eventually the rabbis gave in and endorsed the celebration, but with a difference.

They first removed all reference to the coming of the Messiah from the festival and severed any connection it had with Sukkoth. They turned it into a celebration of Jewish heroism which refused to give in to assimilation. They took one popular legend about a special flask of oil which magically burned for eight days and it became known as the Festival of Chanukah (dedication) and later also as the festival of light.

They took a Greek style menorah with nine candles (symbol of victory) and combined it with the story of the brave scholars who pretended to be gambling with dreidels when they were really studying the weekly Torah portions.

So dreidels and chocolate coins became part of the celebration. They went on to devise special prayers and a strict ceremony for the lighting the candles, but they never attached any work restrictions to the festival so it would neither compete with the Sabbath or with the biblical festivals.

It remains a time for celebrating victory over assimilation and the survival of the light of Judaism. It is a time when we can consider how healthy our dedication to the L-rd is and how well we are resisting assimilation into the pagan spirituality which surrounds us.

It is interesting that one of the first mentions in print of the festival occurs in the New Testament in John's Gospel where our Messiah was in the temple at the Festival of Chanukah and He did declare Himself and the arrival of the messianic Kingdom – but not in the way the people were expecting.

You see our G-d has an agenda which he will not waiver from and it is both our job to adhere to this agenda and to avoid assimilating any of the agenda of the world. At this festival we can light the candles on the chanukiah and play games and celebrate, as long as we know what we are celebrating and why we are celebrating it.

For me, Chanukah will always be a festival which anticipates the arrival of our Messiah and the eventual defeat of all the enemies of the kingdom of G-d. It will also be a time for me to consider how thorough my dedication is to the Bible and to the things of G-d. A part of this will be for me to look at my life and remove any tendencies which would have me assimilate into the pagan culture which surrounds us and among who we should shine as bright lights for the Gospel.

I John ends with this admonition: my little children, keep yourself from idols and just before they entered the Holy Land, the family of Jacob was exhorted to surrender all their pagan idols and not take them with them into the Promised Land.

Are you keeping yourself from idols? Are there 3 areas of your life were you are assimilating into the beliefs and practices of the hostile secular culture we are sojourning amongst? May we follow the example of Mattityahu and removed any pagan altars from our lives.

May we follow the example of Judah the Maccabee and cleanse the temple of our hearts and regain spiritual control over every area of our lives, no matter how long and hard the battle is, because we are called to freedom.

Chag Chanukah my fellow Messianic Maccabees.