

Miketz **At The End of** **His Vision Starts to be Fulfilled**

Torah: Genesis 41:1-44:17

Haftarah: I Kings 3:15-4:1 (Zechariah 2:14-4:7)

Brit Chadashah Matthew 27:15-46

Reading: Jack: pp. 33, 35 and Psalm 40. Jewish hero: Benaja. Torah carrier: Mike

This week's Torah portion is really two stories being told at the same time. The main story concerns the elevation of Joseph from prison to prime minister because he was able to interpret Pharaoh's double dream. He sets about preparing the land so the produce of the seven good years can be safely stored against the seven bad years which were to follow. At the beginning of the years of famine, Joseph's brothers travel to Egypt to buy grain and bow down before him, just as he saw them do in his vision.

In a very real sense, he had to suffer betrayal, slavery and imprisonment in order to be placed in a position to save Egypt, along with his family. His faith in G-d and his ability to interpret dreams made sure that he would overcome every obstacle in his way to the top. He demonstrated good organizational skills, so the task of organizing storage houses throughout the country was well within his skill set.

His use of treachery towards his brothers was more than just pay back, it was a cautious move designed not to spook them until they would not be able to conceal their evil deed. If they had panicked and run away, Joseph could not follow them and it is unlikely Pharaoh would have let him use the army to bring his brothers to justice. In response to his strange treatment of them, his brothers begin to finally come to terms and admit that what they did to their brother was evil and unjustifiable.

He tricks them and keeps Simeon as a hostage until they return with their youngest brother, which they eventually do, despite their father's unwillingness to let him depart. When they show up a second time with Benjamin, he springs his trap and even though they agreed that the guilty one should be put to death, they plead for his life and his release in ways they were never willing to do when he pleaded with them not to be sold into slavery.

They readily saw how much pain of potentially losing of Benjamin caused their father and Joseph was making them see how much pain it caused their father when they sold him into slavery and told their father that he was dead. It is only when they have admitted their sin and experienced the same kind of suffering which they subjected him and their father to, that Joseph is ready to let them know who he really is.

In a very real sense he had to suffer in order to be elevated and all the pain and the trials he went through were actually used by G-d to position him to take over the country and save his family. Not everybody dies even during a severe famine, but it is the weak, the old and the vulnerable who go first. Joseph is able to ensure that none of his family perishes.

It is interesting to note the differences in leadership style between Reuben and Judah while they plead with their father to let Benjamin go back with them into Egypt. Reuben offers to kill two of Israel's grandkids if he fails to return with Benjamin, while Judah says he alone would be forever guilty if he failed to bring his youngest brother back. It was his idea to place Joseph out

of harm's way by selling him into Egyptian slavery, because if he had not done so, Joseph's brothers would likely have succeeded in killing him. Now he is convincing his father to let Benjamin go so that no more people have to be put in danger.

The Haftarah portion recalls the wisdom of Solomon when he returns the live baby unharmed to its mother, who would rather lose the baby than see it cut in two. He made the guilty mother show her guilt as the child's real mother showed her love. He demonstrated great wisdom at the very beginning of his reign and all of Israel saw that of all of David's sons, he was the best candidate to reign over them.

The Torah portion records the suffering of our Messiah on His way to the cross and shows His calm determination as He suffers on the cross. He was not suffering for any sins which He had committed, He was suffering for all sinners, to win forgiveness for all the sins which we have committed. It was something He did alone and forsaken by everybody, not because He had to, but because He wanted to. Like Joseph, He suffered for sins He did not commit and like Joseph He is going to deliver people because of what He suffered. The whole purpose of His incarnation was fulfilled when He died on the cross, just as the whole purpose of Joseph's suffering was fulfilled when he saved his whole family from the ravages of the seven year famine.

The portion in Zachariah is read on the Shabbat of Chanukah as a reminder that the eventual coming of G-d's kingdom can never be thwarted, delayed or undone by anything which happens before it comes. The superintendence of G-d trumps the folly of man and the spiritual resistance of the devil. This is because G-d's purposes are not fulfilled by strength, nor by might, but by the Holy Spirit of the L-rd of Hosts.

Joseph's visions began to be fulfilled when his brothers showed up. The prophecies and visions about our Messiah began to be fulfilled when He suffered, died, rose and ascended back into Heaven. The prophecies and visions of the Bible are being fulfilled as we wait for the return of our Saviour. How well are the visions and prophecies of G-d's Word being fulfilled in your life?

Sermon:

This morning I would like to give you my annual discourse on Chanukah, so that we may come to possess courage under fire and never let go of our dedication to G-d's Word or of our determination to study it regularly as part of a well rounded, healthy spiritual life as we walk with our resurrected Messiah through the valleys and over the mountains of this life.

As a festival, Chanukah has somewhat of a checked past and it has become almost as commercialized as Christmas, which is another celebration with a dubious past. What Chanukah is intended to commemorate is the liberation and cleansing of the temple by Judah Maccabee and his band of Jewish guerrilla fighters. It was set up initially as a second Sukkoth, but soon took on a life of its own and gathered momentum as a messianic festival.

It was thought that just as Judah Maccabee entered the temple and cleansed it, so Messiah would enter the temple and declare His kingdom. It was a time which zealots and revolutionaries capitalized on to agitate for rebellion against the Romans and there were sometimes riots in the temple during this celebration. Whenever a riot occurred which the temple soldiers could not handle, Roman soldiers would issue forth from the fortress Antonia and much blood was shed in the temple. The fortress overlooked the temple to keep an eye on things and whenever they issued forth into the temple, it had to be ceremonially cleansed before it could return to its regular services.

To keep things calm, the temple authorities and most rabbis forbade the celebration of Chanukah and excluded anyone from synagogue who celebrated it. Nonetheless, it survived as a popular folk festival which generated its own share of legends and one of the strangest was the supposed miracle of the lights. It was believed that when Judah the Maccabee cleansed the temple and wanted to light the temple menorah, he could only find enough oil for it to burn for one day and while more oil was being prepared, the single container of oil they found, miraculously lasted for eight days, while more oil was being prepared.

Another version of this, is that Judah and his followers launched eight steel spears in front of the temple menorah, which miraculously burst into flame like candles. It was a popular folk festival which would not go away, so around the fourth century, the rabbis took over the festival and changed it from one of Messianic expectation to one of Jewish bravery against forced assimilation and of courage under fire. They adopted a nine branched, Greek candelabra and used the story of the miraculous oil to make Chanukah into a festival of lights.

They adopted a special lighting order and set up special songs and prayers and used Chanukah to encourage Jewish people to never abandon the light of the Torah, and to let it shine in their hearts and lives, in such a way that the darkness of the world could never put it out. They adopted the dreidel game and once chocolate travelled from the New World, they adopted the custom of gelt (chocolate coins) and it was the only time of the year when gambling was allowed.

The story was that when the Greeks outlawed the Torah, scholars adopted two techniques to continue studying this holy book. The first was they adopted prophetic readings which reflected each Torah portion and when soldiers or guards asked them what they were doing, they said they were studying the prophets, not the Torah.

Along with this, they also posted guards during their study sessions and when guards came to check up on them, they hid their scrolls and pretended to be gambling with dreidels (ancient Middle Eastern dice). Both ruses worked and scholars were able to keep on studying the Torah, despite the persecution.

The religious side of Chanukah is not very elaborate, yet it remains a popular celebration where friends and family gather around the chanukiah to eat festival foods, sing festival songs and play the dreidel game. It stands as a reminder that Judaism is a religion of light and it is our duty not to let ours go out, so that we do not succumb to the encroaching darkness of the world which is always trying to make inroads into our hearts and lives.

The only place this festival is mentioned in the Bible is in **John 10:22**, where it says that Yeshua entered into the temple during the festival of the dedication. This is what the word Chanukah means – dedication. It is mentioned in the apocryphal books of first and second Maccabees and because a Jewish heroine lulled her enemies to sleep with milk, dairy products also feature as a major part of modern Chanukah celebrations.

There are three verses I think which could be applied to this festival: **Matthew 5:16** (*Let your light so shine that men will see your good works and glorify your Father who is in Heaven*), **John 8:12** (*Yeshua spoke to them again and said: I am the light of the world, the one who follows me will not walk in darkness, but he will have the light of life*) and **Acts 14:22** (*fortifying the spirit of the disciples exhorting them to persevere in the faith saying that it is through much tribulation that we must enter the kingdom of G-d*).

I bring these up, because part of the dark side of Chanukah which is not often highlighted, is that under the rule of the Seleucids, a large segment of Jews willingly converted to the Greek

religion and Greek culture. They included the high priest Menelaus who engaged in a radical hellenization of the Holy Land, with the support of both the Greeks and many of the wealthier citizens of the land, who were enthralled with the sophistication of the Greek civilization.

He outlawed circumcision, Sabbath observance and the study of the Torah. So many Torah scrolls were confiscated and burned that historians estimated that only a few hundred remained, hidden away in caves and other safe locations. Menelaus erected a statue of Zeus in the temple and required that all Jewish towns and villages have a pagan altar to Zeus. All Jewish men were required to make an annual sacrifice to Zeus upon these altars and those who supervised this horrendous act were accompanied by soldiers who gave people the choice of performing the sacrifice of a pig or being killed.

In the small village of Modein, near Jerusalem, Matthias, Judah's father, not only refused to perform the sacrifice, he killed both the official supervising the sacrifice and the soldiers who were protecting him. He then fled with his five sons into the hills and began a guerrilla campaign that was more of a civil war between the hellenized Jews and those who were faithful to the Torah. Greek Seleucid soldiers may have been used to support the hellenized Jews, but the struggle was really a civil war between two factions of Judaism.

The hellenized Jews were thrown out of the temple and lost control of the Holy Land, but it took several decades and the loss of much life, before the Holy Land was finally liberated from the control of these hellenized Jews. They were not all killed and while many may have reverted back to a Torah based Judaism, a number of them remained hellenized and, under the Romans, along with other hellenized people, they were permitted to build a network of ten hellenistic communities called the Decapolis (ten cities). We encounter them once more in one of the strangest exorcisms our Messiah ever performed.

The city of Gadara was one of communities of the Decapolis and there our Messiah encountered a man in a graveyard, possessed of a thousand demons. When He cast them out, the demons were permitted to go into a herd of swine and the maddened herd fled into the water and were drowned. When the people of Gadara heard what happened, they pleaded with the Messiah to leave their community and go somewhere else.

You see, the swine were their sacrificial animals, whom they offered up to Zeus and the Lord was sending them a triple message. First of all, He was showing them that the false gods they worshipped were really demons and that those who worshipped them, were actually living in a spiritual graveyard and would end up as dead as the swine they used in their worship. Instead of rejoicing in the deliverance of the demon possessed man and returning to Judaism and acknowledging the Messiah, they preferred their pagan darkness to the light of G-d's Word. May paganism never gain a similar hold in any of our lives.

As it stands, we live in a world where people are turning to many different modern versions of demon worship through such lies as evolution and liberal theology. The truth of G-d's Word is denied and we are called to accept everyone and all beliefs systems because they are considered to be part of a collection of fairy tales which basically teach different versions of the same thing. Religion is seen as a form of mythology which can bring comfort to the young and to the dying, while the real truth is supposedly found in modern science and various versions of evolutionary theory.

We are bombarded with this modern form of paganism and the practice of our faith is both marginalized and directly undermined and those who make a stand for the Bible are called dirty

names like religious fundamentalists. They are seen either as manipulators using their faith to dominate and abuse the feeble minded, or as a means of getting rich on the backs of their followers. It is supposed that deep down these people really know that the Bible is not true and that believers are either brainwashed or feeble minded or both.

At Chanukah we have to determine to remain faithful and dedicated to the light of G-d's Word and to walk in the light with our blessed Messiah, even as the world grows darker and darker around us. We are beginning to see various government legislation which is indirectly levelled against our faith by making it illegal to speak against homosexuality as a sin and protecting the rights of abortionists. They have removed the Bible from schools and make it a crime to pray in schools or even have Bible Study groups in the building. Soon they may make it a crime to publicly proclaim our faith or to teach it at home to our children. We may be driven back underground as we have in the past.

Will you be willing to pay the price and stay faithful to our Messiah, even when we encounter much tribulation and see many of our number leave the faith and join up with the demon worshipping evolutionists who sacrifice various kinds of pigs to their false gods? For all of the struggles which Chanukah commemorates it is a celebration of victory and of great courage under fire and we want to have this kind of spirituality in our lives year round.

We do not want to join hands with those believers who are effectively abandoning their faith and adopting the sophisticated paganism which our modern society seems to favour. We want to be faithful to the G-d of the Bible and to His blessed Messiah, even if it requires that we have Popeye moments like Matthias who had: "all he could stand, cause, he can't stand no more" and took immediate, drastic action.

In our situation, instead of taking up arms and starting a violent guerrilla war, we need to let our light shine as we proclaim the truth and live lives full of faith, hope and love. If people will not readily listen to our message, they will at least see our good works and the difference which our faith has made in our lives. Along side of this, we need to be studying the Torah so that we know what it actually says and we can be actively applying this to our lives. We need to be using it a resource to find solutions to the problems which life keeps throwing our way.

We also need to rejoice in the determination and dedication of the scholars who took effective measures to allow them to continue studying the Torah. Part of the reason we are here today and are also able to study the Torah is because they were dedicated to it and passed it on and did not let its enemies destroy all copies of it. In a real sense, the strength and health of our faith will be determined by the extent of our own personal study of the Torah and how well we come to know its contents.

Our Messiah proclaimed himself to be the light of the world and as we celebrate the festival of lights we need to be dedicated to walking in the light as He is in the light. We need to let the light shine into every area of our lives so there is no area of our lives where we are stumbling around in the darkness. It was a strong desire and craving for the light which first drew us to place our faith in the Messiah and as we light the candles at sunset, during the days of Chanukah, let it be a sign of our commitment to the light which He has kindled in our hearts and lives.

We know that we shall have much tribulation in this life as we face the growing darkness of the world on the outside and its attempts to pull us away from the light of G-d's Word on the inside. But when we get together to worship and fellowship together, we can take a break from the battles we face in the world and recharge and heal as we enjoy the mighty presence of G-d in the songs we sing and in the prayers we pray and especially in the Word we read and study.

For a while now, I have been mulling over in my mind how to make studying the Bible more of a reality for more of us in our community. Only a few of us seem to be able to arrange our schedules to make it out on Thursday evenings, but we all know that we have to be in a constant, healthy discussion with His Word if we do not want the cares, the riches and pleasures of life to choke it out of us.

Do we want to consider holding afternoon study sessions on the Sabbath so that we can discuss the weekly portions, along with the Haftarah and New Testament portions? Would it be a good idea to consider Saturday evening Havdallah celebrations so that we can study the Torah as we bid farewell to the Sabbath for another week? Would Sunday mornings or afternoons or even evenings be a good time to set up home groups to study the Torah and draw closer to our Messiah?

As we go through the season of Chanukah, will you join me in prayer so that we can develop the means of making Bible Study more of a reality in the life of our congregation? I know that we only have 168 hours in a week, but just as the scholars who saved the Torah from being destroyed made study the most important feature of their lives, I believe we need to win the struggle to also make more room for Bible Study in our lives.

In the 23 years that I have been involved as a rabbi in the Messianic movement, I have always held a weekday Bible Study, but if there is another option which will make Bible Study more accessible to more members of our shul, I am willing to make time for this vital activity on the weekend as well.

Our time belongs to the L-rd as much as our hearts and lives do and we know that our Messiah wants us to be well fed believers whose spiritual questions are answered from His Word. Where are you getting your answers from and who do you talk to about the spiritual questions we all need to answer and the important life decisions that we all need to make?

The Maccabees knew where they stood when it came to making a stand for the L-rd and for His Word. The scholars knew where they stood, when they preserved the Torah and kept it out of the hands of those who wanted it destroyed. They made time for regular Bible Study and refused the pressure to assimilate into a culture which denied the G-d of the Bible.

When the rabbis finally decided to accept Chanukah, they filched a Greek symbol of victory (the nine branched menorah) and made it into a symbol of Jewish dedication. They made several wise accommodations to keep Chanukah vital and relevant, both for their own people and for all future generations who participate in remembering their courage and wisdom.

It is my prayer at this season of Chanukah that all the members of our community will also be able to use wisdom and courage to make all the necessary accommodations to make Bible Study a central feature of our lives.

I may express my grief over the sad state of our world's spirituality, both loudly and eloquently, mainly because I see it as our mandate to be spokesmen of G-d's truth to our lost and dying world. But I feel a deeper and stronger need for our community to become more involved in Bible Study and prayer.

Through a mighty struggle, the Maccabees saved the Torah and preserved a lifestyle of faith that we also celebrate, as we go through the Festival of Lights which we call Chanukah. We readily express our gratitude that they stepped up to the plate and refused to let the light of the Torah be extinguished.

May our determination and dedication take inspiration from their example as we make Bible Study and worship the centre around which our weeks revolve. Shabbat shalom and Chag Chanukah. May we all remain strong in the Lord and in the power of His Word – and may we all become modern day Maccabees, heroes for the Torah, filled with dedication and determination to make the study of it the centre around which our lives revolve.