

23 Kislev, 5779 (01/12/18) **First Chanukah Teaching: Avoiding Assimilation** J. M. Terrett

**Vayeshev**                      **And He Settled**                      **Nowhere to Run, But G-d Has You Covered**

**Torah:**                              Genesis 37:1-40:23

**Haftarah:**                      Amos 2:6-3:8

**Brit Chadashah:**              Matthew 1:1-6; 16-25

This week's Torah portion focuses on the multiple betrayals of Joseph, with a little sideline where Judah unwittingly performs a levirate service for his eldest son. This occurs during a time lapse between the time that Joseph is sold into slavery and the famine which obliges his brothers to come to Egypt in search of grain. Let's deal with Judah first.

Judah spends some time away from the family with his friend Hira the Adullamite and he marries a Canaanite woman, who gives him three sons: Er, Onan and Schela. Er is somehow killed by the L-rd after he marries a Canaanite called Tamar. Because Er had no heir, his brother, Onan was supposed to go into his widow and sleep with her until she provided an heir to her defunct husband. Because he knew that the male child born of Tamar would take the place of Er in terms of becoming the firstborn of the family, Onan withdrew and spilled his sperm on the ground.

He was also somehow killed because of this betrayal. Schela was too young to perform his levirate responsibility, so Judah sent Tamar home until his third son reached manhood. He was probably convinced that she was somehow unlucky and did not want his third son to share the fate of his first two sons. When Schela was old enough to marry, rather than obliging him to go into his brother's widow until she conceived an heir to her dead husband, Schela was married to someone else.

Since no descendants of Onan are mentioned, it unlikely he was married at the time of his death and since no descendants of Schela are mentioned, it is likely that his wife gave him no sons. Where does this leave Tamar? She is a widow who cannot remarry until she has provided a replacement for her first husband, who died without an heir. She was not married to Onan, so she would not have to also provide him with an heir through a subsequent levirate union.

Judah has not fulfilled his obligation to her and she plots for a way to provide the heir through an unwitting levirate union. She disguises herself as a veiled harlot and induces the recently widowed Judah to avail himself of her sexual favours. In order to ensure payment, she keeps his signet, his cord and his walking stick. Once he performs, instead of waiting for the agreed payment, she removes her disguise and returns to her father's house.

When it is reported to Judah that she is pregnant, he hypocritically wants her burned at the stake as a harlot. When it is revealed that he is the father, he takes her into his household, but never sleeps with her again.

She provides him with twin boys and lives out her days as the mother of Judah's heirs. He says that she is less guilty than he is because she tricks him into performing the levirate obligation his younger son should have done, so it really wasn't an actual act of harlotry. Later, she is listed among the ancestors of David and of our Messiah, along with four other gentile women. She was not really a shady woman, she just wanted to get what was rightfully hers, and she did. Back to Joseph's trials and tribulations.

After his audacious visions, his brother's plot to kill him as a way of annulling the visions where he would end up dominating over them. Ruben convinces them to throw him into an empty well, because he plans to return later and deliver him back to his father. Judah prevents any further attempts on his brother by placing him permanently out of harm's way and he is sold into slavery and ends up in Egypt.

In spite of this horrible setback, the L-rd prospers Joseph in this adversity. This could be said to be a historical summary of both the Jewish people's fortunes through the ages and of how the L-rd blesses believers in the midst of trials they have to go through.

Joseph becomes the head butler of a major Egyptian house and the household is blessed because of his presence. The lady of the house wants to have sex with the handsome young slave and if she had succeeded, he would have been under her control for fear of having his sexual indiscretion revealed to his master. She may have been planning on turning him in after sleeping with him, but concocts a false story when he refuses to do so. He has left his out cloak in her presence, which was an indication that he was in the process of undressing when she claimed that she had cried out.

Doing that which is right is not always a guarantee that we will be treated fairly and Joseph is thrown into prison, instead of being killed. This is perhaps because the husband does not really believe his wife and may be afraid of offending the G-d who has so richly blessed his former slave.

In prison, the blessing follows him, but it likely would not have done so if he had sinned with Potiphar's wife. He is in a prison for noble Egyptians and is put in charge of all the other prisoners. He does not try and escape, because he really has nowhere to go. If he returned home, his brothers would have resumed their quest to kill him and they might have pretended to be glad to see him, so they could do him in when another opportunity arose.

While he is in prison, he encounters two senior court officials who have displeased Pharaoh and he successfully interprets their dreams for them. The wine taster (cup bearer) is restored to his position, but promptly forgets Joseph. Lest we feel too sorry for Joseph, he is being blessed in prison and obviously had a very good reputation. He has received powerful visions and he knows that the prison is not the end of the story for him.

When we go through various trials, two things should also keep us encouraged. First it is never the end of the story for us and secondly the blessing of G-d will always follow us, even when we encounter trials and have to go through difficult periods in our lives.

## **Sermon: First Chanukah Teaching: Avoiding Assimilation**

The Scriptures are full of warnings that believers should have nothing to do with the unfruitful works of darkness, because the enemy is always active to try and destroy our spirituality and bring us back under his control. Once our people were allowed to return under the Persians, they began the long process of recovering and remained loyal to their overlords who made this possible.

Once Alexander showed up on the scene and demanded that Judah supply his army, the Jews refused and he said that once he had conquered Tyre, he would turn south and destroy Judah. Tyre was on an island and was thought to be impregnable, but he built a causeway to the city and reduced it to rubble.

As his victorious forces and their allies drew close to Jerusalem, Jaddua, current High Priest received a vision from G-d to throw open the gates of Jerusalem and lead a procession of priests to greet Alexander. Josephus records that when Alexander saw the High Priest, he leapt off his horse and rushed to embrace the High Priest. He said that the High Priest had appeared to him in a vision and told him he would conquer the world.

Alexander gave the Jews the same provisions that they had under the Persians, but when he died, his successors did not live up to this deal. Because his generals ruled over a huge foreign population and no longer had their home base in Macedonia, they embarked on a process of intense Hellenization which attempted to turn their subjects into loyal Greeks.

The one who pushed this assimilation in Greek culture the hardest was a Seleucid ruler named Antiochus Epiphanes. He claimed to be a manifestation of G-d and his army took the Holy Land from his Egyptian counterpart. In order to subdue Judah, he demolished the walls of Jerusalem and slaughtered most of its population. He put up a statue of Zeus in the holy place and required that all Jews worship the Greek gods. Failure to do so meant death.

Pagan altars were set up in every Jewish village and town and all Jewish men were required to perform an annual sacrifice of a pig on these government sanctioned altars. A substantial portion of Judah's population surrendered to this assimilation and the High Priest even took a Greek name and outlawed both Sabbath observance and circumcision. All the copies of the Torah they could find were burned and study of the Torah was punishable by death.

Historians estimate that only a few hundred copies of the Torah survived as thousands were destroyed. Judaism had to be practiced in secret or in the hills and it looked like Judaism was on its last legs. There was a large core of Hellenised Jews who drove this forced assimilation with the support of the Syrian Greek soldiers who were stationed throughout the land.

A priest, Mattathias, the aged father of Judah Maccabeus, rose up and killed both a Jew who was performing the hated sacrifice and the soldier who was supposed to protect him.

He fled into the hills and the long civil war against the Syrians and their Hellenised Jews began. At first, there were just small guerrilla assaults from the hills, but soon an army was assembled under Judah Maccabeus and this force gradually began to liberate the Holy Land. They had to be flexible and allowed their forces to fight defensively on the Sabbath and their bold fighting tactics defeated often superior numbers of Syrian soldiers and their Hellenised Jewish allies.

In the month of Kislev, in 165 BCE, Judah defeated the Syrians and led his victorious army into Jerusalem. They cleansed the temple and because no one had been able to celebrate the festival of Sukkoth that year, they celebrated it for eight days, from the 25<sup>th</sup> of Kislev until the second of Tevet. This celebration became an annual event and was first known as the Festival of Sukkoth of the month of Kislev.

Judah did not live to see the final defeat of the Syrians and their Hellenised Jewish allies, but even after some major setbacks, within a little more than a decade, the Holy Land was under the complete control of the Maccabees. Before we get into how the Festival of Sukkoth of the month of Kislev morphed into Chanukah, we have to deal with three groups of people who were also impacted by the victory of the Maccabean forces.

A group of returning Jews refused to give up their converted Gentile wives and set up a rival Jewish state in northern Israel, called Samaria. They rejected the teachings of the Bible outside of the Torah and rejected the House of David, but not the house of Judah. They built their own temple and anointed their own High Priest. They were always hostile to the Jews of Judea and the Galilee and even tried to disrupt the celebrations of the festival cycle by lighting signal fires on the wrong days.

Once the Maccabees defeated the Syrians, they attacked the Samaritans and burnt their temple. When this was done, they turned south and gave the Philistines and the Edomites a choice similar to the one the Hellenists tried to give to them. They were told to convert to Judaism or die. They chose conversion over death and many Jews today have Philistine and Edomite blood.

The remaining Hellenised Jews formed a protective league for mutual defence and were called the Decapolis – ten cities inhabited by Jews who had converted to the Greek religion. They were still around in the time of our Messiah and as He drew near to one of the cities, He allowed 1,000 demons to enter their sacrificial pigs and the animals were drowned in the sea of Galilee.

He did this to show them that they were worshipping demons and that they should abandon their folly and come to faith in the true Messiah of promise. Most of them declined at first and asked Yeshua to leave their territory.

Now back to the transformation of the Festival of Sukkoth of the month of Kislev into the festival of Chanukah.

After the initial happiness that Judaism was restored as our national religion, the rabbis and priests became alarmed at the popularity of this new, grass roots celebration.

It took on a life of its own and people came to believe that just as Judah the Maccabee cleansed the temple, so Messiah would come into the temple during this festival and declare the Kingdom of G-d. Variations of this belief were that He would arm them with magical weapons and they would issue in the Kingdom of G-d by conquering the world in His name.

Once the Romans took over Judea, this festival was a signal for anyone who claimed to be the Messiah, to enter the temple and recruit an army and lead them in an attack on their Roman masters. To counter this rebellious tendency, the rabbis and the priests at first outlawed the festival and ejected anyone from their synagogues who celebrated it.

When this did not diminish the popularity of the festival, they decided to take it over and turn it into a celebration of Jewish heroism which took up arms against forced assimilation. They even gave it a new name: Chanukah and celebrated the dedication of the newly cleansed temple with a new set of rituals.

They removed any mention of Messiah coming into the temple and chose one of the two most popular legends of Chanukah and came up with a new form of the menorah which they called the Chanukiah. It has nine candles instead of seven and candles were lit on each night of eight-day festival.

You see, one legend said that when Judah Maccabee entered the temple, his warriors threw nine iron spears into the ground before the ruined temple menorah and they miraculously burst into flame. Another version of this legend said that when they tried to light the repaired menorah, they did not have enough oil for the festival, but the candles remained lit for the full eight days of the festival.

They remembered the courage of the sages who studied portions of the prophets when the Greek guards were around and took out their hidden Torahs when the guards weren't around. They also remembered the courage of the sages who pretended to be gambling when the guards drew near and returned to their study of the Torah when the coast was clear.

From these two practices, we have the Haftarah portions which are geared to the weekly Torah portions and the practice of spinning dreidels and gambling with chocolate coins. The nine branched, menorah was a Greek symbol of victory which they transformed into a special menorah to commemorate the victory of the Maccabees over those who were trying to forcefully assimilate them into the Greek religion. It is a pagan symbol which the Jews adopted, in much the same way as the Christians later adopted the Christmas tree. Neither symbol is found in the Bible, but both symbols have taken on a special symbolism associated with the festivals in which they both appear.

We are to avoid assimilating into pagan culture, whenever it tries to drag us in, either by force or by seduction and we can use the great courage and determination of the Maccabees as an example to follow.

However, we should also be aware of the true story which the events which Chanukah celebrate. Legends have no place in our lives, but the use of the Chanukiah was a good way of preventing paganism from creeping into the celebration of Chanukah. Whatever symbolism we use should speak to our enduring commitment to avoid assimilation and not give ground before the intrusion of any paganism which is trying to pollute our lives.

As Messianic believers, we need to put the Messiah back into our celebration of Chanukah, because He did come into the temple during this festival and declared Himself and His kingdom, just like the people hoped He would. The Chanukiah reminds us that He is the light of the world and we have to let our lights shine in the pagan world in which we live.

Accommodation means we will sometimes adopt and transform pagan symbols and give them a biblical meaning, which is what was done with the Chanukiah. We are not celebrating any Greek gods when we use the Chanukiah and we are not celebrating any pagan gods when we put up a Christmas tree. Both festivals have become quite commercialised and we should always go back to the original meaning of the festivals and not let the world steal them away from us.

I will talk more about the symbols of Christmas in my Christmas sermons, but let me finish my first Chanukah sermon with both a challenge and a warning. Make sure you never let the world creep into how you celebrate any festival or celebration. Chanukah is a minor, non-biblical festival, but it is probably the most popular one, because it is all about family celebrations and renewing our commitment to fight against assimilation whenever it tries to invade our lives.

How strong is your commitment to fight assimilation? Materialism is one of the most pernicious forms of assimilation the world is trying to drag us down with. Evolution is not far behind. Are you a believer in the biblical creation account? Do you believe in the sanctity of life which the Bible says begins in the womb? Being both anti-abortion and pro-Life are requirements for people who believe in the Bible, with no exceptions. Do you uphold and practice biblical sexuality?

Do you believe that all and any sexual activity is reserved for one man and one woman within the bonds of marriage? Homosexuality, immorality and adultery are all forbidden forms of sexual misbehaviour and they are trying to hard to assimilate our youth and pull them away from a biblical morality.

Do you believe that faith in our Messiah is the only way, the only truth and the only life and that no man or woman comes to Father except through Him? The question of those who died without hearing and those who are still wallowing in paganism and who will die without hearing is one we should take up in our Yeshiva, but let me just say categorically that Yeshua and Yeshua alone will decide the eternal fate of everyone and anyone in our sad world, including all the angels.

Let us determine at this Chanukah season not to let even the slightest bit of assimilation take root in our lives or in our congregation. We need to exercise the courage of the Maccabees. We need to exercise the endurance of the Maccabees. We need to take a stand against assimilation, as forcefully as the one the Maccabees did.

It may take time for us to deal with the carnal influences of our world which are trying to assimilate us away from the truth of G-d's Word. We need to pray for our children who are being bombarded with secular propaganda in public schools. We need to teach them the truth of G-d's Word and help them overcome the politically correct moral corruption which they are being forcefully exposed to.

Our faith is not an optional one, it is a necessary one which has clear teachings both about the origin and the meaning of life and about how we should dwell in this life on our pilgrimage through this world towards our Father's home in glory.

Our world is becoming less and less friendly to the Bible and to biblical spirituality and morality. We need to speak up and claim our constitutional right to freely practice our faith, even if we are becoming a targeted minority which has lost the support of the popular mind of our culture.

The enemy first attacked out theology in the 1800's and evolutionary mythology has become an accepted way for people to look at origins and the meaning of life. Once the popular mind of our modern society fully embraced evolutionism, then our morality came under fire in what has been called the sexual revolution. I agree that it is quite revolting and recently the Israeli city of Tel Aviv hosted a Pride parade that attracted 250,000 participants. I think it is incredibly sad that the homeland which was set up to be a safe place for Jews to live, has become a haven for sexual deviants from all of the Middle east and indeed from all over the world.

This season, may we speak up to defend our biblical theology and our biblical spirituality and morality. Many former believers, both Christian and Jewish, have succumbed to evolutionary humanism and support abortion and gay rights as major pillars of their belief structure. There is as much rampant paganism in many mainline churches and synagogues as there is in the bars and the houses of ill repute and don't get me started about the filth which is polluting the airwaves and the internet.

Instead of feeling sad and going underground, we need the courage of the Maccabees to take a stand and refuse to be assimilated. I am a convinced and vocal creationist and take no guff from evolutionists. I am a convinced support of the pre-born and take no guff from abortionists. I fully support a biblical approach to human sexuality and take no guff from the gay subculture which claims that the practice of gross and perverted immorality is their right, which they claim should be presented as an acceptable option in our schools.

Assimilation is our greatest enemy and may it never become a fifth column in our midst as we prepare to celebrate a hero's festival and recognise the reality of our Saviour's birth so long ago. May we practice spirituality and not cave in to materialism as we celebrate.

