

30 Kislev (28/12/19) **Chanukah Service** by: Chris Dahlberg

**Miketz**

**At The End Of**

**Torah:**

Genesis 41:1–44:17

**Haftarah:**

Zechariah 2:14 – 4:7

**Brit Chadashah:**

Matthew 27:15-46

**Reading:** Alan P. 153 & PS. 40 **Jewish Hero:** Enoch **Carrier:** Betty

I come from a Pentecostal background. I went to Bible College up North, and I thought I had a handle on the Word of God. Then the Lord showed me how little I knew, when he introduced me to Messianic Judaism. Now I am learning the Bible from a Jewish perspective. It's a very different book. It is a Jewish history book, about Jews, about their connection with God in and out of Israel. So why would we not all learn this book from a Jewish perspective? For example, the passages I am discussing in this Haftarah. As a Pentecostal, I was convinced Zechariah 2 only had 13 verses. My King James, New King James, and New Living Translation Bibles only shows 13 verses. So when Aaron Shaw told me I had to do a Haftarah on verses 14 and on, I was stumped. So I had to search for verses 14 – 17. In the Complete Jewish Bible at [www.chabad.org](http://www.chabad.org), I found those verses. Of course, from Jewish sources.

Zechariah lived during a period of Jewish history which was both precarious and promising. It was promising because the Jews who had been exiled to Babylonia had been permitted to return to their homeland in Judea; precarious because their homeland had yet to be totally rebuilt and Judea was still dominated by a foreign power. In consequence, the people of Judea were forced to live in incredible insecurity, with many unknowns.

God often communicated with Zechariah in visions, many of which were inscrutable. Among these visions was the famous vision of the gold Menorah: **“The angel who talked with me came back and woke me as a man wakened from sleep. He said to me: ‘What do you see?’ And I answered: ‘I see a menorah all of gold, with a bowl above it...’**

I, in turn, asked the angel who talked with me: 'What do those things mean, my lord?' 'Do you not know what these things mean?' asked the angel who talked with me. And I said: 'No, my lord.'" (4:1-5)

How are we to understand Zechariah's inability to understand this fantastic vision – a vision which from the Jewish point of view could only indicate good things? An American rabbi, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik (20<sup>th</sup> century) attributes his inability to comprehend this vision to the precarious situation in which he and his fellow Jews lived. The redemption was on their doorstep but they could not see it because of the upheaval which accompanied it. It stared them in the face but they could not see it.

This is what made the angel's response so poignant: **"Then he explained to me the following: This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel: 'Not by might, nor by power, but by My spirit, said the Lord of Hosts.'" (4:6)** Now as a Pentecostal, I thought that was the message, this awesome, rousing conclusion. However, there's much more in this vision, that I learned doing this research. The intent of the angel was to raise the morale of those who were in doubt. He reminded them that the Menorah symbolized their redemption and its light meant that God was with them in their endeavor. This vision, then, was intended to give them strength in their adversity. (See Days of Deliverance, pp. 139-40)

It is easy to sink into despair when the going gets difficult; when the task does not seem to measure up to expectations. The faithless way is to scorn the task and be a naysayer. God asks us to be inspired by His spirit; not to lose courage or strength and continue to struggle for the redemption to occur. These words are no less true today than they were in the time of Zechariah and in the days of the Maccabees.

The prophet sees the high priest, Joshua, standing before the angel of the Lord with Satan, the adversary, **“standing at his right side to accuse him. And the Lord said to Satan, ‘The Lord rebuke you, O Satan! The Lord who has chosen Jerusalem, rebukes you! Is not this a brand plucked from the fire?’”** We can see that Joshua’s garments are filthy—unfit for priestly service—but the angel says, **“Behold, I have taken your iniquity away from you, and I will clothe you with pure vestments”** (Zech 3:1b–4). Joshua is restored and equipped for service, but how did his garments become unclean in the first place?

An old Jewish interpretation is that Joshua got polluted because he was among those who tolerated intermarriage during the days of Ezra. Rashi says that he is the priest mentioned by name in Ezra 10:18: Now there were found some of the sons of the priests who had married foreign women: Maaseiah, Eliezer, Jarib, and Gedaliah, some of the sons of Jeshua the son of Jozadak and his brothers. Jeshua here is Yeshua in Hebrew, of course—the same name that our Messiah was given by his parents and that we use today. But whatever the source of Joshua/Yeshua’s defilement, the Lord decrees mercy, not judgment. The accuser is to be rebuked. This priest is a brand, a burning branch plucked from the flames of exile, and God still has a purpose for him. The Hebrew word for “brand” can also be translated “firebrand” as in Isaiah 7:4 and Amos 4:11—a branch drawn out of fire that bears fire itself as a crude torch. The light-bearing Joshua/Yeshua is a hint of the Yeshua to come, who will be plucked out of the fires of suffering and death to bear light to the world.

From out of the conflagration of exile and adversity comes a flame, however feeble, which God values and protects. The fire threatening destruction of God’s people ignites a flame that serves God’s purpose. Despite all the difficulties of the struggling Jewish community of Zechariah’s day, the fire of God’s Spirit still burns among them in the person of Yeshua the high-priest.

The classic Christian commentators Keil & Delitzsch note: The priesthood of Israel was concentrated in the high priest, just as the character of Israel as the holy nation was concentrated in the priesthood. The high priest represents the holiness and priestliness of Israel . . . which had been graciously bestowed by God upon the nation of Israel. (citing Kliefoth, another commentator, on Zech 3:8)

God's response to Israel's failure is to graciously restore what he had graciously bestowed—a priestly service that will benefit all the nations (see Zech 2:15 [2:11]). God's response to Israel and its high priest in this vision is a word of encouragement for us within the Messianic Jewish community today.

Those of us who have been leaders and participants in our community for years can become discouraged and disheartened. Forty or fifty years into our Messianic Jewish journey we remain in many ways a struggling remnant. We find ourselves still divided on key issues and still seeking a firm foundation to build on. Like the high priest, we have sons and daughters who have wed themselves to foreign women and men, to foreign loyalties and beliefs, to foreign priorities. We constitute a community that can feel besieged and on the verge of being overwhelmed. We cannot be satisfied with our impact upon the wider Jewish community or our success in drawing Jewish people to their Messiah, Yeshua.

The words of the prophet bring great encouragement to us, however, for like Joshua the priest we are a brand plucked from the fire. The Messianic Jewish community was born out of the fires of alienation between the Jewish people and the Jewish Messiah, out of the age-old estrangement between the Jewish community and the body of Messiah. We have a long way to go, but this simple fact of our existence remains astounding and transformative.

The angel's rebuke on behalf of Joshua shouldn't be seen as making excuses for Joshua's failures. Yes, he has fallen short, but he is a brand plucked from the fire and God has a purpose for him still. We also have fallen short, but we are like Joshua, a brand plucked from the fire, and God has a purpose for us as well, which he will accomplish by his Spirit despite our shortcomings.

With such a vision in sight let's hear anew Zechariah's words of empowerment: **Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit says the Lord of hosts.**



Torah Portion: The Maccabees

The very first Hanukkah was quite different than our own. As you know millennia ago the Maccabees fought a three year struggle against the mighty Syrian-Greek army. The ruler of the Syrian-Greeks, Antiochus Epiphanes had decreed that our people could no longer practice their Judaism.

In the Hanukkah story, the Jewish people are oppressed by a greater empire, forced to abandon their deepest religious practices until a small military force arouses the people

to fight back and against all odds defeat the greater power. And yet the legend tells us even then they seemed to be stymied in their efforts to consecrate the Holy Temple until a miracle occurs that affords them the time to prepare consecrated oil for the Temple menorah and resume the sacred rituals.

Here are just a few of the oppressive rules. No Jewish sacrifices could be offered. Instead sacrifices of pigs had to be made to Zeus. Pagan temples had to be built in the land of Israel. Circumcision was prohibited. We could no longer observe our Torah laws but instead had to follow Greek laws. Shabbat and holiday celebrations were strictly forbidden. Everyone had to party on the Emperor's birthday. Participation in Greek parades was mandatory. The penalty for not following any of these rules was of course death. And finally it was forbidden to identify oneself as a Jew. No one was even allowed to use Jewish names any more. So you could not be called Noah or Talya or Josh, but you could be called Bruce, Kim or Steve.

Well thank God the Maccabees did not want to be called Steve. (By the way the meaning of the name Steven comes from the Greek meaning crown. A bit ironic) The Maccabees would not accept any of these laws. They fought a long hard battle and as you know, won. They cleaned up the Temple, dedicated it in an eight day long celebration (Hanukkah means dedication), threw out all of those Jewish Steve's, and proclaimed the holiday of Hanukkah for all generations to come. Today we light our menorahs to commemorate their victory and also of course as a reminder of the miracle of oil. Everyone knows this part of the story. There was barely enough oil for a one day dedication ceremony. Nonetheless the menorah was lit and the oil miraculously lasted for all eight days.

The story of Hanukkah is a story of light illuminating what appears to be dark.

What sometimes comes as a shock to those who are familiar with the Hanukkah story of

the one cruse of oil that lasts for eight days, is that the only source we have for that story is the Talmud. Even there, the passage introducing the story is kind of odd: Mai Hanukkah? The Talmud asks – What is Hanukkah? The assumption is that the custom of lighting lights during this dark winter period is a common custom among Jews but it is not clear why or how this commemorates the Hanukkah story of the Maccabean revolt and reconsecration of the Temple.

There is, however, another explanation of the lighting of lights at Hanukkah time found in our tradition. The Sages told a story about what happened to Adam, the first human being, at this winter time of the year. As the days began to become shorter, Adam was terrified. Each day there was less light and, having never experienced this before, he assumed that this was the end of the world, each day would become darker until the world receded into its original nothingness. He assumed that this was the punishment for his disobedience to God. But after the winter solstice, when the days began to become longer he realized that this was merely the natural order of the world and the Talmud tells us Adam instituted an eight day festival each year to celebrate it. He did so in gratitude to God, but later pagans celebrated it in honor of their false gods (Avodah Zarah). This legend was the Sages' explanation for the origin of the Roman holidays that occur at this time of year, holidays that included lighting lights, holidays that later were adopted by Christianity as Christmas and New Years. It is no accident that Christmas lights play such a prominent role in that holiday. Lighting of lights during the darkest days of the year is a common element to festivals in many cultures. Rabbi Reuven Hammer notes it probably originated in sympathetic magic. In an attempt to encourage the sun to shine longer, you light fires. This, people believed, would help to restore the sun's brilliance. I myself, still remember lying by the Christmas tree, with no lights other than those on the tree casting light. It felt magical.

Lighting lights when the days are short makes sense in many ways. The light is needed to see in the lengthened darkness but we also know that lack of light during these months can cause a physiological condition called SAD, Seasonal Affective Disorder, that can cause depression. The solution to those who suffer is to employ an especially bright artificial light.

It makes sense, then, that Jews – no less than all cultures living in deepening darkness – would have wanted to light lights at Hanukkah time in order to dispel the darkness and gloom, to brighten their lives when the depression of the winter season sets in. The legend of the miraculous oil insured that Jewish lighting of lights was not an imitation of pagan rituals but were truly tied to the events of Hanukkah. We all need light in our lives, not only physical or physiological, not only metaphorical but psychological as well. We need signs, examples, reports that remind us that even when things seem dark, the dawn is just around the corner. Or in the words of the midrash, while others are dealing with sorrow, the Holy One is preparing the light of the Messiah. That is also the reason why increasing the light each day - is more acceptable than decreasing the number each day until there are none. Increasing light is optimistic, the other is pessimistic. One gives us hope, the other takes it away.

Purim is the story of Esther which is seen as a kind of parallel to the Joseph story, there is a natural connection from the miracle aspects of both stories and the unexpected reversal of fortune in each tale. In the Joseph story, Joseph is hated by his brothers, conspired against, sent into slavery and despite doing the right thing, keeps getting beaten down until his dream interpretive skills are appreciated by the Pharaoh. Both tales tell of the victory of light over darkness, in the metaphorical sense and in the case of Hanukkah, in a very literal sense as well. An interpretation is only an act of self-discovery. A dream can only have meaning for the one who interprets the dream.

Can you recall a moment around which the narrative arc of your entire life pivots? Perhaps a conversation with someone who became a professional mentor? Perhaps a glance across a crowded room and catching sight of the person you would marry? Or, perhaps being asked to interpret a dream, and instead offering a plan to survive a coming famine...

After rising to a position of privilege within his family and sharing dreams in which he is the center of the universe, the heavenly bodies circle around him, Joseph is thrown into a pit and sold as a slave to Egypt. Joseph then rises within the household of Potifar to a position of privilege, only to be thrown into prison.

And then, Joseph has an audience with Pharaoh, a combination of parole board hearing, job interview, and therapy session all at once. Pharaoh shares his dreams with Joseph: Seven thin cows consume seven fat cows. Seven sickly sheaves consume seven healthy sheaves. Joseph then offers a correct interpretation of the dreams' meaning. There will be seven good years and seven bad years. And then Joseph does something else! He offers advice to Pharaoh! Save food during the seven good years for the seven lean years. Find someone you trust to oversee this process.

Joseph, an imprisoned slave, pulled out of the "pit" to interpret Pharaohs' dreams, deigns to offer advice on policy and politics to an absolute monarch who had not asked his opinion. And, hard as it is to imagine, it works! Pharaoh accepts Josephs plan and appoints Joseph himself to be the one in charge of gathering and distributing food. The Lubavitcher Rebbe, not the one who met with Freud, but a descendant through marriage, suggested that Joseph did not speak out of place because the solution to Egypt's predicament was inherent in the dream itself. The seven fat cows and seven lean cows stood together in the dream at the same time. There could be planning for the lean years during the fat years and there could be a remnant of the fat years during the lean

years. Joseph offered advice because the advice was there in the dream itself that he had been asked to explain.

Rabbi Tamir Granot, of the hesder yeshiva in Ra'anana, noticed that Joseph's decision to share a response to Pharaoh's dream was a moment fraught with religious significance. Pharaoh understood dreams to be messages of fate to be accepted passively. Once a dream is interpreted, there is nothing one can do other than prepare for one's coming fate. Joseph had absorbed a Jewish notion of prophetic destiny. The future can always be shaped. In response to a prophetic warning, we can change course and take control of our destiny. Joseph was therefore teaching Pharaoh the meaning of Pharaoh's dream, and also teaching him the meaning of dreams. Joseph understood that passivity was the wrong response to Pharaoh's dreams because the themes of Pharaoh's dreams, food and power were familiar to Joseph from his own life and his own dreams.

But whereas Joseph's first dream was one in which he worked in the field to harvest food and that was his source of power, Joseph is entirely passive in his second dream. The sun and moon and stars bow to him as he sits motionless. That dream of passivity leads in short order to Joseph being thrown into a pit.

The two dreams that Joseph hears in prison have a similar pattern. The butler dreams of activity, going about his job, moving and doing. The baker is passive as birds eat his food. Things turn out well for the butler, not so well for the baker.

Joseph understands that the meaning of all six dreams is that he, Joseph, must not be passive, in using food as a means to secure his future and protect his family. Joseph speaks up with a bold plan for surviving and thriving in the face of famine because the entirety of his dreams push him to understand that nothing is left to fate and everything

depends on his willingness to seize the moment and take advantage of every opportunity provided to secure a better and different future.

That's a message of Hanukah as well. The Maccabees faced an onslaught of challenges. Against overwhelming military, political, economic, and religious power in the hands of our enemies, they sought to reassert control over our destiny as a people. That Hanukah message is one that seems quite apt this year as well. Looking at the challenges facing our community, there is much cause for pessimism and little basis for naive optimism that everything will work out OK in the end. But naive optimism did not fuel the Maccabees victory and naive optimism did not lead to Joseph's own triumphs. The path to a better future, now as well as back then, can be found in rejecting passivity, finding arenas where one can be active, and insisting on taking responsibility for writing our own future. We should be doing all we can to make sure justice is done, and some ways we can do so in our communities is by voting for honest judges and politicians, supporting ministries that work to extend justice to the unborn, or media such as Ezra Levant and The Rebel Media.

The story of Joseph, who by wit and moral constancy, overcame his struggles, and the story of Maccabees who fought against religious persecution, show us that light can be increased in the world, but only when we take actions to improve the world. These stories remind us that God is there more often in hidden miracles and depends on us to do the fighting against the darkness that threatens the values we treasure.

Shabbat Shalom Mishpocha, Let us consider these lessons when we kindle the lights of Hanukkah.