

Tonight we light the seventh candle on the Chanukiah, as the sixth day of the feast draws to a close. We will light eight candles at the end of the seventh day of Chanukah, as we usher in the eighth day. On the eighth day itself, we do not light any candles. The sunset of the preceding day actually ushers in the next day and it can take quite some time to get used to this way of measuring time.

Now, I would never like anybody to think that I am against the festival of Chanukah, just because I tell the truth about how it started and how it was first celebrated. I watched with pride as the first light was lit on the legislature menorah and I agree totally with the Lubavitcher rabbi that Chanukah is a festival of light, but that is about as far as it goes.

Yeshua said that He was the light of the world and that we should let our light shine in our darkening world. Even though the nine candle menorah was taken from the Greeks as a symbol of victory, I do not consider it a pagan symbol. It symbolizes the victory of our people over their Greek enemies and I am glad that for once, we were on the winning side!

Attempts to get Jewish and Gentile believers to assimilate and abandon their faith are occurring even as we speak. When I tell someone that I am a biblical creationist, it is usually just as if I had slapped them in the face. Most secular people in our society feel that the Bible has been proven to be wrong and should only be used as an historical reference.

On Chanukah, I want to make sure my light is shining bright with none of the smoke of the world being allowed to put it out. As part of my discussion this year, I want to make some points about this wonderful festival, even if they go against popular traditions.

At first, Judah the Maccabee fought against Jews who had assimilated into the Greek religion and who had adopted the Greek culture. He died in the long conflict and his brothers carried on with the task of fully liberating the Holy Land. It was only near the end of the conflict that they fought against the Seleucid Greek armies.

At one point, a majority of Jews had adopted the Greek religion and the study of the Torah was forbidden, as was the keeping of the Sabbath and performing the rite of circumcision. Scholars had to pretend to either be gambling with dice (dreidels) or to be studying the Prophets, which was not illegal. They would have had money in the centre of their circle and had to gamble until the guards or the informants went away.

They selected Prophetic portions which reflected the weekly Torah portions and in honour of their bravery, we still study the same prophetic portions, along with the weekly Torah portions. So many Torah scrolls were destroyed that at one point, just before the rebellion by the Maccabees, there were only a few scrolls left, well hidden in the hills. Possession of a Torah scroll was punishable by death – would you still study yours if the same penalty existed today?

Once Judah had defeated the Hellenistic (Greek) Jews, he turned on other pagan groups that dwelt in the Holy Land and gave them a choice – convert to Judaism or die. Most of them converted.

The remaining Hellenistic Jews took refuge in ten fortified towns, which came to be called the Decapolis and these towns were still around when our Messiah walked among us. When our

Messiah was travelling through the Galilee, he came to one of these cities, called Gergesa and performed a very controversial miracle.

The town had a herd of one thousand sacrificial pigs which they offered to the Greek gods. When He cast out the legion of demons, they asked to go into the pigs. Once they entered the pigs, the animals went crazy and drowned themselves in the lake. Yeshua drowned these abominations to show the people that they were really sacrificing to demons and not to YHVH. Jews should never assimilate to any other religion and should also never adopt any pagan elements in how we worship YHVH.

The rebellion under the Maccabees put an end to the pagan Greek influence in the Holy Land and by the time they finished, both the Philistines and the Edomites had converted to Judaism. Christianity started as a kind of Judaism and when a Jew becomes Messianic, he is not converting to another religion, even if too many Gentile Christians have allowed any number of pagan influences to affect both what they believe and how they express their faith.

When Judah cleansed the temple, the pagan statue of Zeus was removed and the temple was cleansed. The temple menorah was repaired and lit. It was a Menorah with seven branches and not a Chanukiah with nine branches. There are two versions of the supposed miracle of light which was said to have occurred, once the menorah was repaired.

The most popular version is that there was only enough oil to light the menorah for one day, but it miraculously burned for eight days, until more oil could be prepared. Another version of the miracle of the light was that Judah the Maccabee and his soldiers threw eight metal spears in the ground before the menorah and their spears suddenly burst into flame.

Could G-d have caused the menorah oil to burn for eight days? Easily, but we have to ask each other if that was really what happened. It was not. When Judah cleansed the temple, the people had not been able to celebrate Sukkoth that year, so they had a second Sukkoth which lasted from the 25 of Kislev to the 2nd of Tevet. They took a Greek symbol of victory and the rest of the legends developed over the years. But there was a problem.

It was a festival that was not under the supervision of the Rabbis and the people came to believe that just as Judah came into the temple and cleansed it, Messiah would come into the temple on the Feast of Dedication and declare Himself. They felt Messiah would arm them with special weapons and they would not only drive the Romans out of the Holy Land, but they would go on to conquer the world as they followed a military Messiah.

This way of looking at Chanukah alarmed the rabbis, who were afraid someone claiming to be the Messiah would lead a revolt against the Romans which would be brutally suppressed and might even result in the destruction of the temple. For a while, they forbade the celebration of Chanukah and excluded anyone from the synagogues who celebrated it.

This did nothing to diminish its popularity, so the Rabbis decided to take over the festival, remove any reference to the Messiah and make it all about celebrating Jewish courage in the face of forced assimilation. They accepted the nine branched menorah, added dreidels and all reference to it being a second Sukkoth was lost.

It is not a biblical feast, but it does celebrate events that helped to preserve our people in one of the darkest moments in their history. There are a few reasons why I feel we should celebrate

this amazing festival. First, it does speak of amazing courage and our people's refusal to assimilate. Judaism was being brutally suppressed and might not have survived if it were not for the courage of the Maccabees. What happened was not a legend or a story that someone made up. It actually happened, but not in the way the people came to believe under the influence of the Rabbis.

The Chanukiah is a Greek symbol of victory and our people won a great victory over the pagan Greeks, so why not use their nine branched menorah to celebrate this victory? We won, they lost and Judaism was saved. There will always be other attempts to attack and undermine our faith, but G-d will always raise up heroes to lead us to victory over those who want us to assimilate. It will rarely be a military struggle because the weapons of our warfare are spiritual and the sword we take up is the Word of G-d.

Also, Chanukah celebrates a mighty victory over assimilation, which still remains a danger for us today. We have to hang on to our biblical faith and not let anybody pull us away from the Word of G-d. It is a festival of light and our Messiah is the light of the world. He died on the cross for the sins of the world and His light will never go out and His coming Kingdom cannot be overthrown.

So play with your dreidels and chocolate coins, light your Chanukiahs and eat your latkes with apple sauce and sour cream. Sing Chanukah songs and rejoice that, once again, a major attempt to destroy Judaism failed.

Also, we are celebrating an actual historical event and it is not a fairy tale. Under the Persians there was a considerable religious tolerance and our people prospered and even won many converts to Judaism. When Alexander the Great conquered the Persian empire, at first, Jewish people were also treated with religious tolerance. But after Alexander's death, the situation for our Jewish people suddenly became very dark.

Four generals fought for control over Alexander's empire and two of them turned their attention to the Holy Land. While we lived under the Egyptian Ptolemies, Judaism prospered and almost as many Jews lived in Egypt as they did in the Holy Land. They were Greek speaking and a group of scholars produced a Greek translation of the Bible, the Septuagint.

After a while, the Seleucid Greeks wanted to reconquer Alexander's entire empire and force all of the conquered people to adopt both the Greek religion and the Greek language. They drove the Ptolemies out of the Holy Land and began a violent campaign to force the Jews to assimilate into the Greek world. Any who resisted were slaughtered and it looked like biblical Judaism was doomed.

I am grateful for the courage of the Maccabees and for the long struggle they undertook in defence of our biblical faith and we should honour their memory and allow the example of their courage inspire us to cling to the Tree of Life in our beloved Messiah.

But there is another problem that will always need to be addressed. While many attempts have been made to assimilate us from the outside, there is also a threat from the inside which must be dealt with thoroughly – the rise of non biblical traditions in our midst.

Our faith always needs to be relevant in every generation, but there is a core which should not be messed with, if we do not want to collapse and dissolve from the inside. What started as a

second Sukkoth, should have remained a second Sukkoth and thanks to the courage of the Maccabees, conditions were right for the Messiah to show up and fulfill the first part of His ministry.

He did go into the temple during the festival of Dedication (Chanukah) and He did declare Himself, but not in the way the people expected. You see, YHVH will always be faithful to His Word and He never bows before popular opinion. He has His agenda and that is the one we should be following, whether or not it is popular or safe to do so.

With the loss of the second temple, the rabbis were beginning to take control over all the Jewish groups which existed at the time. They wanted every Jew to believe as they did and to obey their laws which they claimed to be on par with the Torah. And even though they have a great reverence for the Scriptures, they have equal reverence for their traditions. They believe that there are two distinct Torahs: the written Word and the Oral Torah.

They believe that YHVH spoke the written Torah out loud, so that Moses could record it. Then YHVH is said to have whispered the Oral Torah into Moses' ears, so it could be passed on by the seventy elders and eventually be written down. There is no Oral Torah that originates with YHVH. Many Gentile churches have also developed extensive traditions which they also claim are on par with what the Bible teaches.

It is right and proper for each new generation of believers, Jewish and Gentile, to develop new ways of putting the teachings of G-d's Word into practice, no matter what altered situations they encounter. Making the Bible meaningful in various cultural settings is called accommodation. Adding to or subtracting from its content, is called syncretism and is a form of assimilation from the inside out.

As we celebrate this amazing eight day festival and light candles, we need to be as strong and as stubborn as the Maccabees and refuse to budge, even an inch, from what the Bible teaches. We might find different ways of applying the same biblical principles and we may have to be incredibly flexible and creative as we find ways to keep the Bible as both the centre of our lives and as the solid rock we will not be removed from.

Sometimes we may wish that the Bible gave us more details and explained to us more about the secret things of G-d, but when we accept the Bible's silence, we are making sure that we do not add to its contents, nor subtract from them.

Over the centuries, Chanukah has taken on a life of its own and I agree that it should be a celebration of courage in the face of forced assimilation, but removing all and any messianic expectation from it is something I am not willing to accept. Yeshua is the light of the world and one day His kingdom shall burst forth upon an unsuspecting world. Every year this marvellous event gets closer and we need to live our lives in His light, with at least the same courage and determination as the Maccabees possessed.

Traditions may come and traditions may go, but as long as our lives remain focused on His unchanging Word, we will not get lost or become sidetracked as we wander through this life on our way to our Father's Home in Glory. Shabbat Shalom and Chag Chanukah sameach.