

Vayeshev **And He (Jacob) Settled Cheer up, things could get worse, and they did**
Torah: Gen. 37:1-40:23
Haftarah: Amos 2:6-3:8
Brit Chadashah: Matthew 1:1-6; 16-25

Sometimes we mistakenly expect that just because we are under the protection of YHVH who will always provide for our needs, that even if we encounter struggles, only good things will end up happening to us. Joseph was sold into slavery by his jealous brothers when he was only 17 years old (37:2), but he had to wait until he was thirty years old (41:46) for things to turn around for him.

It was because of Reuben that Joseph was not immediately killed by his brothers (37:21) and because of Judah that he was sent out of their reach, so they could no longer harm him (37:27). His brothers fake his death, and despite Joseph's prophetic dreams, Jacob believes that his favourite son is dead (37:33). He goes into a period of long mourning and we have an interlude where Judah unwittingly performs the Levirate obligation with his daughter-in-law.

The incident is said to have occurred during that time, likely during the 13 years Joseph was in captivity in Egypt. Judah possibly feels remorse for recommending that he and his brothers sell Joseph into slavery and he takes a break from his family. He goes and stays with a friend called Hira and while he is there, he takes a Canaanite women (Shuah) as one of his wives.

She bears him three sons, Er, Onan and Schela. He takes a woman called Tamar as a wife for his eldest son, Er. He was a wicked man and YHVH killed him – we are not told how. Judah requires that his second son Onan perform a Levirate marriage with Tamar so that she can provide her dead husband with an heir. When he does not comply and spills his semen on the ground and YHVH cause him to also die.

Judah suspects that there is something wrong with Tamar and he sends her home to her father's house until Schela is old enough to marry her and perform his now double Levirate obligation. There is no indication that Onan had any children, so Schela would now have to produce two heirs, one for each dead brother. When Schela was old enough to marry, he is given another wife and does not marry Tamar. She comes with her own creative solution.

Judah's wife, Shuah dies and once the unspecified time of mourning is over, he travels to help his friend, Hira, fleece his flocks (38:12). We are not told how long Judah stayed away from his brothers. He is at least back in time to join his brothers as the ten make their first journey to get grain from Egypt. While he is still with Hiram, he notices a veiled prostitute and asks her how much she would charge for him to have sexual relations with her.

Her fee is a young goat and the two enter her tent and Judah is unaware that he is having sexual relations with his daughter-in-law. He has no goat with him, so he leaves his signet, his cord and his staff as pledges that he will send the young goat and be able to retrieve his property. While Judah is getting a young goat, she dresses back into her mourning clothes and goes back to her father's house. Judah gives up on trying to get a goat to her and, to avoid scandal, he says she can keep his pledges. It took three months for signs of her pregnancy to show, so we know that she was fertile and not barren.

Judah is told of her infidelity and wants to burn her at the stake for being a prostitute. Before he is able to arrange her execution, she produces his three pledges and he says that she is less guilty than him. He did not allow his youngest son to perform the levirate obligation and raise up heirs for his deceased older brothers. Judah never touched her again, once her twins were born, but as the mother of his heirs, she would have remained a part of his household. She bears twin boys and the levirate obligation is successfully performed, not by Judah's surviving son, but by her father-in-law himself.

Meanwhile, even in his captivity, YHVH's blessing comes upon all the works of Joseph's hands. His master, Potiphar, places his entire household under Joseph's supervision and he is mightily blessed. There is no indication that he tried to buy his freedom and find his way home. He probably did not want to live his life as a runaway slave.

He is well built and handsome and even though we are never given her name, Potiphar's wife is attracted by Joseph and wants the handsome young man to have sex with her. When he turns her down, she arranges for them to be all alone in Potiphar's house. She seizes his outer garments and he has to leave them behind in order to escape from her clutches.

She uses this piece of evidence against Jacob and claims that he tried to rape her. Potiphar realizes that Joseph is a blessed person, so when he is put in prison, it is not in the ordinary prison, but in the king's prison where people of importance are kept. The blessing of YHVH still follows Joseph and he becomes the superintendent of the prison of all the prisoners (39:22). We may not always be delivered out of our problems, but the blessing and the provision of YHVH can follow us during our times of trial.

After Joseph has been in charge of the prison for some two years, two VIPs are sent to prison by Pharaoh. He has a cup bearer who is actually the one who tastes all of his food, to make sure it is not poisoned. His head baker also loses Pharaoh's favour. In the same night, both prisoners have a disturbing dream where the number three figures as a dominant feature of what they see. When he sees how troubled they are, he offers to interpret their dreams. He has had several vision dreams himself and was able to make sense of the dream's symbolism.

Joseph says to the cup bearer that he will be restored to his privileged position in three days. He tells the unfortunate head baker that Pharaoh was going to execute him in three days. Joseph asks for their help, once they see the visions unfold according to Joseph's interpretations. Once the cup bearer returns to Pharaoh's service he forgets about helping Joseph.

Now there are several instances where people have had prophetic dreams and prophetic visions and though most of what we dream is just our mind sifting through what we are going through (Eccl. 5:2), sometimes we are receiving coded messages from YHVH. These either come with an explanation or their meaning is so obvious, no interpretation is required.

Both palace officials knew they were having a prophetic vision and wanted to know what it meant. Anytime we receive one of these special dreams, they will never contradict the Bible and we might need help from someone who is gifted at interpreting prophetic visions. The explanation must resound with what is going on, both in our lives and in our hearts. YHVH will never leave us or forsake us.

Sermon: Chanukah: People Can Only Be Pushed So Far

You know, just believing in something does not make it real, just as not believing in something does not make it unreal. There are many legends that have crept into our observance of Chanukah and many of the original details are no longer remembered. As a believer with a great respect for history and an even greater respect for the Bible, I want to go back to the original story, before I give any consideration to how a festival should be observed.

After koine Greek became a dominant language in the ancient Middle East, there was quite a lot of pressure exerted on the conquered people to adopt the Greek religion or at least combine it with elements of their original faith. Once the Seleucid Greeks got control of the Holy Land, they embarked on a vigorous campaign to eradicate Judaism and to force Jews to adopt the Greek religion.

At first, there was quite a bit of resistance to this forced conversion, but after several massacres and lost battles, a large segment of the Jews assimilated into the Greek religion. Reading the Torah was a capital crime, as was keeping the Sabbath, observing the Festivals, and circumcising your male babies. So many observant Jews hid their Torahs in caves and began studying prophetic passages which reflected the forbidden Torah content.

In honour of their bravery, we still read the Haftarah portions, along with the weekly Torah portion. In the small Jewish village Modi'in, an old Aaronite, Mattathias, saw a member of the village performing his required annual sacrifice of a pig on a pagan altar, under the protection of a soldier. He was enraged, killed both the soldier and the man sacrificing a pig. He then fled into the hills with his sons. He died soon after, but his sons initiated a lengthy campaign of guerrilla warfare against the Jews who had assimilated into the Greek culture and religion.

At first, they were not allowed to fight on the Sabbath, but an exception was made for them. They could not initiate a battle on the Sabbath, but if they were attacked, they could fight back. It took a long time, but gradually the forces of the assimilated Jews were defeated and driven out of Jerusalem. Mattathias' son, Judah, cleansed the temple and since the Jews had not been able to celebrate Sukkoth that year, a second Sukkoth was mandated.

Each day of the second Sukkoth was not treated either a holy day or an intermediate day, but since this new festival was not under the direct control of the priests or rabbis, it took on a life of its own. Jews began to believe that just as Judah the Maccabee entered the temple during this festival, so Messiah would also enter the temple during this festival and declare the beginning of his worldwide ministry to bring all the scattered children of Adam and Eve, back to G-d and to His Torah.

This is what did happen during one Chanukah when Messiah walked among us. The first mention of Chanukah in print is John 10:22, where it says Yeshua went into the temple during Chanukah. He proclaimed His divinity (John 10:30) and some of the Jews wanted to stone Him, because He pronounced the Sacred Name and thus proclaimed His equality with YHVH. They were not able to seize him, likely because at that time He was surrounded by His followers. Chanukah had turned into a celebration of Messianic expectation. False messiahs would come into the temple during Chanukah, gather some followers and begin a campaign of guerrilla warfare until they were defeated and the fake messiah was killed.

The rabbis even tried banning Chanukah which would exclude anyone from synagogue who celebrated this festival. Many of the original rituals of Sukkoth were gradually modified and the rabbis did not like the version of the festival which they had to deal with. So, they took over the festival and instituted a whole new series of rules and regulations. They even accepted one version of a myth that the people believed.

In their modified version of events, Judah repairs the temple menorah but only has enough oil for one day. The oil is supposed to have miraculously lasted eight days, hence the eight days of the new feast. Any connection with Sukkoth was suppressed and a unique nine canded menorah was developed, which we call a chanukiah. It is actually a Greek symbol of victory. Special prayers were composed, along with a series of songs and legends.

The people played a new dreidel game in honour of the courageous scholars who refused to give up the study of the Torah. Over the years, special foods were added. Potato pancakes, called latkes, became a part of the festival while our people dwelt in Eastern Europe.

Now there is no record of Judah having to repair the temple menorah or of running short on oil. The temple menorah only had seven candles, but since it is lit during the festival of Sukkoth, so was the Chanukiah. The problem of how to light it each day had to be addressed. One rabbi said all the candles should be lit on the first day and then one less each day until the festival was over.

Another rabbi said that the servant candle (the Chumash) should be used to light the first candle at the beginning of the festival. Another candle was lit each day until all of them were lit on the last day. What was once a chance for Jews to celebrate Sukkoth in the month of Kislev, became a celebration of Jewish bravery and the refusal to assimilate.

The assimilated Jews who fought against the observant ones, were turned into a Syrian army, and, in some versions, the Maccabees had to face elephants, when they fought their enemies. At Chanukah today, the long struggle that Judah's brothers fought over many painful years is not remembered. Some of the defeated assimilated Jews did survive and in the first century, they had ten special fortress towns that were called the Decapolis.

Virtually none of the modern Chanukah traditions were around when Messiah walked among us, but He did encounter at least one of the villages of the Decapolis, Gerasa. There he encountered a man possessed of many demons who dwelt in a graveyard. The demons asked Yeshua not to confine them to the pit, but to allow them to go into a herd of one thousand pigs which were grazing nearby. They were allowed to enter the pigs, but the animals went insane and drown themselves in the nearby lake.

He was making at least three points. First of all, the man was dealing with an almost unimaginable degree of pain, with a thousand demons tormenting him. Second of all, he wanted to tell the people of the town that the gods they were worshipping were really demons. Third, Jews should not even touch pigs, let alone be raising them as sacrificial animals.

The modern rituals of Chanukah are far less ornate than the ones used at Sukkoth and adding daily presents and sweet food is a nice touch. As Messianic Jews and Gentiles, we are not required to follow all the rituals of Chanukah devised by the Talmud, but I will provide a prayer guide and the rules of the dreidel game for those who feel so inclined.

The Chanukah menorah is not a biblical candelabra, but I have no objection to people lighting it. I also have no objection to those who want to put up Christmas trees. Neither symbol is biblical, but neither symbol is pagan. I will talk about the Jewish origins of Christmas next week, when the Sabbath falls on Christmas Day.

Both Mattathias and his sons had been pushed too far and they took action to save Judaism before forced assimilation wiped it out. They paid a high price for taking the stand they took, but saving Judaism was worth the price. They knew that the arrival of Messiah was imminent and they wanted to make sure that He had many observant Jewish followers to greet Him.

Now, I live as a fully observant Jew, but I do not follow the Talmudic traditions of the Orthodox or the Conservative Jews. I am not against the celebration of Chanukah and if you want to follow some of the traditions of this feast, you are doing nothing wrong.

Assimilation is wrong and should be resisted with every fibre of our being. Spiritual bravery is necessary and should always be an active part of our lives. I find it sad that most of the original story of Chanukah is not celebrated. Modern Chanukah has almost become as secular and commercialized as Christmas. It is seen as a fun time to spend with friends and to acknowledge the bravery of the Maccabees, even if the stories which are told about them were legends and never happened.

I am not some kind of Chanukah Grinch and our family is hosting a Chanukah party on Monday Dec. 19, which is also our daughters birthday. The festival of Chanukah begins at sunset on Sunday, the 18th of December and the last day of the Festival is sunset on Monday, December 26, which is also Boxing Day.

The Chanukah reminds us that Judaism is a religion of light and we should never hide our light under a bushel. Men should see our light and glorify YHVH for the light He sends and for the light in which we dwell. We must never allow even the slightest amount of paganism into our lives, but it is not wrong to come up with our own traditions as we celebrate the Festivals. It only becomes a problem when we take myths and legends and treat them as if they were actually true.

I feel very privileged to celebrate two festivals about the Messiah and want to make Him the centre of both holidays. We need to put the Messiah back in Chanukah and use it as a festival which announces His coming Kingdom. I would encourage you to read John 10:22-39 on one of the nights. Perhaps also read Luke 8:26-39. Here are six more suggested Chanukah readings: Matthew 5:17-20; Matthew 6:25-34; Zachariah 4:1-4; Isaiah 9:1-7; Isaiah 52:13-53:12; Rev. 4:1-5:6. One for each night of Chanukah.

Removing all the myths and legends from our celebrations, does not impoverish them, it sets them free to be celebrated both with the original authentic stories and the traditions we develop to help us make our celebrations rich and meaningful.

We should remember that when Judah Maccabee cleansed the temple, there was still a long battle ahead to cleanse the Holy Land of its paganism and get it ready to welcome the Messiah. Lets make our celebration of Chanukah about three of its main intended themes. Whatever else we include is just icing on the cake.

The Festival should first be about spiritual bravery where we take a stand and refuse to allow any paganism to dominate our lives. This will not always be an easy task in our darkening, secular world. It will take constant vigilance, almost like posting a sentry in our hearts and lives. The price for removing all and any paganism from our lives may be high, but it is well worth the effort, even if most people continue to ignore the original meaning of the Festival.

Chanukah should also remain a festival which celebrates Messianic Expectation. Are you waiting patiently for the coming Kingdom? Is your heart and life full of lamp oil, like the wise virgins (Matthew 25:1-13)? Do you live by kingdom values (Matt. 6:33) and are you walking on the bumpy straight and narrow (Matt. 7:13, 14).

Are you prepared to fight for your faith and give a respectful answer to everyone who asks you a reason for your biblical faith (I Peter 3:15)? Would you still be prepared to study the Torah, even if it became illegal to do so and you had to hide in a cave to do it? Have you answered all the challenges our society has come up with against our faith, or are there areas of doubt that linger in your heart and life?

Having the courage and the perseverance to swim against the current, may not always be very popular and sometimes you may even find yourself being the only swimmer who has taken up this challenge. It is one thing to want to be popular and quite another to remain courageous. The enemy, the flesh and the world will always try and trip you and drag you back into the darkness which is trying to take over our world once again.

I want to be a good neighbour and even a good friend to many of my pre-believing friends. I want to reach out to the poor and the hungry. I want to speak out against oppression and violence wherever it occurs. I will uphold the Bible and take a firm stance on both the moral and the spiritual issues it upholds.

I believe more in the coming of Messiah's Kingdom than I do in the daily rising and setting of the sun. This is where my primary citizenship lies. I will always be a vocal supporter of both our Jewish people and of the Land of Israel. And even in our gadget filled, social media driven world, I will keep my house firmly on the rock and not allow the world, the enemy or the flesh to gain even the slightest foothold in my life.

Finally, the third feature of how we ought to observe the Festival of Chanukah involves participating in worship and we know that regularly tithing ten percent of your increase is an important part of worship. Our worship should be both joyful and respectful. We do not sing many traditional Chanukah songs, but there are some of them I would like us to learn. Maoz Tzur (the strong rock) is one of them.

I used to have a collection of traditional Jewish festival songs and it might be a nice gesture to find recordings of Chanukah songs and give them as gifts to people you care a lot about. I would be open to getting one or two recordings as well.

So let us run through the candle lighting rituals and the rules of the dreidel game. May we make our celebration of Chanukah about our Messiah's coming Kingdom and the bravery we need to have to walk with Him. May we always be committed to worship as we joyfully celebrate both His protection and His provision in our lives. Shabbat Shalom. Shavua Tov. Happy Chanukah (Chag Chanukah or just simply Chag Sameach).