

23 Kislev, 5776 (5/12/15)

**Getting the Most Out of The Festive Season** J. M. Terrett**Vayeshev****And He Settled****The Straight and Narrow Can Be a Bumpy Ride****Torah:** Genesis 37:1-40:23**Haftarah:** Amos 2:6-3:8**Brit Chadashah:** Matthew 1:1-6; 16-25

This Torah portion begins with Jacob settling in the land, having survived both his encounter with his brother and the slaughter at Sichem. He is an old man, but he seems to take great pleasure out of his children and grandchildren, with special interest in Joseph and Benjamin. His sons seem to form three groups: the sons of Leah, the sons of the concubines and the sons of Rachel. They live as shepherds and move from place to place in search of grazing land and this gives Joseph's brothers a chance to deal with him far from the eyes of their father.

They resent two things about him – first the special favour which their father shows him, even though he is the second youngest, then his dreams (visions) which appear to give him dominance over his older brothers. Two of his brothers want to help him, but the only way to save him from eventually being killed by his brothers was to remove him from their reach. Reuben wants to restore him to his father and perhaps regain his father's favour, but Judah sees that the situation has no safety for his brother as long as he is with them.

He is sold into slavery and in a sense escapes into Egypt, where he is able to let the blessing of the L-rd help him rise above both the evil designs of his brothers and those of his first employer's wife. The portion contains an episode in Judah's life where he tries to protect his youngest son from performing his levirate obligation with an apparently dangerous woman. His two older sons prove unworthy of the woman who was selected to be their bride and when they die, he is afraid that anyone else who marries her will also die.

He is manoeuvred into performing the levirate obligation and surprisingly, does not die. She gives birth to two male twins, which must have pleased Jacob and we know from the customs governing the levirate obligation, that he never touches her again. Both she and her mother-in-law are Canaanite women, but they obviously abandon the idolatrous behaviour of their culture and join the community of Israel.

From the two of them, the blood line of Messiah is established in the House of Judah, even though the two youngest sons are considered the two eldest and the House of David rises up from among their descendants.

Joseph is blessed through his tribulations and the blessing of the L-rd follows him even more tenaciously than the troubles he encounters. These troubles will eventually cause him to be set up to become prime minister of Egypt, though they lasted nearly two decades. The portion ends with the cup bearer forgetting about the insignificant imprisoned Hebrew slave, but we know that whatever happens to us, we are never forgotten by G-d.

Of all the sons, Joseph appears to be the one who does not depart from the straight and narrow, even though it is an extremely bumpy ride. It is always worth it to walk with the King, even though you encounter tribulation, betrayal, danger and long periods of feeling

abandoned. We know what awaits us at the end of our pilgrimage and we know the end of the story, even though our episode of it may not be very pleasant or reassuring.

The prophetic portion in Amos outlines why the L-rd had to chastise His people. YHVH is nothing like Santa Claus, but He does keep a list and He knows when you are naughty and when you are nice. One of the stipulations of our discipleship agreement with the King is that He will discipline us when we wander and keep on working with us until we come to our senses, even if it takes the rest of our lives.

Too many believers spend their lives doing their own thing in the name of the L-rd, but true discipleship and true blessing occur when we refuse to be sidetracked from the straight and narrow, no matter how bumpy it gets. Rather than lamenting the happenstances of our lives, we ought to relish the privilege which we have to be walking with the King of Glory in a darkening, spiritually confused world. When the pull of the world grows too strong, the bumpy straight and narrow kicks in and we are either brought back to the place of faithful obedience or we do laps around the mountain until we come to our senses, no matter how long it takes.

The New Testament portion deals with the genealogy of our Messiah, which includes four Gentile women, beginning with Tamar. It goes on to mention another Joseph who is informed in a dream that his wife's pregnancy is not the product of any infidelity, but is the hand of G-d accomplishing His purposes through the House of David, just as He promised He would.

The history of the House of David is a bumpy road and the kingly line mentioned in Matthew is disqualified, so we know that Joseph, who belongs to this line, cannot be the father of our Messiah. G-d's purposes are even more inevitable than the carnal folly of our secular world and no matter how many times we seem to be thwarted, and no matter how bumpy the road gets, His purposes shall prevail and the straight and narrow remains the only acceptable path for believers to follow on our pilgrimage through this life.

Sermon: Getting the Most Out of the Festive Season

***Love not the world, neither the things which are in the world. For the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life are not of the Father but are of the world (I John 2:15, 16). Prove all things and hold fast to that which is good (I Thess. 5:21). Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good (Rom. 12:21).***

The month of December has often been called the silly season because of all the wind up to Christmas and New Year's which means that so many of the usual, ordinary business of living gets neglected until the dust begins to settle sometime in January. For us as a Messianic Jewish congregation of Jews and Gentiles, we are hit with a double whammy and it would be too easy for us to become overwhelmed and feel intimidated by the secular high jacking of the festive season which seems to sideline any possibility of spirituality during this time.

We need first to understand our triple mission in the world and then we need to know which battles to fight and how to conduct this combat in a season which remains a minefield of possibilities in a truly silly season.

We are called to exercises three kinds of reach as we walk through this life on our way home to our Father's home in Glory. We are called first to tenaciously maintain our up-reach and

never lose sight of our saviour and Messiah in our noisy, spiritually distracted world. People are clamouring to find the supposed true meaning of the season and for so many it is finding the right mate, fixing the tensions in a family or getting what we really wish for over the holiday season. For others it is learning to care for others and help those who are less fortunate. None of these worthy objectives have anything to do with walking with G-d and finding the true meaning of life, which is walking with G-d towards the life which is to come.

We need to be maintaining a good, tenacious up-reach and never to forget who He is and what he is doing in the world around us, despite all the trials and tribulations of our fast paced, secular madhouse. How is your up-reach doing? Do you know who He is through His blessed Messiah and is He the main focus of your life?

Our next mission involves what I like to call in-reach, or learning to become a redemptive, caring community where each one is cherished and all our of talents and resources are geared towards maintaining a safe place for each of us and all of us to grow spiritually and find our place in the flock, even if the pathway to this reality is the bumpy straight and narrow I spoke with you about in the Torah meditation. Our up-reach and our in-reach need to be the basis upon which our world is built so that we are inviting non-believers and pre-believers into a safe, dynamic community. This community will challenge us, annoy us and even frustrate us, but it needs to be the place where we have learned the difference between carnal, disruptive behaviour and spiritually authentic conflict resolution.

Until we have a safe sheepfold where the world is effectively fenced out and the spiritual truths of His world are effectively followed and fed upon, we are not really ready for the third mission which all believers are called to: outreach. Sharing our faith is both a conversation and a lifestyle where we both explain the reason of the hope which is in us (I Peter 3:15) and where our good works and our salty light glorify our Father and form the credibility echo people need to see so that when they come to faith, they have less of a chance of being lost by the wayside, scorched by a lack of roots or choked by the cares, the riches and the pleasures of life.

In other words, when they see us living the life of an integrated disciple who is joyfully feasting on the Word in prayer, then they have a concrete example of what the Word is talking about when the changes which believers should encounter are described. If there is any discrepancy, then our up-reach and our in-reach can get in the way of our outreach. We need to both have persuasive arguments to counter the secular humanism of our darkening world and also have a dynamic spirituality, which while not perfect, revolves around putting the truths of His Word into practice in every area of our lives. Nothing more, nothing less.

When all three aspects of our mission are functioning, then even when the road gets bumpy, we will be able to manoeuvre our way through the silly season with our spirituality intact and see newcomers challenged both by what we say and by how we live.

This is part of what I wanted to talk to you about this morning about getting the most out of the festive season and there is just one more aspect of this holiday survival which I want to discuss with you before we launch into Chanukah, and the rising tide of Christmas challenges us for one more silly season as the year draws to its end and we begin to climb out of the darkness which winter subjects us to.

I know many believers who really do not like Christmas and they engage with anyone who will listen, to tell them how secular and how pagan the festival has become. Now many of their observations are valid, while others seem to be the grumpy inventions of those who would like to turn their back on the season and wake up when it is all over.

I am more and more convinced that the real problem with the season is not the date or the decorations or some of the silly customs which involve massive cooking and extensive gift giving. The real culprit in both festivities (Chanukah and Christmas) is how the festive season has been secularized to remove any spiritual or supernatural meaning from this special time of the year. Our secular society wants to feel good and to gather with friends and family and party and share gifts and set out intricate and even exquisite decorations, both inside and outside their homes.

But the real pitfall for us is not all the glitz and the hype which inundates the season, even though I personally find it very tiring and even annoying. The real pitfall is for us to become so negative about the festive season that we give any potential spiritual meaning it may have a bitter taste.

A friend of mine has a big family gathering with all the kids and grandkids and he kicks things off with his annual tirade against Christmas and all the pagan elements which have crept in, from the supposed wrong date, to each one of the decorations which he especially loves to target. Then they open their gifts and sit down to a sumptuous meal. He just doesn't get that he is sending a mixed signal to the young people and he is distracting any potential spiritual meaning the festival could have.

Whether the date is wrong or right, it is the festival of the birth of the Saviour and it is the one time of the year where sharing our faith is natural and in context. I do not want to get sidetracked into being a Scrooge or a Grinch who is so focused on criticizing the festival that I forget to focus on the true meaning of the season - the birth of the Saviour at G-d's appointed time so that He could become the Messiah of promise and win eternal salvation for all the nations and generations of mankind, to the Jew first and also to the Gentile.

During the 17th century, Puritans in England got control of the country and outlawed Christmas as a pagan extravagance that they wanted nothing to do with. Anyone who celebrated Christmas faced fines and even jail time.

Their rule over the country did not last long and they were known more what they objected to than for what they stood for. This may be the greatest challenge for us as believers at this time of the year. It is a perfectly valid option to opt out of the season and go for Chinese food and watch your favourite videos instead of setting up decorations and opening gifts. But it is not the only option and people need to see how we relate to the secularization of what could be our greatest period of outreach.

I want to put the Messiah back into both Christmas and Chanukah and I will be talking more about Chanukah next week and Christmas the week after. But however I decide to celebrate or opt out, I need to be careful not to be so negative about the festive season that people get a sour taste in their mouths whenever they hear me talk about the season.

Instead of knocking the symbols, I could talk about the one and only true meaning of

Christmas, even if I have to dodge the mistletoe and push the fat old guy in a red suit aside. I may not have a tree and I may not surrender to all the gift giving and party going, but when people ask me why, I need to let them know that the true spirit of Christmas is the Holy Spirit of G-d who caused a virgin to be with child in accordance with the prophecies in the Bible about the Messiah and that truly He was born in a manger in Bethlehem and was proclaimed to be the Saviour of the world by the angelic host.

Instead of focusing on what is wrong with the festival, wouldn't it make more sense to use this time as a spring board to talk about the Gospel? We can lament the materialism and some of the silly customs which have nothing to do with the Saviour's birth, but if our overall message is negative and bitter, then we are in danger of doing as much or even more damage than the annoying secularization which wants to drain the festival of any of its possible spiritual meaning.

If the society tries to drown out the spiritual meaning of the festival with so much materialism and secular nonsense, then we should be careful of not adding to the problem by being so negative that all people hear about from us is what is wrong with the festival and not what it should really be all about.

So I see two potential barriers to getting the most out of the festive season. First all the secular nonsense which tries to silence the spiritual meaning of the season underneath a load of silliness that either turns the festival into a celebration of family or of parties and debauchery. Next I see the negativity which some believers have fallen into and that are so critical of the season, that people are not willing to hear about the intended spiritual meaning of the season - the birth of the Messiah who is the Saviour of the world.

People then have to wade through the secular nonsense and put up with the negative criticisms of the festival, and these two make it nearly impossible for people to be willing to consider the core meaning of the season. However you choose to celebrate or opt out, may you take the opportunity at this time of the year to share your faith in the Messiah of promise, over and above all the sidetracks and bitterness which the season also seems to generate. And may you get the most out of the season as you walk with the One it celebrates.