

7 Tevet, 5776 (19/12/15) **What Makes It the Most Special Time of the Year?** J. M. Terrett

**Vayigash**                    **And He Drew Near**                    **Never lose Sight of the Hand of G-d**

**Torah:**                    Genesis 44:18-47:27

**Haftarah:**                    Ezekiel 37:15-28

**Brit Chadashah:**                    Luke 6:12-16

(Sharon p. 161) Jewish Hero: Jethro    Torah Carrier: Denysia

In the last portion, Joseph's special cup is found in Benjamin's sack and he is prepared to keep Benjamin as a slave and release the others to return to their father. He may have wanted them to feel the anguish and hopelessness which he felt when he was sent into exile, far from his father. Judah makes a final pitch to get Benjamin released and offers to stay in his young brother's place. This is called vicarious, which means in the place of and shows the spiritual leadership of Judah. Again, when he says that he does not want to see the affliction of his father, Joseph is making them taste his own pain and the affliction which their action on his behalf caused his father.

He reveals himself to his brothers and declares that it was the hand of G-d which placed him where he is now. His brothers know they are completely in his power and that Joseph can do whatever he wants to them. He is also allowing them to feel the complete helplessness which he experienced when he went from favourite son to a slave in a foreign land. When we encounter heartbreak and distress, we should never feel that we have been abandoned by our G-d for even a moment, because He is there even in the darkest night and in the midst of our greatest peril. We should never lose sight of His hand and in every situation, we should ask ourselves what it is He wants us to do and how He wants us to react - which is the only thing which allowed Joseph to survive.

He did not try to escape and he did not sink into anger or self-pity. He served the L-rd, even when his troubles increased and he went from slavery to prison. Now, he is reaping what he has sown and he is preparing to save his family, even though his brother's hated him and wanted to kill him. It was only Judah's intervention which saved his life. Life is too short to wallow in bitterness and anger, even against those who may have hurt us the most and totally without cause. One of the sad realities among believers is the quarrelling and backbiting which is truly a form of spiritual self-destruction. When we are betrayed, hurt or lied about, instead of getting even, we should never lose sight of the hand of G-d as we ask Him how He wants us to respond and what it is He wants us to do. Two wrongs do not make a right and instead of perpetuating the quarrel and getting even, Joseph acts graciously because He has not lost sight of the hand of G-d.

His father is persuaded to come to Egypt and is told in a vision that he will die there, but not be buried there. He is promised that Israel will become a great nation and that Joseph will close his eyes. When he sees his son after so many years of mourning, he wants to die on the spot because he is so happy. The names of the heads of the families are listed in a mini-genealogy, to indicate the end of one story and the beginning of the other.

Only the heads of the families (and two [unmarried?] sisters) are mentioned by name and the seventy families who descend from one man, take up a position of prominence for a temporary sojourn in Egypt. As shepherds, the Jewish people are an abomination to the Egyptians, in spite of their privileged status, so there is no danger of assimilation, even for the family of Joseph which settles among their brethren. This would indicate that Joseph's position was not intended to be hereditary, because he was in the world, but was never part of the world.

He finishes his fourteen year mandate and leaves behind a permanent double consequence for Egypt. First all the land and all the people belong to Pharaoh and next they are all moved off the land in the cities. They could still go out to sow and reap, but they no longer lived on the land. This did not cause any resentment towards Pharaoh or Joseph because their lives had been saved and it allowed the Jewish people to grow and prosper in a land which greeted them with no hostility. This would come later when a new regime would take over Egypt. They were blessed by the fledgling great nation all because Joseph did not lose sight of the hand of G-d and his faithful obedience caused him to rise above his troubles, even if it took several decades where things did not appear to be going his way.

No matter where we are and no matter what is going on in our lives, as believers we are being upheld by the hand of G-d and as long as we do not lose sight of that hand, He will make sure that we too are able to rise above our troubles and be used of Him to bless even our enemies. In every situation of our lives, we need to understand that we are called to be stewards of His greater kingdom purposes, whether we are soaring with the eagles or trudging through the valleys. Especially at this time of the year, let us purpose never to lose sight of the hand of G-d and to never let the world or our unfortunate or fortunate circumstances dictate how we should live on our pilgrimage from conception to the grave and beyond. Ours is a higher calling to be a blessing, even among those who hurt us unjustly.

### **Sermon: What Makes It the Most Wonderful Time of the year?**

***This is why the L-rd himself shall give you a sign; behold the virgin shall become pregnant and shall give birth to a son and she shall give Him the name Emmanuel ((G-d with us) (Is. 7:14). For unto us a child is born, a son is born unto us; and the government shall be upon His shoulders; and He shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, Mighty G-d, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace (Is. 9:6)***

When we come to the L-rd, we can bring with us a considerable amount of baggage, both in terms of emotional damage and spiritual misinformation. We do not suddenly dump all of it at once and as young believers, we are not usually immediately or completely free from the influence of the world (the flesh or the enemy). There is a process of growth and reintegration where the twisted brainwashing which we have acquired from any number of sources (family, friends, society, training), is slowly and steadily undone and this process of deprogramming needs to become a lifelong reality so that we do not acquire more baggage as we wander through this life on our way home to our Father's House.

Phil. 3:12-16 talks about this process of forsaking that which lays behind and pressing ahead with the high calling of G-d, so that if in anything we are otherwise minded, G-d will reveal that to us, so it to can be eradicated. This is not an arbitrary process where we blindly accept everything which is taught to us from the Bible and where we mindlessly reject anything which comes to us which is not from the Bible. As our people were weaned away from the influences of Egypt during their wilderness wanderings, so the L-rd will challenge us and convince us of the truth of His Word until all the negative baggage we brought with us into the faith is dealt with and we are immune to the seduction of the world (the flesh, the enemy).

As we wander through this holiday season, we will be bombarded with any number of mixed messages about the meaning of the season and various supposedly appropriate ways we should learn in order to celebrate the festivities without losing the true meaning of Christmas. As believers, there are various ways we can relate to this annual holiday hype and I want to approach our reaction in two ways. First of all, we should never let Hollywood or the major retailers tell us how we should keep Christmas. Secondly, even if we feel that the Messiah's birth did not occur during this time of the year, we should use this opportunity to speak to our friends and neighbours about the greatest wonder in the cosmos – the birth of our saviour and Messiah.

Many of my neighbours are stringing out Christmas lights and decorating their houses with candy canes, ribbons and even inflatable Santas and his reindeer. They set up their tree and nearly bury it with gifts and use various holiday greetings at the myriad Christmas parties which occur over the season. Christmas movies are flooding the media and all kinds of special foods are being prepared. The kids are out of school and the stores are open for longer hours with what they claim are the most amazing specials of the year.

I can understand why some believers want to opt out of this hype because it disguises and diminishes the real reason for the season and it may soon even become politically incorrect to talk about the Saviour's birth amidst all the tinsel and gift giving. However, we should never let the world dictate to us how we should do anything because we serve the King of Glory and want to shine in our darkening world and avoid our greatest foe – functional assimilation into the values and beliefs of the world.

Both those believers who ignore the festival and those who celebrate it should respect each other's perspective and not claim that their approach is the only valid one to adopt. When I went on line and read all the holiday posts, both positive and negative, I came across one which made me smile and I want to share part of it with you. You all know that I am a history buff and a stickler for biblical accuracy so that we can avoid all kinds of nonsense and not be taken in by the deceptions which want to pollute our faithful obedience.

The post said: Quit making things up and claiming that everything is satanic. It was referring to the claims which say that everything from candy canes to holiday wreaths have a pagan origin and were once parts of pagan worship which serious believers should avoid. I am aware of the origin of most of the paraphernalia which comes our way at this time of the year and some of it is definitely pagan in origin, but not all of it.

I dislike the secular portrayal of Santa Claus which ignores his origins as Saint Nicolas and both Christmas trees and yule logs were used in pagan worship. However, the early church hijacked these and gave them a positive spiritual meaning which has no connection with their pagan past. I agree that we should have nothing to do with darkness or be unequally yoked with any of the works of darkness, but I have a question for you this morning. Why remind people about the pagan origins of various trappings which surround Christmas when reminding will further detract from the true meaning of Christmas, which is the birth of the Messiah.

As a matter of fact, His birth is the only part of the Christmas which is not based on myth and legend. Also, do we really think most people are worshipping their Christmas trees and performing all kinds of criminal pagan behaviour when they use these symbols in their homes? If we are going to opt out of the season, let us explain that we firmly believe in the wonderful birth of the eternal Saviour and we want to talk about Him and His love and not all the other silly nonsense which clogs the entire month of December every year.

Having said this let me shift gears and talk about the reality of the nativity of our L-rd. There are somewhere over 300 references to the birth, life, death and resurrection of our Messiah that are scattered throughout the Torah and other passages of the Old Testament. Nothing about what the New Testament says about any aspect of our Messiah or His ministry is of pagan origin and none of it was made up years after He lived, died, rose and ascended.

I have selected two passages from Isaiah which talk about of Messiah's birth and which firmly declare His divinity as the saviour of promise. First of all, without the help of a man, Mary conceived the most special baby ever to be born into our world. There are many miraculous births throughout the Scriptures, beginning with Isaac and ending with John the Baptist, but all of these births speak of a fertility problem which our L-rd overcame.

After the birth of Yeshua, Mary had at least four other sons and at least two daughters, so she did not struggle with fertility. The babe, who was conceived in her before she and Joseph had come together as husband and wife, was the work of the Holy Spirit, because G-d Himself was coming down through His Son to take up residence among us. He came to win eternal salvation for us and to break the power of sin, the devil and the world. He did not have an earthly father and did not descend from Joseph, but from Mary alone.

The virgin birth is a central teaching of the Scriptures and clearly indicates that our Messiah is truly G-d with us (Emmanuel). Isaiah goes on to give our Messiah five titles of divinity which are more amazing and miraculous than flying reindeer or a bag of toys which gets delivered all over the world in a single night. Christmas should not be about holiday romances or even about family gatherings and people being nice to each other for a change. It should be about the arrival of the extra-celestial Saviour whose light shone in the dark, even if it was neither understood nor received by the darkness into which it shone.

The truth of the Word is never diminished or threatened by the folly of the world or by its stubborn unbelief and ever reoccurring paganism and secularism.

We should take a leaf out of our enemy's play book, but apply it in reverse. Instead of focusing on trying to undermine a belief in the Saviour at Christmas, the enemy is trying to bury it beneath layers of myth and legend to the point that from a spiritual standpoint, how the world observes Christmas has got absolutely nothing to do with the babe who was born in the manger. We need to liberate the truth of Christmas from the layers of myth and legend and firmly and simply speak about the real meaning of Christmas.

The child who was born in the manger is Wonderful – which means deserving of worship and no other human being in the Scriptures is ever given this honour. The child who was born in the manger is Counsellor – which means filled with the wisdom of G-d and of the things of the world to come and though many people have been described as possessing divine wisdom, no one else in the Scriptures has ever been given the honour of this designation.

In case the people did not get it, He is also called the Mighty G-d, in order to distinguish Him from all the false gods and idols which have polluted our world for too long. He is not another G-d, nor are the Scriptures saying there is more than one G-d. The term Mighty G-d refers to the only true G-d who came and dwelt among us through the babe who was born in the manger. No other human being has ever been so described by the Scriptures.

The babe is also called the everlasting Father, just so that we understand that He may have come as a baby and may be described as the Son, but He has always been and will always be the everlasting Father. He was, He is and He will forever be what He has always been, the everlasting Father. He is not an overweight old man in a red suit who drinks milk and cookies after having come down a chimney. He is the One who shed His own blood and who feasts with us when we celebrate communion in anticipation of the wonderful Kingdom He will one day usher in. No other human being in the Scriptures has ever been described in this way.

Finally He is called the Prince of Peace because bringing us everlasting peace is His singular mission. He did not come to perform incredible music or to paint wonderful portraits and He never once tried to compete with all the great philosophical minds which try to explain the meaning of life. He demonstrated this meaning by what He accomplished on the cross and still shines as the everlasting light which will one day forever dispel the darkness of death. No other human being has ever been given such an amazing task and no other human being has ever succeeded in fulfilling such an amazing task.

All the power and glory of all that happens around the world at Christmas and which does not loudly and singularly proclaim the true meaning of Christmas, pales to futile and silly insignificance beside the wonder of our blessed saviour and Messiah. I am not recommending that we ignore Christmas or that we rant and rave about how pagan it has become. Let us celebrate the advent of the promised Messiah and speak of Him as we gather with friends and family, because as stewards of G-d's truth in His Word, it is our task not to become distracted from our Mission as we wander as pilgrims through our fading world. Isaiah was shown who Messiah is and it is our privilege to show this same Messiah to the world, both at this season of the year and all year long, until the Kingdom comes. Amen.