

5 Tevet, 5778 (23/12/17) **Chag HaMolad AS We Remember His Birth** J, M, Terrett

Vayigash

And He Drew Near

The Tables are Turned

Torah: Genesis 44:18-47:27

Haftarah: Ezekiel 37:15-28

Brit Chadashah: Luke 6:12-16

Reading: Jack pp. 33,35 and Psalm 40 Jewish Hero: Jehoshaphat Torah Carrier: Ifeanyi

The Torah portion begins with Judah pleading for Benjamin to be returned to his father in a way he never did for his brother Joseph. He is willing to remain as a slave in place of Benjamin and he and his brothers freely admit their guilt for what they did to Joseph. Joseph acted the way he did so that his brothers wouldn't just head for the hills and scatter if he revealed himself too soon.

As it stands, they cannot abandon Benjamin because they have made a solemn oath the return him to his father. They also need the food which is only found in Egypt, so in a very real sense they are cornered and are completely at the mercy of Joseph. Judah has replaced Reuben as the leader of the brothers and he is the one who first expresses his willingness to accept his guilt and to take the place of Benjamin as Joseph's slave. The tables are really turned because they are completely at the mercy of Joseph, just as he was completely at their mercy, when they threw him in the pit with murder on their minds.

Joseph understands that in G-d's purposes even the most dire of circumstances can be used by Him to accomplish His will in our lives and in the life of the whole world. The brothers are given a chance to admit their guilt and to repent and they took this golden opportunity. The same golden opportunity is offered to us frequently throughout our lives. Our lives can either be all about our plots and schemes to become the king of the castle as we advance our own agenda, or they can be about G-d's Kingdom as it is outlined in His Word.

Whatever people do to us and whatever difficulties we encounter, it is still G-d's purposes which will prevail, we just have to decide whether we want them to prevail through us or in spite of us. The tables were turned on both Joseph and on his brothers and what started out as a double bad story (enslaving a brother out of hatred and enduring a long hard famine) ended up being a double good story (brotherly reconciliation and a haven during the famine).

I am not saying that all the bad things which happen to us in our lives will all have a happy ending in this life along the lines of Joseph's story, but what I am saying is that the blessing of G-d will always follow those who walk with Him according to His Word, whether we languish in a prison or are exalted into a palace.

This is because there has no temptation which has overtaken us except that which is common to man and G-d, who is faithful, will not allow us to be tempted beyond that which we can endure, but will always provide us a way of escape so that we may be able to stand up under it.

It is in eternity where the tables will eventually all be turned and the books are opened and we receive our reward or our punishment according to how we have responded the happenstance of our lives. The contents of our hearts (habits and attitudes) will always be far more important

in the long run than the contents of our wallets. How we respond to what happens to us in our lives, be it ever so good or ever so bad, will always be more important in the eyes of G-d than the actual circumstances themselves.

In fact, though we may not have very much control over our destiny in terms of the direction our lives take, even when we do our very best to make it happen so that we get ahead, we can always exercise complete control over how we respond to the direction our life takes. Time and circumstances happen to all people and both success and failure are fickle and unreliable. It is only the grace and love of G-d through our beloved Messiah that we can always rely on.

When the tables were turned on Joseph and his brothers, he demonstrated mercy and they discovered repentance and this is why the story had a good ending. One day the tables will be turned on us, when we stand before the King of Glory and we need to ask if our life long repentance ensures that we will receive His eternal mercy when the contents of our hearts are finally revealed. All of the plotting and scheming of all the nations and generations of mankind can never thwart or derail the eternal purposes of G-d. We will either embrace them or be finally judged and demolished by them.

The choice is ours, day by day, year by year throughout our short lives. Living for the world to come sets us free from the false promises and pleasures of this darkening age, so in fact we can have a say in how our story ends. When it is all over He will either say: "well done my beloved servant, enter into the joy of your Father", or "depart from me you worker of iniquity, I never knew you". May your tables always be turned with G-d's purposes in mind.

The Haftarah portion deals with the reuniting of the kingdom of Judah with the kingdom of Israel in preparation for the arrival of David's greater Son who will rule over them in peace eternally. In a very real sense, the second diaspora did not have to occur, but even that cannot stop the purposes of G-d nor take away His love for His people. We cannot go far wrong, not matter what is happening to us in our lives, if we keep our focus on the eternal purposes of G-d when all the tables are finally turned.

The New Testament portion deals with the selection of the twelve apostles, the intended leaders of the redeemed people of our Messiah. They were all Jewish and one even betrayed Him, but nothing and no one can ever highjack, delay or overthrow His kingdom purposes. How well are they doing in your life? Living for the eventual turning of the tables in eternity is the only sensible way to face the challenges of this life. How will it be with you, once the tables of your life are turned, when you stand before Him?

### **Sermon:**

Growing up in a secular home, for my family of origin, Christmas was always about gifts and parties and decorations and had no real spiritual component. My parents never went to church or to shul and the closest thing to a religious observance for me was watching the black and white version of Dickens' a Christmas Carol. I liked the two week holiday we got from school and shopping for presents was fun, though it got very expensive. It is estimated that up to 40% of all retail sales are made around Christmas, so it is good for the economy.

When I accepted the L-rd and began celebrating Christmas with Patti's family, it was a whole new world for me. It was openly a celebration of the birth of our Messiah and there was lots of

hymn signing and even prayers of thanksgiving for the arrival of the Saviour of the world. I was introduced to church Christmas services and started a lifelong love affair with Handel's Messiah. I have attended at least two or three live performances of this amazing piece of music and have watched others on TV over the years.

At first, as a really rigid, stubborn young believer, I refused to go to public performances or movies because I thought they were a waste of time which could be better spent studying the Bible or praying. I blush when I remember that the only way Patti got me to attend my first performance of the Messiah, was to tell me it was based on a little over 70 scripture verses. I brought my Bible and spent the whole time looking up each of the verses.

I was surprised when I first heard that some believers had a problem with Christmas – as a matter of fact, in England, the Puritans under Cromwell outlawed it and jailed anyone who celebrated it. You see, as a young believer, I relished the opportunity of celebrating the Saviour's birth and I ignored all the commercialism and concentrated on the birth narratives.

He really brought joy to the world and as the shepherds watched their flocks by night, the herald angels sang His praises above the little town of Bethlehem. Some of the Christmas hymns still give me shivers and bring tears to my eyes and I was saddened that I had been singing them most of my early life, without ever really thinking about what the words meant.

When I first met believers who refused to celebrate Christmas because they felt both that it was a celebration of pagan origin and that the 25th of December was the wrong date, my historical curiosity kicked into overdrive. I wanted to get to the bottom of this! Besides my abiding love for the Bible, the next greatest passion of my life is history, both the part that is written down and the parts that people disagree about, even when they know the events must have happened.

I heard many convincing preachers argue that Christmas was just a christianized version of Saturnalia (Winter solstice), peppered with any number of pagan customs from any number of pagan sources. The Yule log was from the druids and the Christmas tree was a form of Nordic worship of the spirits who dwelt in trees. The mistletoe was a pagan fertility ritual.

From an historical perspective, it is true that early Christians freely borrowed pagan symbols and gave them a new Christian meaning and even added some of their own. It was Luther who added candles to the tree, saying that because the Messiah is the light of the world, lights should be added to the celebration of His birth.

But none of this had much of an impact on the opportunity which Christmas affords believers to celebrate the most important birth of all time. But some refuse to celebrate Christmas because they are convinced it is the wrong date.

You may not know this, but historically, Jewish people did not celebrate birthdays, so not much effort was made in the New Testament to record the exact day when our Messiah was born.

The only concession to an actual birth date for the Messiah's birth, which ancient Judaism made, was to specify that Messiah had to be born on one of the three fasts related to the destruction of the first temple. They wanted the happiest event in Jewish history to occur on one of the dates which recorded that saddest event in Judaism, that did not just happen once, but twice. And all that remains of Herod's humongous temple is the retaining wall of the court of the

Gentiles. What are these dates? They are mentioned in the Bible (Zechariah 8:19).

In the year when the first temple was destroyed, the final siege of Jerusalem was set on the 10th of the month of Tevet (fast of the tenth Hebrew month). Several months later, on the 17th of Tammuz, (fast of the fourth month) the walls of Jerusalem were finally breached and nearly a month later, on the 9th of Av (fast of the fifth month) the Holy Temple was burned. Yom Kippur is the fast of the seventh month.

Several times a century, the tenth of Tevet falls on the 25th of December and at least one historian, Alfred Edersheim, a Jewish convert to Christianity, found convincing historical evidence that the original date for the celebration of the birth of our Messiah was set by Messianic Jews as the tenth of Tevet.

About the same time as Gentile Christians expelled Messianic Jews from their midst, they fixed the date of Easter as a Sunday with no connection to Passover and they fixed date for Christmas as the 25th of December, with no connection to the tenth of Tevet. You see Jewish festivals always occur on the same date on the Hebrew calendar, but these dates are different every year on the Gentile calendar.

So if we were going to be absolutely faithful to the date which early Messianics established as the date to celebrate our Messiah's birth, we ought to celebrate it on the tenth of Tevet, whenever that date is on the Gregorian calendar. This year, the tenth of Tevet goes from sunset Dec. 27th to sunset Dec. 28th. (Chag HaMolad, campers)

As we discuss how Messianic believers should relate to Christmas, I want to use two unusual verses to give my meditation a Bible base, even though they have been used by Gentile Christians to attack our observance of the only true day of the L-rd – the Sabbath.

***One man considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind (and not judge those who do or those who don't). (Romans 14:5 ff) Let no one judge you concerning eating or drinking or concerning a festival or a new moon or the Sabbaths. (Colossians 2:16)***

Let me first put to rest any nonsense about using these verses to justify ignoring the Sabbath and making Sunday the Day of the L-rd (which it isn't). First of all, everyone needs to be fully persuaded when it comes to how they express their faith and not do it out of obligation or fear. Secondly, the word for Sabbath is plural in Colossians and not singular and does not refer to the weekly Sabbath, which none of the apostles ever spoke against and which no verse in the New Testament cancels or changes.

When a festival falls on a week day, it is called a Sabbath, and a whole array of customs and practices have grown around how Jewish people feel they should celebrate these special times on the calendar. This is why sabbaths is mentioned in conjunction with the new moon and the festivals so that no one would feel obligated to keep all the customs and follow all the man made rules that gave grown up around what were originally simple biblical celebrations.

Paul nowhere sets believers free to break the Sabbath and the question of whether he obliged Gentile believers to keep the Sabbath was dealt with in part by the first Jerusalem council and also by the weight of biblical evidence in favour of Sabbath keeping. It is built in to temporal fabric of creation and it is the only day which the L-rd called holy and it is also enshrined in the Ten Commandments. So for early believers, both Jews and Gentiles, it was inconceivable that

anyone would ever dream of breaking one of the least of these commandments and teaching others to do so as well (Matt. 5:17-20).

I have never heard a viable, biblical argument for violating the Sabbath and exchanging it for Sunday, other than when early Christians caved into Roman Law and distanced themselves from the Sabbath keeping Messianic Jews by adopting the Roman day of rest as theirs. Sunday just happened to be the third day from the resurrection and this was also used to justify the breaking of the Law, even though this is something which the resurrected L-rd would never have supported.

Now back to Christmas. I want to say three things about this festival before I share my list of things I love about Christmas and things I hate about it, so you can make an informed, biblical decision about how to handle the busiest and most commercial time of the year.

First of all, no matter what you feel about the real date for Christmas, we should not judge people who keep it for the 25th and they should not judge us, if we do not join in with them to celebrate the Messiah's birth on that day. We need to all be fully convinced in our own minds. This means that we have positive and negative reasons for our choice to celebrate or to abstain from celebrating. The reasons why we choose to celebrate or to abstain are more important than the decisions we arrive at, because it is our convictions which are important.

Secondly, we know that the Messiah was born in a stable while His parents were in Bethlehem participating in an obligatory Roman census of the ancient world. His birth is an established historical fact which occurred in time and space and is not a mythical event. We are not arguing about whether or not it happened, just when it happened.

Thirdly we need to learn to respect each other's opinions when it comes to customs and celebrations which are not biblical feasts. Instead of using the season to let people know everything we are convinced is wrong with the season, we could use it as an opportunity to witness for the L-rd about why He was born and what He really came to earth to achieve.

It is not wrong to voice our objections about the paganism which has crept into how some people celebrate Christmas. It is not wrong for us to be convinced that December 25th is the wrong date. It only becomes problematic when we spend all of our energy being critical of each other and not talking about what should be the real reason for the season.

For me, the best Christmas verse in the Bible is one of the most familiar verses: "**For G-d so loved the world that He sent His only begotten Son, so that whosoever believes in Him, should not perish, but have everlasting life**" (John 3:16). We should encourage people to look for the real spirit of Christmas and we know that it is the Holy Spirit who came upon Mary so that she could conceive the Messiah and give birth to the serpent crusher.

Instead of spending so much time, money and effort in looking for the best gift for everyone on our list, we need to acknowledge G-d's gift of everlasting life in our beloved Messiah. This is because He does have a list and He is checking it more than twice, because it is the Lamb's Book of Life and when we come to faith in Him, our names are written down on it and we escape forever from the power of sin and death.

The real Christmas tree is the cross of Calvary And while there were no presents at its base,

only Roman guards, He became our living gift, when He burst out of the grave and left all the wrappings of death behind Him. He brings us to Himself and we become His family, Jews and Gentiles and we need to gather to celebrate every aspect of His life, from His birth through His death to His resurrection, and His ascension. The final chapter of the Christmas story will be when He returns from Heaven to establish G-d's eternal kingdom over all the nations and generations of mankind, to the Jew first and also to the Gentile. I can hardly wait!

Now let me tell you what drives me nuts about Christmas. Most of all, it is the fat bearded guy in the red suit with a team of magic flying reindeer, who is somehow able to slip down chimneys and bring gifts to all the good boys and girls. We are teaching our kids to be good for the wrong reasons. We need to be good out of love for the L-rd and truth of His Word, not so we can weasel a better gift out of a creepy guy who spends all year spying on us.

Next, it is the materialism around gift giving, where the quality of your gift is supposed to express the quality of your love. Many times, when our kids were growing up we did not have much money and it bothered them to see all their friends buried in gifts which we could not afford to buy for them. You need to express your love for someone in the way you love them, not in the way you bribe them or impress them with how much money you spend on them.

Now here may be a surprising one – Christmas lights are a careless waste of electricity where people try to outdo each other and the only one who really benefits from it is the electric company which makes a killing this time of year. Decorations can be a way to dress up the holiday, but instead of dressing up for the holiday, why not try being kind and nice and forgiving and helpful at this time of year? We need to be salt and light year round.

We should focus on visiting the elderly and the sick and reaching out to the homeless and even to those who are incarcerated. We could also think of the orphans and the victims of war around the world who could use our help.

So instead of overeating and over decorating and over spending this Christmas season, why not go overboard in acts of kindness which will bring relief and joy to those who suffer and who are lonely? Let us share the joy of the L-rd, which will always be our strength all year round.

Well, let this old rabbi tell you some of things I like about Christmas. The first is that it is an opportunity where everyone, even a little bit, thinks about the Saviour who was born in a stable and none of the glitz or schpitz that people try to drown the holiday with, can remove this central truth about what the holiday is supposed to commemorate. It is a time when it is perfectly natural and appropriate to talk about the Saviour who died on the cross for our sins.

Next, it is a time for friends and family to gather and take a well deserved winter break away from the rat race. Family bonds can be renewed and friendships can be strengthened. It is even a time when people try to make more of an effort to get along better and actually be nice to one another and to strangers. Nearly our whole society stops and takes a break and does their best to get some rest. We need to slow down and smell the roses, even in wintertime.

Lastly, it is a season of good will when you can set aside all the quarrels and wish even your enemies well, like the soldiers did in WWI, when they came out of the trenches on Christmas day and sang together and toasted each other. It is also one of the times of the year when nearly every church is filled and people acknowledge their need for some spiritual support and

where they look deep inside to find meaning and purpose in their lives.

As a Jew, I am not obliged to keep Christmas. As a believer, I am obliged to acknowledge every aspect of the Messiah's life, whether or not I celebrate the 25th of December as the day of His birth. I am not going to around and check to see if any of you have set up a Christmas tree in your homes, because you are free to do so, if you wish – as long as you have done your homework and are fully convinced in your own mind. Even if I wanted to have a tree in my house, I am not allowed to have one because of the mold that comes with it – and the artificial ones are worse than the natural ones.

I rejoice in the opportunity to share my faith about the babe who was born in a manger and who grew up to die on the cross for the sins of the world. I celebrate Passover, not Easter and I celebrate the birth of my Messiah, whether or not I believe it occurred at this season of the year. I do not participate in all the materialistic hype that is generated at this time of the year, but I do appreciate the rest time which it is usual to take at this season of the year.

Some of you will treat the 25th of December like any other day of the year and some of you will treat it as a very special celebration. It is up to you because we all need to be fully persuaded in our own minds. Let us not judge those who do not participate in the festivities and let us not judge those who do. We are all servants of the resurrected King.

One year my family tried to avoid Christmas by spending it at Sunshine Ski Resort. The place was full of young people and Jewish people and we were served a special Christmas dinner anyway, by waiters wearing Santa hats. However you come to terms with the season, may it be a blessed time for you and your family as you walk with our Messiah according to His Word. He is the reason for the season – and even more than that, He is the only reason which is worth giving our lives to, today and every day of the year.

Shabbat Shalom, campers and perhaps even Chag HaMolad (Merry Christmas) or humbug, which ever is more appropriate for where you are coming from. Amen and amen.