

## Shabbat Hanukkah

Numbers 7:18–29; Zech 2:14–4:7; John 10:22–47

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notes by Tim Hegg

Once again we celebrate the Feast of Dedication, or Hanukkah (as it is usually called in more modern times). And, as is often the case, our celebration overlaps and coincides with the celebration of Christmas by the Christian Church. As Messianic believers, we once again are faced with the question of self-identity and group definition: as followers of Yeshua, do we not find an identity with our brothers and sisters in the Christian church who likewise confess Him as Messiah? Should not we, then, join with them in their celebration of the birth of Messiah? Yet as those who (Jew and non-Jew alike) have adopted a Torah-pursuant life-style, we have come to appreciate the long standing traditions of the synagogue in which the Torah continued to be upheld in spite of the church's insistence that it had been abolished by the life and death of Yeshua. So during the Christmas season, we are once again faced with self-identity issues. Many of our Christian friends and family have difficulty with our lack of enthusiasm for the traditions that have surrounded the modern observance of Christmas.

But there is more to the self-identity issue than just whether or not to celebrate the birth of Messiah with our Christian brothers and sisters in the holiday known as Christmas. We have questioned whether traditions that have become thoroughly associated with Christianity are worthy or if they are the result of syncretism with other religions. We've come to a conviction that we must read and study the sacred words of the Bible with "new eyes," testing what we know (or think we know) against the unchanging rule of God's self-revelation.

As we have done this, we more and more have come to the conclusion that one of the root sins of mankind is the tendency to mix into our worship those things God has forbidden. To put it more bluntly, we have found it a natural outflow of our fallen nature to introduce idolatry into the worship of the God of Israel. This practice has a "long and prestigious history." It began in Gan Eden when Chava thought she could mix together the commands of God with the advise and schemes of Satan—that somehow the two were actually compatible. Then we have the infamous Golden Calf event in which we "reasoned" that adding a few more gods along side of the One we worshipped was not only thinkable, but acceptable. I could go on and on with this litany of syncretism: the northern kingdom under Jeroboam, the Asherah poles, the high places, and so on.

Which brings us back to the theme of Hanukkah. Hanukkah, at its core, is not foremost a celebration of our victory over the pagan enemy, but rather a victory over the draw to syncretism. If one reads carefully the stories of the Hasmonean struggle, one comes to the conclusion that the enemy was not insisting we cease to worship the God of Israel. No, actually they were simply wanting us to do away with the belief that He is the only One worthy of worship. For as long as the true believers in God continued to proclaim the narrow view that He alone was God and there were no others, *it cast all other religions as false and called everyone to repent of their idolatry and turn to the One, true God.* In other words, the Israelite belief in God, grounded as it was in the utter uniqueness of His position in the universe, judged and condemned all other worship.

But even as this position is considered politically incorrect today, so it was the case in the 2nd century BCE. This is because such a position has really very little to do with the spirit of the time and everything to do with the condition of man's heart. *To proclaim God to be One (i.e., unique) is, at the same time, to admit that man is dependent upon Him, and such an admission obviously goes*

*contrary to the pride of our hearts.* After all, idolatry is really self-worship, for mankind creates idols as images of his self-invented gods, for one reason and one reason alone: these self-made gods can be controlled! Through ritual and religious ceremony the gods we make for ourselves can serve our purposes.

So here is the heart of the issue as we celebrate Hanukkah: are we willing to proclaim the God of the Bible as the only true God and in so doing to label all other gods as false? And, are we willing therefore, to live out our confession that there is only one true God by following His ways and obeying His commandments even when this means we must graciously but firmly “swim against the current” and carefully refuse to allow accept syncretistic forms of worship?

The celebration of Christmas, is of course, an obvious example of syncretism. That’s why many of us have decided not take part in this holiday. But the celebration of the birth of Messiah has nothing to do with the celebration of Christmas, so we dare not confuse the two. As followers of Yeshua we must remember that His birth upon this earth, and His subsequent life, death, resurrection, and ascension are as dear to us as any event in all of history. If the angels rejoiced at His birth, surely we should! So in our desire to remove ourselves for syncretism in our worship, we must never lose the joy of thanksgiving to HaShem for sending His Son, Yeshua, in the way He did: via a miraculous birth; into the lowest of economic strata; to a people who would reject Him; to accomplish our redemption through His own self-giving. And we ought always to be ready to confess our Messiah regardless of what such a confession may cost us. What I’m saying is that we must never let our righteous stand against syncretism diminish our joy in the truth.

Hanukkah, then, brings to us every year this challenge: how will my life exemplify authentic faith in the One true God, and resist both the natural temptation as well as the societal pull toward pluralism? How will I gently but firmly hold to the biblical, eternal truths, exposing syncretism wherever I find it, yet remain sensitive to the needs of those trapped by tradition? How can I live out my identity as one who has a genuine faith in God, and who therefore deeply desires to love Him by doing what He commands within a society (and indeed, a religious one at that) that has accepted syncretism as the norm? To put it simply, how can my life shine as a light in a world that judges me as “judgmental” when I confess all other gods to be idols, and all man-made religion to be unworthy of my self-dedication?

The *haftarah* passage selected for Hanukkah gives an answer to this. Here, in the vision of Zechariah, the Menorah of the Temple is connected to a continual supply of oil—two olive trees, one on each side of the Menorah. When the prophet inquires as to what these are, the answer is given in the famous verse: “not by might, nor by power, but by My Ruach, says Adonai.” Note further that this paragraph follows the opening paragraph of the section in which the prophet (and by extension, the nation) is exhorted to walk in God’s commandments. The means of living (i.e., worshipping) God’s way is none other than His own Ruach. The oil of the light of our lives is the indwelling Spirit of God. But what does it mean to “walk by the Spirit” (cf. Gal 5:17)? It means first and foremost that the word of God, illumined by the Ruach, becomes the touchstone against which all things are tested. Apart from the Ruach, however, we will never understand the proper application of the Torah to our lives. Indeed, *apart from the Ruach of God, the Torah itself can become an idol.* Consider this illustration: when Balaam was commissioned to curse Israel, he was unable, because God restrained him and turned his cursing into blessing (Num 22-24). Defeated in this battle, Satan turned his attack to the wayward heart of Israel, and they fell into the sin of Baal Peor. In some similar ways, Israel, given victory over those who would have forced her into

syncretism, developed a man-made religion that continued to diminish her role as a light to the nations, and made her ineffective as God's messenger to take the salvation message to the world.

Let me suggest some vitally important issues to which we must commit ourselves as we strive to worship God in spirit and truth:

1) the word of God must stand as our sure foundation. We must be able to test all things against its inspired message. This means we may never become weary of studying it, learning it, and applying it to all of life's situations.

2) we must grow more and more sensitive to the leading and urgings of the Ruach as He applies the Scriptures to our lives, which is His primary function within us.

3) we must commit ourselves to living out what we know to be true, not being content with discussion about the truth, but striving to make it more and more the pattern of our lives, regardless of the cost.

4) we must commit ourselves to lives of humility, remembering that we all are on a journey of holiness, striving to please our Master.