

VAYEISHEV (GENESIS 37:1-40:23)

The ‘December Dilemma’ -- Bah! Humbug!!

2009 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

[This message ran as an op-ed piece in the Jewish Press – Another well-known JEWISH WEEK-ly paper (initials J.W.) rejected the article. I wonder why.:)]-----

-----**

Joseph is the quintessential Jew in exile. Separated from his family ties and family values, he has the opportunity to become an Egyptian. In one respect, he does so with tremendous success. He eventually becomes the second most powerful man in Egypt, who uses his connections to help his family survive.

Yet, in another sense, Joseph never quite fit in. He steadfastly maintained the lifestyle he had learned in his father's house. He refused to engage in Egyptian idol worship. He had rejected the immoral advances of his master's wife, and was rewarded for his fidelity with a prison term. Even when he became a hero to the Egyptians, there were backroom whispers about his strange background.

Joseph taught us that you don't succeed in a non-Jewish environment by throwing away your values and mimicking those around you. Rather, you do what you know is right. If those around you accept you and respect you, all the better. If they don't, so be it.

Once again, we are confronted by the so-called "December Dilemma." How do we as Jews respond to the "Holiday Spirit" that surrounds us wherever we go? How should we as American Jews deal with a December holiday that occupies the hearts and minds of all around us?

In one respect, it seems that the Christmas-Chanukah clash is no longer the problem that it used to be. Most communities have found it politically correct to substitute "Merry Christmas" with a much more inclusive "Happy Holidays."

They have theirs and we have ours. We too, have the ability to ornament our homes with Chanukah decorations. Stores offer us the same abundance of toys for children of all ages, complete with appropriate Chanukah wrapping paper. We can now celebrate with pride! OUR holiday is no different than THEIRS! They are two sides of the same coin. The dilemma is solved!

Isn't that sad? Why does Chanukah's chronological proximity to Christmas have to force us to try to duplicate it?

What is Chanukah all about? Everybody knows about the miracle of the oil. But we often tend to forget about the rest of the story.

Chanukah commemorates the liberation of the Temple in Jerusalem, which had been controlled by Syrian-Greeks. The occupiers desecrated the Temple. Their goal was to "Hellenize" Judaism. They introduced Greek culture into the Temple and forced the Jews to make certain changes in their religion. They put up a statue of Zeus and sacrificed a pig on the Altar.

Many Jews viewed the Syrian-Greek occupation as a benevolent dictatorship. After all, the Hellenists really weren't opposed to the Torah per se. Most of the Jewish practices were acceptable to the occupiers. They did object to the brutality of circumcision. Shabbat and the celebration of Rosh Chodesh were a bit antiquated for their taste. But everything else was okay. They just wanted to "upgrade" Judaism by inserting a bit of Greek culture. It wasn't really an occupation; it was more like a "renaissance;" an "enlightenment."

A small group of Kohanim -- Priests organized an armed revolt against the large and powerful Greek army. The "other miracle" of Chanukah is that this "weak" and outnumbered band of scholars miraculously managed to "throw the bums out!"

The goal of the Hellenists was to water down Judaism. They wanted to convince the Jews to combine the two religions into a cultural melting pot. (Perhaps something on the order of today's December "Holiday Parties," that celebrate everything, and therefore, celebrate nothing.)

Many of the Jews of that time, perhaps even a majority, embraced the concept of multiculturalism. They had no objection to a Judaism that stood for nothing. But this small group of dedicated Jews took up arms to defend our right to follow G-d's Torah. And by doing so, they kindled a light that illuminated the world.

We live in a time when it is so easy to follow the Torah. Shabbat, Kashruth, and all of the Mitzvot are so easy to observe in this wonderful country, which allows us to practice our faith as we choose.

However, the melting pot of America also gives us the option of throwing it all away, or, perhaps even worse, of living a Judaism that is so wishy-washy that it makes Chanukah look like little more than a Jewish Christmas.

How do we celebrate Chanukah today? Where did the multitude of lavish gifts come from? Ask any Jew who was born in Europe. Nobody gave Chanukah presents in "the old country." Yes, parents gave their children "Chanukah Gelt," a few pennies to encourage them to excel in their Torah studies. Children are

supposed to take some of that money and give it to the poor. The way gifts are given today is clearly an imitation of our surroundings.

Where does it say in any of the books of Jewish Law and custom that we're supposed to deck the halls with tinsel "Happy Chanukah" signs? Where does it say that we should have parties that serve latkes and eggnog, with a Menorah and a tree?!

Isn't it ironic? In celebrating our right to follow the Torah without outside influences, we are borrowing from the dominant culture and "enhancing" our Judaism with outside influences!

I am proud to live in a country that allows us to follow our religion. Why do we thank our neighbors for the right to be different by trying to be the same? I don't expect my Christian neighbors and co-workers to make Christmas into a generic winter holiday. Why should we do it to Chanukah?

As we light the Chanukah candles, let us celebrate the religious freedom that G-d has given us in America. Let us take advantage of that freedom.

Joseph succeeded in Egypt by being an observant Jew. The Talmud says that our People were eventually taken out of Egypt because they maintained their Jewish identity. They kept Jewish names, a Jewish mode of dress, and spoke Hebrew.

In other words, they weren't afraid to celebrate diversity by being different.

Have a great Shabbos and an illuminating Chanukah.

© 2009 Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz. Reprint permitted for non-commercial use with attribution to torahtalk.org.