

Parshas Miketz **פרשת**

The 10th Torah Reading in the Annual Cycle of Weekly Torah Readings

Genesis 41:1-44:17 **and Naso - Numbers 7:24 to 35**

Haftarah: **Zechariah 2:14 to 4:7**

## **Shabbat Chanukah**

**By**

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**Shabbat Chanukah** is perhaps best referred to in this instance as “**Shabbat Chanukah I**” since when the first or second day of Chanukah falls on Shabbat, that Chanukah will have two Shabbatot, and my painting focuses strictly on where there is either just one Shabbat during the holiday or on the first Shabbat if there are two. A wide span of the history of the Jewish People is touched upon when one studies the portions of the Bible that are read on Shabbat Chanukah I. One might think that trying to capture the message of Shabbat Chanukah I on a single painting, which is what I try to accomplish, would have dradles, the Maccabees and Chanukah Menorahs at center stage, but though those elements are surely there, they are represented or hinted at by their historical predecessors.

The one part of the painting that may need clarification is the way the flames atop the six flanking branches of the seven-branched Menorah that stood in the Holy Temple have been depicted. The flames are “pitched” or leaning towards the central flame, which is, of course, unnatural, but, which according to our tradition, is how the flames actually burnt; a miracle in and of itself. The center branch, which is referred to as the “nair ma'aravi” or “the western light” because it faced the Holy of Holies, was the first light to be ignited each evening, and it would burn long after the lights on top of the other branches had burned out, until it was time to rekindle the Menorah the next day; another miracle. These miracles related to the Menorah in the Holy Temple were to serve as a sign to the entire world that God dwelt with the Jewish people.

The remaining elements of the painting are drawn directly from the various readings as well but there is more; and I believe much more.

**The Sedrah of Miketz** (Genesis 41:1 to 44:17) is centered on the dreams of Pharaoh and what those dreams meant. Joseph explains that Pharaoh’s dreams herald the coming of seven years of plenty, which will be followed by seven years of famine. We see how Joseph was elevated by Pharaoh to help navigate Egypt wisely through the times of abundance so as to be properly prepared for the lean times to follow. When the famine affects the neighboring lands to Egypt, we are reintroduced to Jacob and his sons, who must turn to Egypt for sustenance. We see how dear Benjamin, Jacob’s last remaining son from his wife Rachel, has become to him after the loss of Joseph. We observe how nimbly Joseph uses his position as Viceroy of Egypt to manipulate his brothers into reuniting him with his brother Benjamin. We also get what amounts to

almost an X-ray view of the nature of Joseph's other brothers through their reactions to the gambits used by Joseph to get them to see themselves for what they are.

**On Chanukah**, the Sedrah of Miketz is augmented by an **additional reading taken from the Sedrah of Naso** (Numbers 4:21 to 7:89), which deals mainly with the numbering of the Levitical families and details their duties regarding the transporting of the Mishkan (the Holy Tabernacle or the Tent of Meeting) while the Jewish People were wandering through the desert but also includes sections about ritual purity, the Laws of the Nazirite, the world famous and often borrowed tripartite Priestly Blessing; i.e. "May the Lord bless you and keep you" etc., and ends with the Offerings of the Princes for the Mishkan.

The particular section of Naso read as the Maftir Aliah on Shabbat Chanukah (Numbers 7:24 to 35) recounts the bringing of gifts for use on and around the Holy Alter in the Mishkan by the Prince of the Children of Zebulun, who brought his gifts on the third day of gift giving, and on the fourth day by the Prince of the Children of Reuben. The gifts were given and recorded in perfect symmetry with each Prince bringing his gifts on a separate day and each Prince bringing the exact same gifts as each of the others. All twelve tribes brought the exact same thing. How this apparently perfunctory and straightforward reading illuminates the Sedrah of Miketz seems rather tangential until one looks at the personalities of the progenitors of the Tribes represented in this portion; particularly that of the Children of Reuben.

Reuben was the brother, who when his other brothers were ready to kill their brother Joseph, reminded them that "the tongue of the just is as choice silver." The presence of the various silver objects among the gifts brought by his descendant therefore has special meaning here. Similarly, the purpose of one of the silver vessels, which was to be used to sprinkle blood on and around the Holy Alter, can be seen as a reminder that it was again Reuben who, in the same instance, advised his brothers to throw Joseph into the pit rather than to kill him; i.e. to spill his blood.

**The Haftorah for Shabbat Chanukah** is taken from the Book of Zechariah (2:14 to 4:7) and details one part of the Prophet's multifaceted dream that spurred him to preach so fervently and successfully to the Jewish People who had only recently returned from their forced exile in Babylonia and encouraged them to rededicate themselves and the remains of the Holy Temple to their mutual and great purpose. The Haftorah notes the positive message of the Prophet with his assurance that the Lord will again "dwell" among them, which Rashi points out means that the Holy Temple will be a central presence in their lives as it had been before.

There are a few interesting comparisons between the Sedrah of Miketz and its Chanukah Haftorah from the Book of Zechariah. Both deal with the interpretation of dreams: Pharaoh's in the Sedrah and Zechariah's in the Haftorah. Both have an instance where "cloths makes the man" becomes an issue. In the Sedrah, Joseph, who had been in the dungeon for two years, was shaved and dressed in clean clothing before being brought into Pharaoh's presence to interpret Pharaoh's dreams.

Pharaoh's dreams were apparently beyond the interpretive abilities his mystic seers and advisors or what they had presented to him as their interpretation of the meaning of his dreams was, for some reason, unacceptable to him, which created the opportunity for Joseph, who had impressed one of his fellow cell mates by interpreting his dream and one of another cell mate with 100% accuracy in both instances. When summoned before the Monarch of Egypt, Joseph, interprets the Monarch's dreams so convincingly that he wins Pharaoh's complete confidence and is thrust into a leadership position second in Egypt only to the Pharaoh himself.

In the Haftarah, a part of the dream Zechariah had tells how the Angel of the Lord defends the former High Priest of the Holy Temple, Joshua, from criticism and harangue by Satan, whose argument focuses on the High Priest's soiled and disheveled clothing and overall slovenly appearance in an effort to discredit him as having been sinful and corrupt and therefore unworthy of the tasks required to accomplish the cleansing, restoring and rededication of the Holy Temple. But, the Angel of the Lord had Joshua's soiled garments replaced with clean new vestments and an appropriate headgear for a man of his station, which effectively removed Satan's argument and, at the same time, served to encourage the Jews of Zechariah's day to seek the Lord by committing themselves to the way of life offered by the Lord and, therefore, to dedicate themselves to the rebuilding of the Holy Temple and rededicating it, and along with it themselves, to a Torah way of life.

But, the major and perhaps most obvious reason for featuring the Haftarah selected for Shabbat Chanukah is the part of the Prophet's dream where he envisioned the seven-armed golden Menorah, which had been prominently located in the Holy Temple and which would be again in the restored and rededicated one. The connection to Chanukah, which is represented by an eight-armed candelabra, which is lit nightly in Jewish homes throughout the eight day holiday and placed in a window facing the public thoroughfare to publicize the miracles associated with the rededication of the Second Temple after the successful rebellion against the Seleucid (Greek) Empire, which had been led by Judah Maccabee. The miracle most often mentioned was that of a one-day supply of oil that miraculously lasted eight days until new oil could be processed and delivered to the Temple. Of course, the defeat of the Seleucid (Greek) Empire was also a miracle since the Jews were a rag tag catch-as-catch-can army and the Seleucid (Greek) Empire was a sophisticated fighting force, even if the empire itself was on the wane at that point in history and was eventually usurped entirely by the Romans.

There is, however, another commonality between the Sedrah and the Haftarah and even between the Maftir and the story of Chanukah itself, which is important, but which may not be as obvious.

**In the Sedrah of Miketz, what was it that landed Joseph in Egypt in the first place?**

His brothers were jealous of his position as their father's favorite and resented Joseph for what might be called his style and panache, which was exemplified by his coat of

many colors, his great self-confidence, which was really his confidence in the Lord, but which his bothers took to be a “know-it-all attitude,” and his squeaky clean way of living. If it were not for Ruben, as we learned above in the Maftir from Naso, the brothers would have killed Joseph outright. As it was, when they threw him into the pit and then sold him to slavers on their way to Egypt, they simply turned their backs on the entire situation and put what they had done out of their collective minds.

They lied to their father Jacob about how Joseph might have been killed by a wild beast and stuck by that lie for years. “How many years?” one might ask. The brothers kept up that phony front for at least the two years that Joseph was in the Egyptian dungeon and for however long before that when he served in the house of Potephar, then for another seven years during the time of plenty and, for at least one and perhaps up to seven or more years during the famine, so, between ten and sixteen years in all, until the famine reached Canaan and the lack of food forced Jacob to dispatch them on their mission to Egypt as described in Miketz.

When they encounter Joseph, who surely did not look anything like they would have remembered him, and he, in the role of Viceroy to the Pharaoh in charge of the food distribution program for all foreigners, accuses them of being spies, they are of course taken aback. After questioning them through an interpreter, Joseph learns of the welfare of both his father and his full brother Benjamin, and demands that the latter be brought back to him to prove that the other brothers are not spies, and that he will hold one brother, Simon, as hostage until they return. The brothers are heard by Joseph speaking amongst themselves, not knowing that he, Joseph, could understand their language, saying that “we are verily guilty concerning our brother, in that we saw the distress of his soul, when he besought us, and we would not hear; Therefore is this distress come upon us.”

This recognition on their part of why they are being treated in this way is in no way an expression of remorse, but, rather, a statement of what had happened, what they had done and this, they claim is their opinion as to why they are being so strangely treated by Pharaoh’s second-in-command. “Pay back ain’t easy.” “You play; you pay.” Just as simple as that. No guilt. No feelings about it. Ice cold and without passion.

How could such callus men be the sons of Jacob? Is this handful of murderous unrepentant so-and-sos to be the source from whom the future of world Jewry will emanate?

The brothers, with no other options, do as they are told to do by Joseph and return to Jacob with the demand from “the man from Egypt;” to bring back their brother Benjamin. They certainly do not seem to be in any kind of rush to redeem their other brother Simon who they were forced to leave in Egypt as a hostage. Their father Jacob considers the facts at hand: their supply of food is running low, the only place to find any is in Egypt and even if his beloved son Benjamin may be at risk, there are no options left except to trust in the Lord and allow his other sons to take Benjamin with them to

Egypt. He then resigns himself to do what he must and allows Benjamin to go with his other sons and trusts his fate to the Lord.

On their return to Egypt with Benjamin, the brothers are greeted in royal fashion, which must have been quite refreshing after what had happened when they had been there last. Their pack animals are loaded with food as before and they are allowed to begin their journey back to their father Jacob.

How absolutely shocked the brothers must have been when the proverbial rug was pulled out from under them as emissaries from Pharaoh's second in command, Zaphenathpeneah as Joseph was named by Pharaoh, arrested them on their way back to Canaan with the foodstuffs they had just purchased in Egypt and accused them of thievery. The brothers swear on their lives that they had stolen nothing, but were beside themselves with surprise again when the Egyptian officers open their food containers and disclose not only the silver with which they had just paid for the provisions, but, worse, a silver goblet allegedly used by Joseph to read into the future.

Joseph dismisses the death option for any of the brothers as punishment for their "crime" and chooses instead to keep Benjamin as a bondsman and sends the rest of the brothers away to rejoin their father Jacob in Canaan. This time the brothers, through the words of Judah, include a modicum of remorse: "God has found out the iniquity of thy servants."

Please! Did the sons of Jacob, the great grandsons of Abraham himself, really think that the all-knowing God of their forefathers just discovered what they had done to their brother Joseph? Did they really think they would actually get away with it?

This is where the Sedrah of Miketz leaves off. But, from our vantage point, we can almost see what the Lord needed to do in order to keep His vow to Abraham that He would make his progeny into a great nation. The basic material for greatness as a people was surely in that third generation from Abraham, but a better appreciation of life itself, of the Lord and His relationship with the World, and of their responsibility as His chosen people would have to be instilled in the brothers of Joseph and Benjamin and their progeny or the promise of becoming a great people and an example to the world would be in serious jeopardy.

It is from this situation that the 400 years or so of slavery in Egypt evolves as the cauldron through which the Jewish People are to be processed with the purpose of making them the champions of freedom and the People of the Lord that Abraham and the Lord had in mind when the Covenant between them was made.

As the Sedrah ends we see that the seeds have indeed been sewn that will result in the Jews having to leave their Homeland, Canaan, because they were not living up to their role and act appropriately as God's Chosen People.

**What was it, in the Maftir for Shabbat Chanukah taken from the Sedrah of Naso, that made it necessary for the Jews to be wandering in the desert with a “Tent” for a Mishkan instead of being in Canaan after conquering the Canaanites and building a permanent “bricks-and-mortar” Holy Temple for the Lord to dwell in their midst?**

It was because the Jews, who Moses had only recently led from bondage in Egypt to freedom after God demonstrated his greatness with an array of miracles that one would think would have made the deepest possible impression on them, bolted at the prospect of challenging the Canaanites and, instead, cried to Moses complaining that they would have been better off had he not taken them out of Egypt; it would have been better for them to have remained slaves to Pharaoh than to die fighting the Canaanites. Their crying led the Lord to declare that from then and onward that day, the Ninth Day of the Month of Av, would be a day of tears for the Jewish People.

The first Jews to know freedom after 400 or more years of slavery in Egypt were denied entry to the “Promised Land” because they had too much of a slave mentality. It was as if they had spent a little too long in that cauldron. In this case, it could be argued that it was really not their fault. But, blame or no blame, if Jews want to live in the Land of Israel it will mean that they are going to be living in the way they are expected to live or they will be denied the privilege. If they could not have enough faith in God to battle the Canaanites and to believe that the Lord would protect them, how could they expect God to allow them to do much more than he did; i.e. to let them live out their lives in a kind of limbo; no longer slaves but not much more than marking time until the end of their days?

**What was it, in the Haftorah for Shabbat Chanukah, which made it necessary for the Prophet Zechariah to dream as he did and to use his dream as the impetus for encouraging the Jews returning from Babylonia to rededicate themselves and the Holy Temple to their great purpose?**

It was because the Jews before them had turned away from the ways of the Lord. They had allowed themselves to become influenced by their non-Jewish neighbors, to make alliances with nations that led to a commingling of cultures, which weakened the religiosity of the Jews as individuals, as a people and the Kingdom as a viable force amongst its ever-hungry neighboring nations. The eventual punishment for living outside the bounds of a respectable Jewish life was to be overrun by the Babylonians and ejected from the Land of Israel.

**And, finally, in this Chanukah-centric Shabbat, what was it that had caused the Jews to have been conquered by the Greeks so that the Maccabees would have to come to the rescue of their fellow countrymen and co-religionists in the first place?**

According to the Book of 1 Maccabees 2:27, the Jews under the rule of the Greeks had become almost split down the middle with one faction leaning so much towards the

Hellenistic ways that they were turning away from Judaism completely and starting to follow the pagan customs of the Greeks. It was at that juncture that the revolution of the Maccabees, which apparently lasted around 25 years, was launched by Mattathias who stabbed and killed a Jew, who was about to ritually slaughter a pig in public to demonstrate his rejection of Judaism and his acceptance of the Greek ways. Mattathias also killed a Greek governmental or military personage who was in attendance and then called out to the throng of people who had been watching the event, "All who are for God's law and who stand by the covenant, follow me!"

Again, it is the Jews themselves who, in rejecting the ways of the Lord, virtually launch the "machinery" that will end in their eventual expulsion from the Land of their forefathers.

It is almost as if there is a kind of undulation that seems to happen in the Jewish People; as if it, the Jewish People as a people, are an organism unto itself; morphing from faithful follower of the Lord to unrestrained, self-involved and rebellious malcontent with no regard for anything but the basest pleasures and the moment at hand.

But, the Lord made promises that must be kept. The first was to Noah, who came ten generations after Adam and ten generations before Abraham. After the flood, God promised that He would never again destroy the world. So, we, mankind, are here to stay. The second promise, to Abraham was that He would make his children into a great nation; as numerous as the sands on the shore and the stars in the sky. So, the Jews, no matter what, are destined for greatness.

There was, however, a condition to the second promise, the one to Abraham, which makes the realization of greatness rest squarely on the shoulders of those who would be that great nation. **The Jewish People may dwell in the Land of Israel and the Lord will dwell in their midst, as He did in the Mishkan during the forty years in the desert, and later in two different periods in its history in the Holy Temple, as long as the People follow the ways of the Lord. The reverse of that conditional agreement is that if they do not live in the ways of the Lord, the Jewish People will be, over-and-over again, ejected from the Land.**

The lesson here, particularly at Chanukah, the holiday focusing on rededication, seems to be that the "key" to getting to earn their way back into the good graces of the Lord and to make their way back into the Promised Land is for the Jewish People to admit their misdoings, to rededicate themselves to living a meaningful and committed life in the ways outlined by God.

Chanukah therefore is not just the Festival of Lights celebrating the miracles of the oil and of the triumph of the spiritual over the mundane. Chanukah also comes annually to remind us of the great recommitment that the Jews in the time of the Maccabees made and of the same commitment that we, the Jews of today, will hopefully continue to make so that the promise made by the Lord to Abraham, that **the Jewish People may dwell**

**in the Land of Israel and that the Lord will dwell in their (read: our) midst, will again and at last be realized.**

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