

Chanukah and Christmas

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Delivered to Ohev Yisrael December 23, 2006

Today is the eighth day of *Chanukah*, and tomorrow night will be Christmas eve. Christmas is not a Jewish holiday; in fact, Christmas is one of the days of the year commonly considered to be the least Jewish and most Christian. I recall that when I first became a believer in Yeshua, one of the first things my Jewish friends asked me was: “Does that mean that you’re going to have a Christmas tree and dye Easter Eggs? Well, I must confess that my mother did dye Easter Eggs for me when I was young but, thanks be to God, He has since delivered me of that. However, even today, one of the first questions people ask me about Messianic Judaism and Messianic Jewish congregations is whether we celebrate Christmas. And their reason for their asking is to try to figure out who we are – to decide whether we are Jews or whether we are Christians. The question has nothing to do with wanting to know about Christmas; it is that if we don’t celebrate Christmas maybe – just maybe – some of us are Jews; but if we do celebrate Christmas, no way!

Now I know that this causes some of us sadness – particularly those of us who come from traditional Christian families who expect the opposite of us – that if we believe in Yeshua we most certainly would celebrate his birth on December 25. And some of us do miss some of the traditions of Christmas – even the non-religious ones. But whether we are Jews or Gentiles, we of Ohev Yisrael have come into Messianic Judaism with a very special purpose and calling that includes our testimony that Jews don’t stop being Jews when they start believing in Jesus. So it is very important that members of our community live a Jewish life in Yeshua and not one of cultural Christianity. Making this change is indeed a sacrifice for some of us that the rest of us need to appreciate.

Now it is a fact that Christmas in America has influenced how we celebrate *Chanukah*. *Chanukah* has sometimes been called the Jewish Christmas. Why? First, because the 25th of Kislev always falls near the 25th of December; second, because, like Christmas, the mood of *Chanukah* is celebratory and is associated with the display of colorful lights; and third because, like Christmas, we have adopted a tradition of giving gifts during *Chanukah* – especially to the children. And, if the truth be known, some Jews have even been known to decorate “*Chanukah bushes*.”

Now all of this is in good fun, but there are some serious things that we should consider as well. While it is true that we strive to be authentically Jewish in how we live, both for our own sakes and also so as not to interfere with our witness to the Jewish community, it is also important that we not place stumbling blocks for the Christian Church, because part of our witness is to the Church. The Christian Church preserved the New Covenant Scriptures and the truth of Messiah through the ages, and for that we are thankful and grateful. But the Church didn’t have everything right, and in fact it had, and still has, some things wrong that we can help it with. For example, the Church that started off as a Jewish sect, eventually tried to distance itself from Judaism, and establish itself as a replacement for Israel as God’s covenant people. From time to time it also turned a blind eye to persecutions of the Jewish people and, even today, much of the Christian Church does not understand how it is related to Israel, and how its future and Israel’s future are intertwined. Still, Messianic Judaism is beholden to the Christian Church, as our paths

have crossed and continue to cross because of our common faith in Yeshua, and the reality that the Church continues to contribute much to our knowledge of Messiah, and to bringing the Good News to our Jewish people.

I find this season of *Chanukah* and Christmas an ideal time to consider our relationship with both the Jewish community and also with the Christian Church. It is a time when I like to reminisce about my own roots in Judaism and also to taste a bit of Christian culture – that part that is truly godly and biblical. And while I am tasting, I often find opportunities to share my heritage in Messianic Judaism.

The Christmas season is the only season when I use the term *mazel tov*. *Mazel tov* does not, as some believe, mean “congratulations.” It literally means “good star constellation” and in common usage means “good luck.” In other words, it invokes astrology to wish someone “good fortune by the stars” or “may the configuration of the stars bring you luck.” Now that expression seems unbiblical to me so I avoid it except now at Christmas time when it reminds me of the star that led the wise men to Yeshua as told in Matthew 2:1-10:

“Now after Yeshua was born in Bet Lechem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East [His mazel tov]”¹ and have come to worship Him. When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. So they said to him, “In Bet Lechem of Judea, for thus it is written by the prophet: ‘But you, Bet Lechem, in the land of Judah, are not the least among the rulers of Judah; For out of you shall come a Ruler Who will shepherd My people Israel.’” Then Herod, when he had secretly called the wise men, determined from them what time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bet Lechem and said, “Go and search carefully for the young Child, and when you have found Him, bring back word to me, that I may come and worship Him also.” When they heard the king, they departed; and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy.”

So there was a *mazel* or constellation containing a bright star that led the wise men to the place of Yeshua’s birth; that is why I consider it the only *mazel tov* – the only “good constellation,” and why I am willing to use the term at this time of year.

Now we know, and knowledgeable Christians know, that Yeshua was not born on December 25. Some people say he was born during *Sukkot* and they come to that conclusion through applying extra-biblical information about the seasons and the priesthood. I have a different theory – that he was born in the Spring – and I come to my conclusion mainly through interpreting the Scriptures.

Want to hear how I arrive at my theory? You were too late in your response, so now you’re committed!! ☺

¹ “*Maxel tov*” is my term that I inserted.

Please turn with me to Luke 1:24-57 as we read the account of how Miryam became the mother of Yeshua, the son of God. It is a long passage but well worth our time reading it:

<Read Luke 1:24-57>

Now please pay very careful attention while I go through this slowly. I want you to notice that the term “in the sixth month” in verse 26 follows our being told in verse 24 that Elizabeth was pregnant for 5 months. Because of this sequence – “5 months” – “sixth month” – there is the natural inclination to think that the expression “in the sixth month” is a continuing reference to Elizabeth’s pregnancy – in other words to believe that it is referring to the sixth month of the pregnancy. Still another reason to come to that conclusion is that verse 36 states that Elizabeth was 6 months pregnant when Gabriel visited Miryam.

But I suggest to you that that is coincidental. Almost everywhere in the Bible that the phrase “in the [blank] month” exists, it is defining the lunar calendar month and nothing else. Here are three examples:

Exodus 12:18: *“In the first month, on the fourteenth day of the month at evening, you shall eat unleavened bread, until the twenty-first day of the month at evening.”*

Here the phrase “in the first month” refers to the lunar month of *Nisan*.

Leviticus 16:29: *“This shall be a statute forever for you: In the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall afflict your souls, and do no work at all, whether a native of your own country or a stranger who dwells among you.”*

Here the phrase “in the seventh month” refers to the lunar month of *Tishrei*.

Esther 3:7: *“In the first month, which is the month of Nisan, in the twelfth year of King Ahasuerus, they cast Pur (that is, the lot), before Haman to determine the day and the month, until it fell on the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar.”*

Here the phrase “In the first month” defines itself as being the lunar month of *Nisan*.

So it is reasonable that in Luke 1:26, the words “in the sixth month” means that Gabriel visited Miryam in the sixth month of the year which was also, coincidentally, the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy – the month of *Elul*.

Now according to verses 40-44, Miryam was already pregnant when she arrived at Elizabeth’s home; I believe this because Elizabeth’s baby leapt in her womb when it perceived the presence of Yeshua in Miryam’s womb.² Logically then, Miryam was impregnated by the Holy Spirit between the time of Gabriel’s visit and her having arrived at Elizabeth’s home – most probably right after the Gabriel’s visit. Assuming a normal 9-month pregnancy in a 12-month year, Yeshua’s birth would have occurred in the third month of the following year or the month of

²My assumption is that Elizabeth’s baby would not have leapt had he not sensed the Holy Spirit-induced pregnancy within Miryam.

Sivan, which is when *Shavuot* occurs, in the Spring. In the less likely case that that particular year had a leap month, Yeshua's birth would have fallen in *Iyyar*, a month earlier – still in the Spring.

Well, this is all interesting, and maybe I have convinced you and maybe not. What I really wanted to accomplish though, was to spend this time as a way of connecting with our Christian brothers and sisters who will shortly be celebrating the birth of Yeshua. *Chanukah* is not, of course, the Jewish Christmas, but it is a Festival of Lights, and as John 1:9-12 reminds us:

“That [meaning Yeshua] was the true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name:”

And in John 8:12 Yeshua said of Himself:

“I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life.”

Yes, this season does, in a way, join *Chanukah* and Christmas by reminding us that those of us who celebrate *Chanukah* and those of us who celebrate Christmas have a destiny that is joined by our common faith in Yeshua.

Paul warns the Gentile Church in Romans 11:18:

“Do not boast against the branches. But if you do boast, remember that you do not support the root, but the root supports you.”

It is important for us to realize that our community of the Messianic root ought not to boast either, because we are historically indebted to the Christian Church, and our calling to be a light to the nations requires no less of us than to bless the Christian Church as often and in every way that we can.

Thank you Lord, for this message, and for this season that is devoted to Your light, and to peace and good will toward men.