

Hanukkah and Purim – Yes or No?

Should followers of Torah celebrate Hanukkah and Purim? Neither festival can be found in the Torah so why should we consider these two Jewish celebrations any different to Christianity's Christmas and Easter? Let us consider the origins of both Hanukkah and Purim, how and why they have become annual celebrations.

Hanukkah

The Greek emperor Alexander the Great conquered the Israelites in 333 BCE. After his death about a century and a half later, there arose a new king of the then Seleucid Empire, his name was Antiochus Epiphanies (Antiochus IV). Antiochus was not religiously tolerant and committed great atrocities against the Jewish people, their form of worship and the Temple. Once when returning from an expedition in Egypt, Antiochus decided to visit the temple, looting it and slaughtering many Jews in the process. This incident is well documented in the 'Book of Maccabees;'

And after that Antiochus had smitten Egypt he returned again in the hundred forty and third year, and went up against Israel and Jerusalem with a great multitude. And entered proudly into the sanctuary and took away the golden altar and the candle stick of light and all the vessels thereof. And the table of the showbread and the pouring vessels and the vials and the censers of gold and the veil and the crowns and the golden ornaments that were before the temple, all which he pulled off. He took also the silver and the gold and the precious vessels: also he took the hidden treasures which he found. And when he had taken all away, he went into his own land, having made a great massacre and spoken very proudly. (1 Macc.1:20-24).

Antiochus imposed Greek law and religion for the whole kingdom and ordered for all dissenters to be killed,

Moreover King Antiochus wrote to his whole kingdom, that all should be one people. And everyone should leave his laws; so all the heathen agreed according to the commandment of the king. Yea, many also of the Israelites consented to his religion and sacrificed unto idols and profaned the Sabbath. For the king had sent letters by messengers unto Jerusalem and the cities of Juda, that they should follow the strange laws of the land. And forbid burnt offerings and sacrifice and drink offerings in the temple and that they should profane the Sabbaths and festival days. And pollute the sanctuary and holy people; set up altars and groves, and chapels of idols and sacrifice swine's flesh and unclean beasts. That they should also leave their children uncircumcised and make their souls abominable with all manner of uncleanness and profanation: to the end that they might forget the law and change all the ordinances. And whosoever would not do according to the commandment of the king, he said, he should die. (1 Macc.1:41-50)

From the above it is understood that pigs were sacrificed on Yahuwah's altar. In verse 60 we are told that those women who had their children circumcised were put to death and the circumcised child was hanged. Having caused many of the Jews to abandon the Torah Antiochus, possibly as a final show of his power over the Jewish people, erected a statue of Zeus in the temple.

As can be seen the situation for the Jewish people was very desperate. With the Jewish people forced into apostasy a father and his five sons decided enough was enough. This family started a revolt against the king and although the father, Mattathias died soon after, his son Y'hudah also called Maccabeus, took over the leadership. As a result they became known as the Maccabees. Many faithful Jews joined them and against great odds, obviously with Yahuwah's blessing, they defeated the king's army. They took back rightful possession of the temple and installed a new altar to replace the one defiled by Antiochus. But it is the menorah that is the centre of the Hanukkah celebration. It was necessary for the temple menorah to be relit as Yahuwah commanded for the menorah to burn nightly,

Then Yahuwah spoke to Moshe saying, "Command the children of Israel that they bring you pure oil of pressed olives for the light, to make the lamps burn continuously."(Lev.24:1-2)

Although the verse says continuously it must be understood in terms of Exod.27:21 & 30:8.

The Talmud alleges that whilst there was plenty of oil in the temple the majority of it had been defiled by the king's forces, such that there was only sufficient set apart oil for the menorah to burn for one night. The Talmud alleges that Yahuwah miraculously caused this one nights supply to last for eight nights, by which time a sufficient supply of set apart oil had been prepared,

What is the reason for Hanukkah? For our Rabbis taught: For when the Greeks entered the temple, they defiled all the oils therein and when the Hasmonean (Maccabean) dynasty prevailed against and defeated them, they made search and found only one cruse of oil which lay with the seal of the high priest but which contained sufficient for one day's lighting only: yet a miracle was wrought therein and they lit (the lamp) therewith for eight day. The following year these (days) were appointed a Festival with (the recital of) Hallel and thanksgiving. (Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Shabbat Chapter 21)

The Talmud presents this alleged miracle as the reason for the Hanukkah celebration of today. What is surprising is that the record of events contained in the 'Book of Maccabees,' makes no mention of such a profound miracle,

Then they took whole stones according to the law, and built a new altar according to the former. And made up the sanctuary and the things that were within the temple and hallowed the courts. They made also new holy vessels and into the temple they brought the candlestick and the altar of burnt offerings and of incense and the table. And upon the altar they burned incense and the lamps that were upon the candlestick they lighted that they might give light in the temple. Furthermore they set the loaves upon the table and spread out the veils and finished all the works.

This is a well detailed record of what took place. Surely a miracle as profound as that alleged in the Talmud would have been included within such a comprehensive record. It is quite the contrary, the Maccabean record infers no problem whatsoever with lighting the menorah. What the Maccabean record does tell us, is that there was an eight day celebration of dedication and that the leader Yehudah Maccabee commanded the people keep this celebration every year,

And so they kept the dedication of the altar eight days and offered burnt offerings with gladness and sacrificed the sacrifice of deliverance and praise. Moreover Y'hudah and his brethren with the whole congregation of Israel, ordained that the days of dedication of the altar, should be kept in their season from year to year, by the space of eight days from the five and twentieth day of the month of Kislev with mirth and gladness. (1 Macc.4:56 & 59)

There is no support for the argument that Hanukkah is a celebration of Yahuwah's esteem because He has provided specific instructions how we are to worship Him and stipulated very clearly, that we must not add our own forms of worship. The golden calf incident at Sinai is a good example. There is no contention that Yahuwah gave the Maccabees a miraculous victory over Antiochus. The Tanakh (OT) is full of the miracles of Yahuwah but we do not add festival days for them, so why should we do so for Yahuwah's victory over Antiochus, even if the alleged miracle of the oil is fact.

Some argue that Mashiach observed Hanukkah citing a verse from John's gospel,

Now it was the Feast of Dedication in Jerusalem. It was winter and Yahusha walked in the temple in Shlomo's (Solomon's) porch. (John 10:22).

We should not read what is not said. The verse does not say Yahusha was celebrating Hanukkah it merely says He was in Jerusalem at the temple at this time. It is quite possible that, for His own reasons, He remained in Jerusalem after celebrating the Festival of Sukkot. Another point of note is that Hanukkah has never been a temple based celebration so using the fact that Yahusha happened to be in the temple at this time has no substance. Neither is there any record of either Mashiach or His talmidim celebrating this event, this alone is evidence that we should not observe it.

A very plausible reason for Yahusha not celebrating Hanukkah is because it is associated with light (the lighting of candles, oil lamps etc.) and He claimed to be the 'light of the world.' Thus Mashiach would have every right to question why man is looking to a Hanukkiah for light when He is the light.

We should remember Yahusha's response to the Adversary's tempting Him,

"Man does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Father." (Matt.4:4).

Of significance to Yahusha's statement is Yahuwah's command in Deut.4:2 & 12:32 not to add to His Word. Would Mashiach preach in this way and then observe a celebration that transgresses our Father's Torah? Remember He told us He came to do the will of our Father. Our Father wants us to obey His Word not to disobey it.

Purim

Purim is a memorial to Queen Esther's success in thwarting Haman's attempt to eradicate the Jewish people during the reign of king Ahasuerus (also known as Artaxerxes) of Persia. The whole event is recorded in the book of Esther. It is a holiday in which even the most serious Torah teachers are entwined in the spirit of revelry to such extremes that drunkenness is acceptable. Nowhere does Scripture advocate behaviour likely to produce incapacitation of either thought or control,

And do not be drunk with wine, in which is loose behaviour, but be filled with the Spirit,
(Eph.5:18)

Clearly, a person cannot be full of alcohol and the Ruach HaKodesh and any celebration promoting drunkenness has to be a transgression of Torah.

Notwithstanding the above comment the argument against Purim is much the same as that against Hanukkah. Irrespective of any divine involvement with respect to the events recorded in Esther, we must adhere to what Yahuwah has commanded in His Torah – not to add to His Word.

A Comment on Romans 14

And receive him who is weak in the belief, not criticising his thoughts. One indeed believes to eat all food, but he who is weak eats only vegetables. He that eats, let him not despise him who does not eat, and he that does not eat, let him not judge him who eats, for Elohim received him. Who are you that judge another's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. But he shall be made to stand, for Elohim is able to make him stand. One indeed judges one day above another, another judges every day alike. Let each one be completely persuaded in his own mind. He who minds the day, minds it to YHWH. And he who does not mind the day, to YHWH he does not mind it. He who eats, eats to YHWH, for he gives Elohim thanks. And he who does not eat, to YHWH he does not eat, and gives Elohim thanks. For not one of us lives to himself, and not one dies to himself. For both, if we live, we live unto the Master, and if we die, we die unto the Master. Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Master's. (Rom.14:1-7).

In the above passage the apostle is encouraging each to show latitude to the other but to those who insist on following tradition, whom he describes as weak, he suggests they attribute their actions to YHWH. By this, their actions move away from mere tradition or custom to become a voluntary accolade to YHWH. The tradition then becomes a personal matter of sufferance between the follower and YHWH, consequently all contention is removed. Because it is personal, it cannot be forced upon others and as YHWH is now the benefactor of the action; neither can it be frowned upon. Paul writes in a similar vein to a congregation in Corinth;

“Therefore whatever you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the esteem of YHWH.”
(1Cor.10:31).

There is nothing wrong with a person wishing to pay additional reverence or homage to YHWH. Quite the contrary, the more we revere Him the more we please Him but there is a caveat and that is, we cannot force others to do likewise if we do this the additional worship moves from personal into the realm of tradition. This is the situation with Hanukkah and Purim.

Conclusion

Why is it all such a big deal! Well the incident concerning Nadav and Avihu recorded in Leviticus chapter 10 is evidence that YHWH determines the framework for His worship and He has provided explicit instructions which He has described in great detail for us. When we stray from these forms of worship, we are as Nadav and Avihu; we are offering up “strange fire;” a pseudonym for unauthorised worship and it doesn’t matter if it is done innocently through ignorance. When it comes to the Torah we are left in no doubt how Yahuwah wishes to be worshipped, His Torah is specific. When we do things differently it is tantamount to telling YHWH He got it wrong.

YHWH has decided which festivals are to memorialise the death, resurrection, salvation and the restoration achieved in Mashiach. It is YHWH’s own choice that these festivals are the specific times He wants to spend with us. We are not at liberty to do things differently, to choose our own way. Adding to His Word is disobeying His Word which is evil and the prophet warns about calling evil good,

Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil; Who put darkness for light, and light for darkness; Who put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter! 21 Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes, And prudent in their own sight! (Isa.5:20-21)

Therefore, as the fire devours the stubble and the flame consumes the chaff, so their root will be as rottenness, and their blossom will ascend like dust; because they have rejected the Torah of YHWH of hosts, and despised the word of the Holy One of Israel. (Isa.5:24)

We are not at liberty to mess with what Yahuwah has provided. Hanukkah and Purim are the commands of men and Mashiach warns against following the rules of man,

“Their worship of Me is useless, because they teach man made rules as if they were doctrines.” (Matt.15:9)

So what can we say? Neither Hanukkah nor Purim is ordained by Torah. Just like Christianity’s Christmas and Easter they are the commands of men not Yahuwah. If they are not of Yahuwah’s command then they are transgressions of Deut.4:2 & 12:32.

The Tanakh even provides an example were Yahuwah commands those Israelites returning from Babylon to cease following the additional celebrations they had created,

This word of Yahuwah Tzva'ot came to me. Yahuwah Tzva'ot says, "The fast days of the fourth, fifth, seventh and tenth months are to be times of joy, gladness and cheer for the house of Y'hudah. Therefore, love truth and peace." (Zech.8:18-19).

These particular added feast days were associated with sadness/mourning in remembrance of the destruction by the Babylonians of the temple and Jerusalem. But Yahuwah is instructing the Israelites to stop following their own doctrines to be joyful on these days and to treat them as ordinary.

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