

# Reflections

24th Kislev 5773 ~ 8th December 2012



## Vayeshev - Chanukah 1st Candle

By Dr Annette M. Boeckler

This shabbat we begin to tell the story of Jacob's children ... *eleh toledot Yaakov* "this is Jacob's line of generations" (37:2), with a special focus on Josef and Judah. The story will end in 4 weeks time in the Egyptian Diaspora. Sorry to anticipate the end... Josef will develop from pampered darling child (chapter 37) to sharply calculating Vice Pharaoh (41:40; on his politics see 47:14-24), Judah will change from cold calculating tradesman (37:26: "let's make money with him") to a responsible caring representative of his brothers and sister (chapter 44 a. 46:28). These changes happen during the migration from home to a foreign country. It is in Egypt that questions will arise about how much of the old Canaanite customs one should keep. It is in Egypt that "Israelite" identity will be formed and the Jewish people will be born. Josef, however, will change so much that even his own brothers were unable to recognize him (45:1-4). But during the next weeks, pay also attention to Judah's incredible change of character.

But before we continue the story, today, after motzae Shabbat, we will start a special week reminding of similar intercultural encounters in other times. Despite originating in a fight for Jewish distinctiveness, probably no other Jewish festival is a better witness for intercultural relationships than Chanukkah, no other festival adopted so many customs of its environment. The most popular melody of its signature song, "*Maoz Tzur*" is itself an intercultural encounter. The text was written in the 13<sup>th</sup> century by an Italian paytan called Mordechai. The melody – I mean that famous one, that you stop to like after some days

[there are in fact others!] – the first half (from *maoz tzur* till *n'sabei'ach*) uses the tune of a German hymn by Martin Luther in 1523 "Nun freut euch, lieben Christen g'mein" (Dear Christians, One and All rejoice!). The second part (from *l'eit* till *ha-m'nabei'ach*) is based on the introit of a catholic Gregorian chant for the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Advent "*rorate coeli*" (Drop down ye heavens from above and let the skies pour down righteousness). The last part finally (from *az egmor* till *ha-mizbei'ach*) comes from a German folksong: "Ich weiß mir ein Maidlein hübsch und fein" (I know a maiden, fair and delicate) whose refrain is: "Huet Du Dich, vertrau ihr nicht, sie narret Dich, sie narret Dich!" (Be aware, trust her not, she's fooling you). The texts belonging to these three diverse 16<sup>th</sup> century melodies deal either with spiritual salvation (Luther), with hope for religious renewal (the Gregorian chant) or with a preventative warning about sweet seduction leading to a catastrophe – interestingly all ideas somehow in the very broader sense connected to the theme of Chanukkah: hope for change, fight for tradition.

So when we think about Jewish identity in the Diaspora – what were the changes that made us to those that we are today? What is our "Josef and Judah"- story or our Chanukkah story?

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