

Saturday 5th September 2015

KI TAVO 5775 Bar Mitzvah of Samuel Papier 5 September 2015

Sermon delivered by Rabbi Michael Hilton, Kol Chai Hatch End Reform Jewish Community

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Mazal tov to you Samuel: I know how hard you've been working to get to today: a few days ago, when I asked you if you wanted another practice this week, you replied 100%. Your efforts and your commitment have really paid off. And what a fascinating Torah reading now becomes really special in your life – a splendid picture of a land at peace, everyone donating part of their harvest to the poor and the migrant: and the haftarah talks of a land and a people who are going to have a splendid reputation among the nations, respected honoured and esteemed. If only it were really like that! For this we are still waiting: that *haftarah* from the distant past seem to be talking about a future which has not yet arrived.

The history of ancient Israel was one of war and conquest. But there were plenty of peaceful times too, and no doubt your Torah reading was written at one of those times. There is every reason to believe that at the big festivals, Pesach, Shavuot, Sukkot, pilgrims really did walk in their thousands to Jerusalem, bringing with them at Pesach their lambs, at Shavuot their first fruits as described in your reading, and at Sukkot their later harvest produce. The temple in Jerusalem remained the focus of Israelite worship until the Babylonians destroyed it. But they returned from exile and rebuilt it, and the ceremony of bringing the first fruits in a basket then carried on until Antiochus IV Epiphanes desecrated it in the year 167 BCE, as we know from the Chanukkah story. What was Antiochus' religion, the one he wanted the Jews of the day to conform to? He seems to have venerated a number of pagan Gods, one of them being the Syrian supreme deity *Baal Shamim* (master of heaven), the very same deity whose Temple was destroyed at Palmyra by Da'esh a couple of weeks ago. What the papers didn't report is that the Islamic militants were destroying not just a pagan Temple, but part of both Jewish and Christian history. For *Baal Shamim* was a sun God, his feast the winter solstice when in the dark people prayed for the sun's return. His Temple at Palmyra was, until it was destroyed, the main remaining evidence for Antiochus' religion.

According to our history Antiochus desecrated the Temple on 25th Kislev, the same date the Maccabees restored it three years later, and according to Christian history, the festival to Baal Shamim is one of the reasons why Christmas to this day falls on 25th December.

And so Samuel, while all this may seem like some strange ancient ritual with strange ancient stories, the history which the Bible tells still has echoes in our time. In fact, it's only because history is important that there are people out there who wish to destroy it: if it had no importance, they wouldn't bother with it. Of course, Da'esh are not the first to destroy local heritage sites. Go round Britain and look at the ruins of ancient abbeys and monasteries, plundered for building material after Henry VIII closed them. Or look at England's medieval castles, 80% of them in ruins caused by destruction in the English civil war. Or look at our Torah, and how the Israelites were commanded to destroy all the high places and pagan

sites. Before we rush to condemn what's going on now, we need to be aware that Muslims learned these ideas from a few unacceptable passages in our own ancient texts.

This week we have all been horrified by the picture of a little boy washed up dead on a beach in Turkey. As the Chief Rabbi put it yesterday, echoing how we Jews and so many others feel "When I saw that picture, my heart was broken." The pictures of this boy from a Kurdish family have quickly become a symbol of the conflict in and around Syria. Those who destroy antiquities end up destroying people as well: those who destroy the past have little thought of the future either: only their present madness claims them. Here, every week, in every service, we pray for a peaceful world, yet we do little to help achieve it. Helping those in need runs like a golden thread through the Torah, especially the book of Deuteronomy, and here it is once again this week in your portion, where three times we are told "help the stranger." Those who come into the land are never allowed to forget they were once slaves. Samuel, you chose for us a very serious *devar torah* about our journey through life: you are a very thoughtful person and you know that we were not given this life just to enjoy ourselves: we Jews have given these strong and powerful ideas to the world, of the huge importance of an individual's life, of the duty to reach out and help those in need. At this time the world needs those ideas more than ever. I am very proud that this week Kol Chai has launched a new collection for refugee families here.

Samuel, you are an intelligent and gifted. Your love of computer games has led you to discover the way computers work, to visit shows which sell computer parts and accessories, and to build your own—a simple interest made you delve deeper. In the same way, my hope for you is that this learning you have done for your bar mitzvah will lead you on to try to understand some of the wonderful ideas in your portion which Judaism has given to the world, and to put them into practice in your life. *Today, God makes you a promise. It is not a promise that life will be easy, for no life is easy. It is a promise that wherever you go, whatever you do, your Judaism can be a source of strength and comfort to you, the place from which you start and to which you will return. This weekend, you have your reward, the party and presents which you have earned through your hard work for today. But in your life in the future you will have a far greater reward, ideas which can give a real meaning to your life, inspire you and help you to inspire and lead others to Torah and to good deeds.*