

HOLY CONVOICATIONS (MINOR FESTIVALS)



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Minor Festivals: חַנּוּכָּה Chanukkah - The Festival of Dedication

“Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the Word of Truth!” 2 Timothy 2:15 (KJV)

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The Hebrew word “chanukkah” (say “chah-noo-kah) literally means “dedication.” It is from this word that the minor holiday known as Chanukkah gets its name. This festival is not one of the seven festivals found in Leviticus chapter 23, but in its original concept, it is free from pagan trappings. The familiar 9-branched candlestick that so many of you are used to seeing is known as a “chanukkiah.” I don't claim to be an historian, and the story of how Chanukkah came to be is

somewhat familiar to most folks anyway, so I want to avoid retelling the entire story and instead shift my teaching to focus on the meaning of "dedication." I believe just a small background briefer is necessary.

History Lesson

During the few hundred years prior to the Common Era (C.E.), the Hellenistic (Greek) armies of Alexander marched throughout the Middle East in a conquest to control the civilized world. For the most part, they were successful, as their rule spanned approximately 330 B.C.E (Before the Common Era) until they were finally defeated themselves by a stronger and more militant army known as the Romans in 63 B.C.E. It was during this time period that the Land of Palestine (Isra'el) was caught up in the middle of these intense power struggles.

The Hellenistic armies, led by prominent General Antiochus Epiphanies IV, sought to eliminate all traces of alien culture (alien to Hellenism) by fierce methods of assimilation. They enforced strict anti-Torah policies, particularly, the forbidding of circumcision and public and private Torah reading. As could be expected, the Judeans resisted, and conflicts with the Hellenists were frequent. As it came to pass, Antiochus eventually seized complete control of the Temple itself, and in a public display of triumph and mockery, he decided to sacrifice a swine upon the altar itself, pouring swine urine on the Temple furniture and holy things. He also enforced the strict Hellenization of Palestine by setting up a gymnasium in Yerushalayim, compelling Jews to attend. Eventually the proverbial straw broke the camel's back and a resistance led by the Maccabean family (of the Hasmonean Dynasty) began to fight back.

When the Temple was eventually recaptured by the Judeans, it was in shambles. Apart from being ritualistically defiled by Antiochus' armies, it was in a horrific state of disuse. During the three years that he occupied it, the Temple priests were forbidden to perform their proper duties, therefore, it would take quite a bit of work to repair the once beautiful structure. It was decided that before any reconstruction and repair could commence, the House itself had to be rededicated back to HaShem. This was an act to signify that the Judeans wanted the Holiness of the Holy One to return to his Holy Temple.

They set out to accomplish this task, but when it came time to rekindle the Menorah (the seven-branched lamp-stand that resided in the Temple) they discovered that the olive oil supply had been depleted. It usually took up to eight days to manufacture enough oil to keep the lamp properly lit. According to tradition, miraculously they also discovered one container of oil with enough supply to light just a single lamp (think of it as just one candle of the seven). The miraculous took place when upon lighting the menorah during the rededication ceremony, instead of it lasting only a few hours, it lasted for the duration of the eight days that it took to produce more oil! The Judeans interpreted this as a supernatural sign the Holy One, Blessed be He, was well pleased that they had

defeated the Greek Armies for now, and that he was ready to “move back into his home.”

Whether or not the all the elements in the above story are factual or not, history does record that the Temple was rededicated unto HaShem after the defeat of Antiochus Epiphanes IV, by the family known as the Maccabees. In fact, the story is somewhat recorded for us in the Apocryphal books known as the Maccabees (found in a Bible containing the Deuterocanonicals, usually a Catholic version). Because the festival of Chanukkah originated from a remembrance of this historic occasion, we can read about it also in our New Covenant book of John, chapter 10, verse 22.

K'dushah (Holiness)

Chanukkah is about holiness.

It has been stated that holiness is not metaphysical; our concept of holiness does not define what is holy. Only the Holy One himself can fully define—as well as embody holiness. To be sure, the phrase ‘I am ADONAI,’ or its equivalent ‘I am ADONAI your God’ appears sixteen times in Leviticus chapter nineteen alone! Chapter twenty sees another four uses of these phrases. The lesson is obvious:

ADONAI alone defines holiness among men; only he has the power and authority to set the standard of holiness—for he alone is the fullness of holiness—for he alone is ADONAI!

So what happens when humanity meets holiness?

HaShem is intimately interested in our redemption. Likewise, he is our deliverer from the unholy. That is why he masterfully planned for one man to become the perfect embodiment and display of his holiness. Only this man would be able to showcase the fullness of the holiness of God to such a degree that to look at this man was to look at God! Only this man would be able to perfectly imitate God—for only this man was and is perfectly God.

Yeshua is his name!

And he sets the standard!

Because of our new life in Messiah, we have inherited the holiness that HaShem intended for us to possess all along. When we place our trusting faithfulness in the perfect Man of God, our holiness (or lack thereof) becomes the holiness of the Father! Our constitution changes and we are no longer deemed ‘unholy’, for his riches in glory—which includes his holy standard of being—are transferred to our account! We must grasp this central truth and begin to live according to it!

We are holy because Yeshua has made us holy!

Just as unrighteous Avraham became righteous when he placed his complete faith in HaShem, so we too inherit the righteousness and holiness of the Holy One when we place our unreserved trust in his Son. But holiness is also a duty. What do I mean?

Walking in K'dushah

Apart from being an attribute of God—one that we inherit intrinsically with our trusting faithfulness in the Messiah, holiness is also meant to be a lifestyle. This is why I like to use the phrase 'trusting faithfulness' rather than simply 'faith.' The latter implies a one-time action on our part, which forever sets into motion a spiritual truth that will be fully actualized at the return of our LORD. Notice the candor of the phrase, "I place my trust in Yeshua." However, the former carries the aspect of a daily motion, which permeates every movement of our new-creation lives! "I place my trusting faithfulness in Yeshua." Do you notice the subtle difference? To live by 'trusting faithfulness' rather than just by 'faith' alone characterizes our moment-by-moment thought process as well as our actions. The former carries our faith into action! In other words, this new life in Messiah is an ever constant, ever-growing relationship with the Holy One of Isra'el; a demonstration of the miraculous on a level that can and should be measured in even the smallest areas of our lives. Trusting faithfulness is ongoing! It is not some unmoving, monumental event which took place sometime in our lives—it is the ongoing monumental process that overtakes our lives—for the rest of our lives—which was enacted when we first had a genuine encounter with the divine holiness!

Holiness implies dedication and "set-apart-ness."

To dedicate something is to consecrate it for a set-apart function. To be set-apart unto HaShem is the fullest meaning of the word dedication. Along with the word "chanukkah," is the familiar word "kadosh," meaning "holy." This also conveys the sense of something being "separated" from the ordinary, "separated" unto the Holy. If something is not set aside unto the holy, then it is not properly set aside. One more word that will help to clarify these concepts is the word "shuv," meaning to "return." We get the Hebrew word "t'shuvah," meaning "repentance" from this word. Torah-true repentance involves turning from that which is unrighteous and returning to that which is righteous. Like chanukkah, and kadosh, t'shuvah implies both functions.

The Temple represented the seat of HaShem's dwelling with mankind. It was here that the "Ah-ron HaKodesh" (Ark of the Covenant) dwelt; it was in the Temple that the "Sh'khinah" (manifested Glory of God) resided. Therefore it was necessary to consider this place Holy unto God and separated for a specific

purpose. When the Temple became defiled with pagan influences and pagan rituals, it had to be rededicated in order to be considered “clean.”

The New Covenant Scriptures indicate that, as believers in Messiah Yeshua, our bodies are now (since the Second Temple has now been removed) the Temple of the Holy Spirit of HaShem (the Ruach HaKodesh). We have become his dwelling place in the earth today. As his dwelling place, we need to keep his “temple” cleansed. How does it become defiled?

When we allow our activities to put us into the kinds of situations that the Torah forbids, when we use our temple in ways that are unethical, immoral, indecent, unjust, unloving, unkind, and just plain unscriptural, we defile his Temple! Lying, cheating, stealing, adultery, fornication, deceiving, backbiting, jealousy, quarrelling, lack of self control, lack of moral fortitude—these are some of the things that render our temple unusable to HaShem, and consequently, these are the things that will remove us from being “holy.” Ultimately, these are the types of things that will destroy us. How do we rededicate ourselves?

Holiness is not something that we should just “put on and off” when it is convenient to us. It is a state that we should be constantly existing in! How do we do what HaShem expects us to do? By faithfully trusting in his Power and in his Word to work in and through our lives to produce a temple that is useable and dedicated. We do what the Torah tells us to do, and allow HaShem to make good on his promises that as we are doing what the Torah tells us to do, he is reshaping our thoughts and desires to conform to the image of his Holy Son. Holiness is not just something that we sit around and “dream” about; it is more than a “revelation” or a feeling! It is a call to action!

What I have been discussing here is not some new and modern twist on religion. It is the standard that HaShem has expected since the creation of man. We in the twenty-first century are geared towards wanting the latest and the greatest, but sometimes the “old wine is better.” This year as Chanukkah takes place, take a moment to reflect on the reality of “who you are in Messiah.” You don’t need to be some hyper-spiritual person to accomplish the task of holiness! You are a dedicated, holy temple, set apart from the ordinary (the world and its system), and set apart unto a life of praise and obedience to God Almighty! This is an identity of preeminence! This is a position of honor! And the greatest reality is that this was accomplished, not because you or I deserved to be called “holy.” Rather, it was because the Father chose to demonstrate his intense love for us by sending his Son to become the means of attaining holiness in the first place! Our holiness finds its purpose and meaning in the sacrificial death, burial, and resurrection of our LORD Yeshua! His Ruach (Spirit) empowers us to live a life that is pleasing to HaShem, and at the same time, gives us the boldness and opportunity to share our testimony with those who do not yet know Yeshua personally.

Dedication and holiness should not strike you as unattainable character traits that only the “super spiritual” should possess. Simply placing your trusting faithfulness in Yeshua, and consequently allowing him to have control of your thoughts, actions, emotions, and your will, accomplishes the purposes of HaShem. You can start today. You should pursue it until the Messiah returns to take you unto himself! After all, “chanukkah” is not just for the Jews.

Excursus: Grafted Into Isra'el

Nearly 1900 years ago, the Apostle Paul (a.k.a. Sha'ul) found himself being challenged by the risen Yeshua on a most important mission. Our LORD chose to commission this Pharisaic Jew with an urgent message to the Gentiles:

**“However, to those of you who are Gentiles I say this: since I myself am an emissary sent to the Gentiles, I make known the importance of my work... But if some of the branches were broken off, and you - a wild olive - were grafted in among them and have become equal sharers in the rich root of the olive tree, then don't boast as if you were better than the branches! However, if you do boast, remember that you are not supporting the root, the root is supporting you.”
(Romans 11:13, 17, 18)**

A most wonderful truth is being discussed here. What does it mean for Sha'ul to say that the ‘wild olive tree’ (the Gentiles) is grafted into the ‘cultivated olive tree’? The plain sense of the text should not be easily confusing:

- Through the efficacious ministry of the Messiah Yeshua, Gentile believers are covenant-bound to ‘Father Abraham’s Olive Tree’—Isra'el—thereby making them fellow citizens and full-participants with the Commonwealth of Isra'el (Eph. 2), thus granting them the divine privilege of following the whole of the Torah.
- We believe that YHVH has written this very same Torah upon the hearts of those, Jews and Gentiles, who have placed their trusting faithfulness in Yeshua (Jer. 31:31-34; Heb. 8:7-12).
- We believe that this same Torah is a foundational revelation of the righteousness of HaShem and serves as a description (along with the rest of the Scriptures) of the lifestyle of the Redeemed Community (James 1:16-27).
- Furthermore, ‘grafted in’ bespeaks of our affirmation to our true identity as a people—Jew and Gentile—that is securely rooted in the Finished Work of Yeshua HaMashiach.

The Righteousness of God

In his letter to Rome, Sha'ul wrote in 3:28 that God considers a person righteous on the grounds of trusting, which has nothing to do with the Torah (or as in KJV

“deeds of the Law”). On the surface this seems problematic for my own teachings that consider Torah observance to be of great significance. Yet, the problem here is really more a matter of hermeneutics than of theology. What Sha’ul is really talking about when he employs the Greek phrase “*ergon nomou*,” translated here as “works of Law” is in actuality a technical phrase that the Judaisms of Sha’ul’s day employed to speak of the halakhah, that is, the proper way in which a Jew is to walk out Torah. Indeed, the prevailing view of the sages of the 1st Century held to the common belief that Isra’el and Isra’el alone shared a place in the world to come. Thus, if a non-Jew wished to enter into HaShem’s blessings and promises, such a person had to convert to Judaism first. To be sure, this is one of the primary arguments delineated in the letter to the Galatians.

But for Sha’ul no such ‘man-made’ conversion policy existed in Scripture!

By contrast, Sha’ul taught most assuredly that Gentiles were grafted into Isra’el the same way that Avraham was counted as righteous by God in B’resheet (Genesis) chapter 15: faith in the promised Word of the LORD. Thus, the phrase “works of Law” has a Hebrew counterpart: *ma’asei haTorah*. What meaneth *ma’asei haTorah*? The Dead Sea Scrolls used this phrase as well, and since the discovery of those manuscripts we have now come to know that it refers to “some of the precepts of the Torah,” as adjudicated by the halakhah and by the particular community wielding the most influence. To be sure, the halakhah that teaches Gentile inclusion only by way of conversion (read most often as “circumcision” in Galatians) was naturally at odds with the True Gospel of Gentile inclusion by faith in Yeshua plus nothing! If we understand that quite often Sha’ul’s use of the term circumcision in Galatians is actually shorthand for “the man-made ritual that seeks to turn Gentiles into Jews” then the letter begins to make more sense Hebraically and contextually.

With this knowledge at hand we are now prepared to better interpret Sha’ul’s *pasuk*, “*a person is considered righteous by God on the grounds of trusting which has nothing to do with the Torah...*” as really saying, “*a person is considered righteous by God on the grounds of trusting which has nothing to do with the conversion policy that seeks to make Gentiles into Jews first!*”

Law vs. Grace?

God is the God of both Jews and Gentiles! One need not change his station in life before God can accept him. What is more, the real change that takes place in a person’s life is effected by the Ruach HaKodesh when, because of Yeshua’s bloody, sacrificial death, the sinner takes on the status of righteous! Man cannot add to that which God perfects. A conversion to Judaism (a.k.a. circumcision), in Sha’ul’s mind, added nothing to those wishing to be counted as true Israelites in the Torah Community. To Sha’ul, their genuine faith in the Promised Word of HaShem, as evidenced by the genuine working of the Spirit among them, was all

the “identity” they would ever need! Once counted as righteous by the Righteous One Himself, all the new [Gentile] believer needed to do was begin to walk in that righteousness, a walk already described in the pages of the Written Torah, a walk formerly impossible due to the deadness of flesh and bondage to sin.

Biblical “freedom” is not a license to walk away from Torah! Biblical “freedom” is liberation to walk into Torah and into the righteousness that HaShem envisioned for us all along! Thus, positional righteousness always results in behavioral righteousness. Put plainly, Torah submissiveness is the natural result of being set free from sin and set free unto Yeshua!

The ages-old “Law vs. Grace” argument is a dead argument. Truthfully, there exists no incongruity between God’s Law and God’s Grace. The two are complimentary. To be sure, God’s grace is what actually empowers the saint to walk into Torah obedience!

Conclusion

Failure to continue in genuine trusting faithfulness for either Jew or Gentile participants invited God to place them in a position that Sha’ul called “broken off.” In other words, natural branches (Jews) could be broken off because of lack of trust, and grafted-in branches (Gentiles) could also be broken off due to lack of trust (read Romans chapter 11)! Far from purporting that some “ethnic-driven” halakhah secured one’s place in the ‘olam haba (Age to Come), the native born Jew, the convert Jew, and the good old fashioned Gentiles all faced the same penalty for remorseless lack of faith: spiritual death.

So we see that the Torah is the universal document for both peoples and it outlines God’s plan for all mankind, both Jews and Gentiles.

The “mystery of the Gospel” is that Isra'el is actually comprised of both Jews and Gentiles! To be grafted into the family of God is to join oneself to a Jewish Olive Tree without having to succumb to any kind of man-made conversion policy whatsoever! To this end, one becomes submissive to the instructions and righteousness of God, and inherits the blessings of God, whether he is of Gentile or Jewish stock!

To walk in disobedience and lack of trust is to invite God’s punishment and withholding of blessing. To belong to the family is to mentally, spiritually, and physically accept the family rules. To this end, both Jews and Gentiles are expected to practice Torah submissiveness within their hearts and within their communities. To submit to God is to desire and allow his Holy Spirit (Ruach HaKodesh) to continually mold a person’s life into the example of the Son of God, who vividly displayed a Torah-obedient and submissive life! This is the responsibility of a believer.

To suppose that faith outside of resulting action alone is pleasing to God is to misunderstand the valuable lesson explained by Ya'akov. Such faith is barren and of no value to God. Conversely, to mistakenly replace the genuine faith that the Torah teaches with halakhic rules designed to regulate one's identity with God, is to misunderstand Sha'ul's valuable lesson. Such actions also prove to be displeasing to God and unacceptable as righteous.

***“Baruch atah YHVH, Eloheynu, Melech ha-'Olam,
asher natan Toraht-emet,
uv'suraht-yeshu-ah l'amo Yisra'el
ul'chol ha-amim al-yadey bano Yeshua HaMashiach, Adoneinu.”***

(Blessed are you O' LORD, our God, King of the Universe,
who gives the Torah of truth,
and the Good News of salvation to his people Isra'el
and to all the peoples through his son Yeshua the Messiah, our Lord.)

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Excursus: Sukkot-Chanukkah Connection

**Ariel's note: I cannot recall exactly where I obtained this excursus... perhaps another e-friend sent it to me. However, the information contained herein is fascinating. To be sure, the composition is not my own. I have, nonetheless, decided to attach it as an excursus onto the end of my commentary to Chanukkah. Enjoy.*

We've all heard the story of Chanukkah about Judah Maccabee and his army liberating the temple but finding just the single jar of oil that was only enough to last for 1 day, when somehow “miraculously” the oil lasted for 8 days. So where does this story come from? And what else do we know about the “Festival of Lights”?

First off, a number of historians believe that the reason for the eight-day celebration was that the first Chanukkah was in effect a belated celebration of the festival of Sukkot, the Feast of Tabernacles. During the war the Jews were not able to celebrate Sukkot properly. Sukkot also lasts for eight days, and was a holiday in which the lighting of lamps played a prominent part during the Second Temple period (Suk.v. 2-4). Lights were also kindled in the household, and the popular name of the festival was, therefore, according to Josephus. It has been noted that Jewish festivals are connected to the harvesting of the Biblical seven fruits, which Israel was famed for. Pesach is a celebration of the barley harvest, Shavu'ot of the wheat, Sukkot of the figs, dates, pomegranates and grapes, and Chanukkah of the olives. The olive harvest is in November and olive oil would be ready in time for Chanukkah in December. The origins of Chanukkah are

probably even earlier and more basic. Three main religions have festivals immediately after the winter solstice: The Christian Christmas, the Hindu Diwali and the Jewish Chanukkah are all celebrated with lights.

In reality, the historical tale of Chanukkah is not nearly so “magical.” The “miraculous” story of the Chanukkah oil, with which we are so familiar, comes straight from the Babylonian Talmud (tractate Shabbat, page 21b). It is important here to recall that the Babylonian Talmud dates to about 550CE. But Chanukkah is mentioned at least two other times in pieces of Jewish holy literature that precede the Talmud.

Important facts you will need to recall to follow this story:

- Chanukkah begins on the 25th day of the Hebrew month of Kislev. Kislev is toward the beginning of winter.
- The pilgrimage festival of Sukkot is 8 days long, and is the only one of the three pilgrimage festivals that is celebrated for 8 days.
- The Apocrypha is the set of holy books that were canonized into the Catholic Old Testament, but were not canonized into the Hebrew Bible (and therefore not into the Protestant Old Testament, which follows the Hebrew Bible).
- The Book of Antiquities is a book purportedly written by Josephus Flavius, a Jew who worked for the Romans as a historian during the time of the destruction of the 2nd Jerusalem Temple (73CE). This book was not canonized into any Bible, but remains an important source of historical information.

OK, here we go:

First we find reference in the Second Book of Maccabees, which is part of the Apocrypha, (chapter 10, verses 1-8) to an event on the 25th of Kislev, in the year 165BCE, which sounds extremely familiar:

When Maccabeus and his companions under the leadership of God, had recovered the temple and the city, they destroyed the altars erected by the Gentiles in the marketplace and the sacred enclosures. After purifying the temple, they made a new altar. Then, with fire struck from flint, they offered sacrifice for the first time in two years, burned incense, lighted the lamps, and set out the holy bread. When they had done this they bowed down and begged God that they might never again fall into such misfortunes, and that if they should sin at any time, God might chastise them with moderation and not hand them over to the blasphemous and barbarous Gentiles. On the anniversary of the day on which the temple had been profaned by the Gentiles, that is, the 25th of the Kislev, the purification of the temple took place.

The Book of Maccabees then continues with a description of what happened during this “purification” of the temple:

The Jews celebrated joyfully for eight days as on the feast of Booths, remembering how, a little while before, they had spent the feast of Booths living in caves on the mountains like animals. Carrying rods entwined with leaves, green branches, and palms, they sang psalms of grateful praise to the one who had brought about the purification of The Holy Place.

Whoa! Wait a second! What's this description? There's nothing here about lighting menorahs or playing dreidl! Celebrating as on the Feast of Booths? The Feast of Booths is the fall pilgrimage festival of Sukkot! Carrying rods with green branches and palms? That's a lulav, the most sacred ritual object of Sukkot! And psalms of grateful praise? That's Hallel, the set of psalms Jews sing only on pilgrimage festivals and on the first day of each month! So what are we reading here? The Jews celebrated the re-dedication of the Temple by celebrating Sukkot 3 months late! Why? The text tells us, 'because they were stuck living in caves on Sukkot, and couldn't celebrate the holiday properly (which would involve sacrifices at the Temple and the whole bit)'. Why was it so important to celebrate Sukkot? Well, Sukkot was called "HeChag-The Holiday," probably because it was the holiday when prayers for rain were issued in anticipation of the coming rainy season.

The section concludes:

By public edict and decree they prescribed that the whole Jewish nation should celebrate these days every year.

The Book of Maccabees also contains a letter dated forty years later than the above, in 125BCE:

The Jews in Jerusalem and in the land of Judea send greetings to their brethren, the Jews in Egypt, and wish them true peace!...We are writing to remind you to celebrate the feast of Booths in the month of Kislev.

The second historical reference comes to us from the Book of Josephus-Jewish Antiquities, chapter 7 (75 CE):

And so Judah and his fellow citizens celebrated the restoration of sacrifices in the temple for eight days, omitting no form of pleasure, but feasting on costly and splendid sacrifices. And while honoring God with songs of praise, the playing of harps at the same time delighted them. So much pleasure did they find in the renewal of their customs and in unexpectedly obtaining the right to have their own service after so long a time that they made a law that their descendants should celebrate the restoration of the temple service for eight days. And from that time to the present we observe this festival, which we call the festival of Lights: giving this name to it, I think, from the fact that the right to worship appeared to us at a time when we hardly dared hope for it.

Well! Now the festival has a name! The “Festival of Lights.” Josephus seems unsure where this name originated, but he seems to confirm the story about the 8 days of Chanukkah reflecting a celebration Kislev of the renewed opportunity to offer the sacrifices of the Sukkot holiday. Josephus' phrase “omitting no form of pleasure” is another confirmation that the holiday reflects a pilgrimage festival, since “omitting no form of pleasure,” though it sounds somewhat lewd to our modern ear, likely refers to the accepted halakhah that on festival days, mourning on other somber customs and laws are prohibited.

One unsubstantiated editorial note: On the last day of Sukkot, there is a practice called Simchat Bet HaShoeva-the Water-Drawing Festival. In ancient times, at the end of the last day of Sukkot, water was carried from the storage pools at the lowest part of the ancient City of David (the Shiloam pool, if you visited Jerusalem) up to the Temple Mount and was poured on the altar as part of the prayers for rain. I offer that during the winter, if one were recreating Sukkot, it would be dark by the time the Water-Drawing Festival occurred. Those who have been to Jerusalem will recall that the City of David lay on a “camelback,” the ridge of a hill that leads up to the Temple Mount. This “camelback” can be seen from all around. I can just picture a parade from the Shiloam pool up to the Temple Mount in the middle of December in the dark, trudging up this camelback, guided now by torches. I could easily envision someone calling that “the festival of lights.”