

Jewish Identity and the Torah

Part 3 by Rabbi Baruch

Jewish Identity and the Torah – Part 3

In this third and final article, dealing with the relationship between the Torah and Jewish Identity, I will respond to a growing perspective within Messianic Judaism that Gentiles are not under the same mandate as Jewish individuals in regard to the obligations of the Torah commandments. In regard to those who hold the point of view that there is a difference between a Gentile believer's obligations and that of a Jewish believer's, I most strongly disagree. In reading several articles dealing with this issue I find that there are two primary causes for those arriving at this errant view. The first is an improper credence given to norms and standard practices of believers historically. This is to say because "Christianity" has not historically embraced the commandments of the Torah and most of the Church is Gentile, then it follows that there must not be a mandate for Gentiles in regard to the Torah. The second is a faulty handling of key Biblical passages which relate to this issue.

As has been addressed in the previous two articles, there is no mandate today upon Jewish believers or non-believers in regard to the Torah commandments. In the last article Hosea chapter three (verses 3-4) was cited as proof that the Bible predicted a time when the Torah would not be in force due to the lack of a Temple. Once again the problem with those who promote Torah observance for the 613 Biblical commandments of the Torah is that nearly half are impossible to fulfill today because of the fact that there is no Temple.

In examining the writings of several messianic leaders who

have written to this issue, it would seem that at the heart of the matter is not so much a fidelity to each of the Torah commandments, but a concern whether Jewish identity will be lost if Gentiles attempt to observe the Torah. The first critical point that one needs realize is that Jewish identity is not defined by Torah observance. Would one question the Jewishness of Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob or for that matter any of the descendants of the twelve tribes who lived in the land of Goshen? Yet they did not have the Torah. What about during a good portion of the time when the kings of Judah reigned in Jerusalem when the Torah had been literally lost, did the people of Judah lose their identity as Jews? Today it is estimated that less than twenty percent of the world Jewry practice rabbinical law, yet does a secular Jew like comedian Jerry Seinfeld lose his identity as being Jewish? The answer to all these question is no; hence "observance" of the commandments is not what imparts a Jewish identity.

At the end of the book of Zechariah the reader is informed that Gentiles will come up to observe the feast of Tabernacles. There are other Biblical passages as well as rabbinical writings that say that in the Millennial Kingdom all Gentiles will observe the Torah; therefore one must ask the question, "Does this mean that in the Kingdom that Gentiles will lose their identity as non- Jews?" Once again the answer is certainly not, because it is the vast number of Gentiles who will come to faith in the G-d of Israel, embracing the Torah and Messiah Yeshua in the last days which will be a testimony to Israel's faithfulness in the last days.

What is important to realize are the different groups who will make up the Millennial Kingdom. The first group will be those Jews and Gentiles who come to faith in Messiah Yeshua before the Rapture. These believers will receive a

new body and will rule with Messiah during the thousand years. The second group will be Jewish individuals that come to faith in Messiah Yeshua after the rapture, yet before the inauguration of the Kingdom. This group will be leaders in the Kingdom. The next group is the Gentiles who come to faith in Messiah Yeshua after the rapture, yet before the inauguration of the Kingdom. Whereas the second group is the leaders in the Kingdom, the third group is the citizens. The final group is those who will be born during the Millennial Kingdom. The purpose of this article is of course not to enter into a discourse about the last days, but there is a very important point that can be derived from these facts. Namely that in the Millennial Kingdom group one will be composed of Jews and Gentiles who have the same behavior, i.e. ruling with Messiah, yet their individual identity is not lost due to this common behavior. Also, group two and three (Jews and Gentiles) will be practicing the Torah in the Millennial Kingdom and neither will lose their individual identity.

I want to strongly emphasize that Jewish individuals who accept Yeshua do not lose their identity as Jews, nor do Gentile believers who in some form embrace a "Torah obedient" lifestyle become Jewish. In other words, a distinctive identity does not demand a distinctive set of practices or norms. Ruth for example, embraced a Torah lifestyle, yet she was always known as a Moabite. Uriah the Hittite, served in the Israelite army and spoke of the Ark of the Covenant (a reference to the commandments) yet retained his identity as a Hittite.

Another common mistake that individuals frequently make in regard to this issue is to fail to understand circumcision and what was implied by Paul during his frequent discussions involving the term. In order to assist one in comprehending this issue it must be stated that simply because the

Scripture mentions a position, this does not necessarily mean that the position is Biblical. Such is the case with how some sects of Judaism saw circumcision. During the latter Second Temple period, much of Judaism understood circumcision as relating to the Law of Moses; that is, that circumcision was a symbol or sign of one's acceptance of the Torah. Biblically this is incorrect. Circumcision relates to the Abrahamic Covenant which is established by faith, of which Messiah is the foundation. Circumcision, as was stated in part 1 of this series, represents the death of the flesh. One learns from the New Covenant that the Law arouses the desires of the flesh (See Romans 7:5) and reveals one's sinful nature which is in opposition to the will of G-d. Hence the Law, which is good, holy, and true, brings a death sentence upon the unregenerate man. The point is that the view that the Law is an instrument of salvation is in error. When Paul spoke negatively about circumcision it was in regard to those who had accepted the incorrect view that through circumcision, i.e. the acceptance of the Torah, one is saved.

This was the purpose of the Jerusalem Council in Acts chapter fifteen. Most Christian commentaries are wrong when they assert that the debate was about whether Gentiles who accept Messiah Yeshua are obligated to keep the Torah. If one simply reads the first verse of the chapter it clearly reveals the actual reason why this assembly took place.

"And certain men came down from Judah and taught the brethren, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the manner of Moses, you cannot be saved.'"

It was Peter who stood up and pointed out before the council that numerous uncircumcised Gentiles had believed the Gospel and then received the Holy Spirit which was evidence of their salvation experience. Peter then stated that G-d,

“...makes no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith.” Acts 15:9

Peter continues in regard to the obligation to keep the Torah (once again implied from the discussion concerning circumcision) and says,

“Now therefore why do you tempt G-d, putting a yoke upon the neck of the disciples (context is Gentiles disciples) which neither our fathers (Jewish) nor we (Jewish believers) were able to bear.” Acts 15:10

It is very important to understand this verse as speaking not only to the Gentiles, but obviously to Jewish believers as well. Many messianic leaders (First Fruits of Zion) interpret this verse as a proof text for exempting the Gentiles only from an obligation to keep the Torah. This of course is incorrect when the verse points out that neither are Jewish individuals able to bear an obligation to keep the whole Torah. If one wants to make the argument that Jewish believers by means of the Holy Spirit are able to be perfect like their Heavenly Father (See Matthew 5:48) well and fine, but would this not also apply to Gentile believers who have the same indwelling Holy Spirit? Regardless, since there is no Temple today, as has been pointed out numerous times in our study, Judaism, in agreement with Hosea, acknowledges that the Torah is not in force in this present time.

Peter closes out his speech with the statement that,

“We believe that by means of the grace of the L-rd, Yeshua the Messiah, we shall be saved, even as they.” Acts 15:11

It is most interesting that Peter never deals with a lifestyle issue for believers, but deals with the means of

salvation and strongly states the circumcision, i.e. the acceptance of the Torah, is not related to the means by which one is saved. It is only after James, the leader of the Congregation of believers in Jerusalem and the head of the Jerusalem Council, states his agreement with Peter's position that he then brings up a new but related subject.

In verse nineteen he states,

"Therefore this is my judgment, that we do not trouble those from among the Gentiles which are turning to G-d."

It is very important for one to notice that the verb "turning" in regard to "the Gentiles turning to G-d", is in the present tense (in the original Greek), although some English translations place it in the past. This implies in the process of coming to faith. The implication is this: whereas there were those who wanted to add circumcision to faith in Messiah, i.e. the Gospel as the means of Salvation, James and the Council rejected this point. However James did list a few things which are incumbent upon Gentiles who want to receive the Gospel. This list appears in verse 20,

"But we write unto them (Gentiles) to abstain from the pollution of idols, sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood."

These four things were the basis for idolatry. The point was this, because Gentiles came from a culture that had idolatry very prevalent within it, James wanted the Gentiles to know that acceptance of Yeshua meant a turning away from idolatry. It was very simple for Gentiles who embraced a multiplicity of gods to add one more to their list and accept Yeshua. This of course could not be tolerated and therefore the list in verse 20 speaks against such a tendency. Hence this list does not represent a code of conduct for Gentile believers, but a minimum condition for sharing the Gospel. It is very important to remember the

context for the Jerusalem Council- does a Gentile have to be circumcised in order to be saved? The answer is no!

However if a Gentile wants to accept Yeshua, but still maintains a desire to practice idolatry he is not a candidate for salvation. He must be willing to turn from idolatry in order to accept Yeshua. Here is a real example from my personal experience which illustrates the issue.

Once an individual who was practicing homosexuality wanted to accept the Gospel and asked if I would lead him in a prayer. I had known this man for several months and told him this was great news, but wanted to make sure he understood that homosexuality was sin. He responded that he did not agree. After looking at several Biblical passages which clearly teach that such behavior is sinful, he said he did not care and would continue to live the lifestyle he wanted. I did not pray with him. Why not? Because acceptance of the Gospel implies a desire to turn away from sin. Had this individual acknowledged that homosexual behavior is sin, but he did not know if he could change, I would have prayed with him to receive Yeshua if he would ask Yeshua to help him turn away from this sin, and every sin. The point is the same for any type of sin and not just homosexuality. A person is not ready to pray to receive Yeshua if he does not have a desire to turn away from sin and embrace the lifestyle that Scripture teaches. One's salvation is not dependent upon his performance of turning away from sin, nor one's success in living a Biblical lifestyle, but one who does not possess a desire to walk in obedience is saying he wants to continue in sin, but be redeemed. In other words, he wants salvation, but rejects regeneration. Obviously such a view is incompatible with a true salvation experience.

This brings us to the next verse which is primary in arriving at the proper conclusion to the issue at hand.

James ends his decision by saying,

“For Moses from the ancient days is read in every city being read in the synagogues each Shabbat.”

This verse clearly says that Gentile believers will learn the Torah through their exposure to it in synagogue. What is the reason that Gentile believers will learn the Torah?

The reason is the exact same reason that Jewish believers learn Torah, to apply it to one's life. Wait a second, if the Torah is not in force today then why learn it? This question brings us to one of the most common errors made today by the believing community—that the concept that the Torah is not in force means that the Torah does not have a purpose today. This is a serious error. Let us understand that although the Torah is not and never was an instrument of salvation, it still has several important roles.

The believer, whether Jewish or Gentile, is admonished in the Scripture to study the word of G-d—this means all of Scripture. Even though from an eternal judgment perspective the believer will not be condemned by the Torah, the commandments still reveal the standards of G-d. Because of the lack of a Temple, which was designed by G-d for this allotment of time, much of the commandments cannot be performed today; however the wisdom that is contained in such commandments can and should still be learned and applied to one's life. What is most important for one to understand is that the character of Yeshua is Torah obedience. The Scripture states that Yeshua never sinned, i.e. violated the Torah. Hence when one walks in accordance with the righteousness that the Torah reveals, this one also manifests the character of Yeshua. In other words, being like Yeshua is expressing the righteousness that the Torah manifests.

I strongly believe that Jewish individuals who accept Yeshua do not lose their Jewish Identity as Rabbis like to threaten, nor do Gentiles who accept Yeshua become Jews.

One very important aspect to the Gospel is that it brings two peoples together and although both a Jewish believer and a Gentile believer express the character of Yeshua, their physical description whether it be Jewish or Gentile is not diminished nor needs to be lost. In fact, it is when the congregation of the L-rd is comprised of both Jews and Gentiles that one knows that it is meeting the expectation that Scripture teaches. This means a congregation which is only comprised of Jewish individuals or of Gentiles is manifesting a problem.

In conclusion, the Gentile believer is called to study each Torah commandment like the Jewish believer and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to apply the Spirit of the Law to his life. To those who are concerned that if Gentiles practice some of the Torah commandments and are thereby "infringing" upon the "Jewish identity" of a Jewish individual, I say your agenda is misplaced. Jewish identity is not imparted by the Torah according to Jewish law. One is born Jewish. Traditionally once a Gentile wants to embrace the Torah and the G-d of Israel, Judaism says let him convert, i.e. become a Jew. I take exception to this practice. I believe that Gentiles who embrace the G-d of Israel and His word remain Gentiles and there should not be the perspective that only a Jewish person can embrace Torah.

I believe that when a Gentile embraces the G-d of Israel and His righteousness, the Jewish community does not need to panic and say he should convert, i.e. become a Jew, in order to maintain the position of Judaism that the Torah is strictly reserved for Jews only. The separation between the Torah and Gentiles is so strong in Judaism that the famed champion of Jewish Law, Rambam, writes in his Mishneh Torah in the section entitled "Judges", under the laws entitled

“Kings” chapter 10 and paragraph 9,

“A gentile who engages in the Torah deserves death.”

My hope is that the primary objective of Messianic Judaism is not to preserve “Jewishness” but to bring the Jew first and also the Gentile into a personal relationship with the G-d of Israel, by means of Messiah Yeshua and teaching them to observe all things which Yeshua taught, realizing that Yeshua’s teaching did indeed deal with the proper application of Biblical commandments to one’s life.

Author: Dr. Baruch Korman