

## **The Double-Edged Danger of Torah Observance**

A short time ago, I was reading a story in our local paper of the troubles faced by Justin Bieber, the young Canadian singer who, among many of the young people of the world, has become an idol. It appears, from the events of his life in stardom, this young man has let his fame and fortune go to his head; he seems to have lost his moral compass and the ship has veered far off course.

Often this same story is evident amongst young people who have been introduced to excess early in life, without the necessary guidance of strong adults around them. This is not to say Bieber doesn't have such guidance; however, what seems evident, he is not learning from his experiences and is spiralling down deeper into sin.

**Abba Father, we thank you for the guidance you have provided us through Torah and through Ruach HaKadosh, the Holy Spirit of God, who uses your life instructions in Torah. Thank you for giving us a moral compass which far surpasses anything we might conceive to guide our own behaviours. I pray, Beloved Abba, your guidance and direction will be there for us, even though we may not think it is needed, out of our own pride and arrogance. Your faithfulness is eternal and on this we count ourselves so blessed. In Adonai Yeshua's Beloved Name, we pray.**

The theme of this week's message lies in an understanding every action we take has a consequence. We've all heard the expression 'the double edged sword', meaning there can negative side effects of doing anything, even good things, to excess. The same is true with observing Torah.

Before we get into this message too deeply, let's examine a few of the principles of Torah we have studied over the past few years:

**1. Torah is good and brings us goodness.** Adonai Yeshua spoke truth to the lies of hasatan, when He said, recorded in Matthew 4, *Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of ADONAI*; (Matthew 4:4) and what comes from the mouth of Adonai are the precepts of Torah, to lead and guide us in right living. Without God's Word we would walk aimlessly through our lives or, worse still, we would be vulnerable and susceptible to any whim or fashion which captures the hearts of the ungodly. Joshua, the protégé of Moshe, advised his people and us, in Joshua 1, *keep this book of the Torah on your lips, and meditate on it day and night, so that you will take care to act according to everything written in it. Then your undertakings will prosper, and you will succeed.* (Joshua 1:8) King David clearly recognized the goodness of Torah, when he wrote, *How happy are those whose way of life is blameless, who live by the Torah of ADONAI! How happy are those who observe his instruction, who seek him wholeheartedly!* (Psalm 119:1,2)

**2. The purpose of Torah is to guide us through a moral life.** Psalm 32 shares with us: *I will instruct and teach you in this way that you are to go; I will give you counsel; my eyes will be watching you.* (Psalm 32:8) Adonai instructs and teaches us through Torah and through those who themselves study and teach Torah. John 16 shares with us, *the Spirit of Truth . . . will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own initiative but will say only what he hears.* (John 16:13) This verse has been taken out of context often and used to declare the Torah is dead, replaced by the Law of Christ. However, what we know to be truth is God's Word is eternal and the Law of Christ is Torah. What Ruach HaEmet, the Spirit of Truth hears is Torah and He will guide us with Torah. As we

heard last Shabbat, Psalm 119 tells us, *Your Word is a lamp for my foot and light on my path.* (Psalm 119:105) The Word to which David was referring is the Word of Adonai Elohim, the Lord God, and is Torah. He would not teach anything that was not first revealed in Torah. This sentiment is echoed by Rav Sha'ul, when he wrote, in Romans 15, *For everything written in the past was written to teach us, so that with the encouragement of the Tanakh we might patiently hold on to our hope.* (Romans 15:4) To me, Sha'ul's words bring home the understanding Adonai Elohim's Word, in Torah, was designed to teach us and lead us, as we wait for the return of Adonai Yeshua. We need His guidance and His direction to maintain our hope in the future and in His promises.

**3. Torah convicts us of sin.** Adonai Himself tells us, in Deuteronomy 4, *Therefore, you are to keep his laws and mitzvot which I am giving you today, so that it will go well with you and with your children after you, and so that you will prolong your days in the land ADONAI your God is giving you forever.*

(Deuteronomy 4:40) Although sin is not mentioned in this Scripture, we are given the directive to keep His life instructions, if we wish to avoid the consequences of sin. We see this is the line, *so that it will go well with you and with your children after you.* Rav Sha'ul shares this aspect of Torah with us in Romans 7, when he writes, *the function of the Torah was that without it, I would not have known what sin is.* (Romans 7:7)

**4. Torah points the way to Adonai Yeshua.** This purpose of Torah is very clearly brought out in the many prophecies written about Messiah, in the Hebrew Scriptures, and fulfilled, as recorded in the Apostolic Scriptures. For example, just to name a few, Micah 5:2 prophesizes Adonai Yeshua would be born in

Bethlehem; Isaiah 7:14 declares He would be born of a virgin; Genesis 49:10 prophesies He would be of the line of Yudah and Psalm 69:8 and Isaiah 53:3 reveal to us our Messiah would be rejected by His people.

There are many more purposes for Torah but I believe you get my point. The second aspect of this message, the double edged nature of Torah observance, is not as easily outlined. First, what does it mean to have a double-edged nature? The Miriam-Webster dictionary defines this idiom as – something having both good and bad parts.

How might observing Torah produce problems, while at the same time produce benefits? To unpack this issue, let's venture to Galatians 3. Here, Rav Sha'ul writes, *You stupid Galatians! Who has put you under a spell? Before your very eyes Yeshua the Messiah was clearly portrayed as having been put to death as a criminal! <sup>2</sup> I want to know from you just this one thing: did you receive the Spirit by legalistic observance of Torah commands or by trusting in what you heard and being faithful to it?* (Galatians 3:1,2) In this passage of Scripture Rav Sha'ul is venting his anger towards the residents of Galatia who are being drawn into the demand they observe the legalistic letter of Torah by becoming circumcised, i.e. becoming Jewish proselytes. The inference in Galatians 3 is the Judaizers from Jerusalem are being used by demonic forces to disrupt the spreading of the Good News, the Gospel of Adonai Yeshua, by persuading Gentile believers to reject their identity and to assume a 'new' identity, thus removing them from the covering of grace, through their anti-Torah works.

One of the severe criticisms Adonai Yeshua levelled against the Pharisees, was they followed the Talmud (Mishna and Gemara), often legalistically and to their personal advantage. For example, in Matthew 23, we find Adonai Yeshua

chastening the Pharisees for their hypocritical and self-serving behaviour, *They tie heavy loads onto people's shoulders but won't lift a finger to help carry them. Everything they do is done to be seen by others; for they make their Tefillin broad and their tzitziyot long, they love the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues.* (Matthew 23:4-6) However, He reinforces the need for His disciples to follow Torah, as taught by these same Pharisees, as they have the authority from Adonai to teach, in verses 2 and 3, *"The Torah-teachers and the P'rushim," he said, "sit in the seat of Moshe. So whatever they tell you, take care to do it. But don't do what they do, because they talk but don't act.* (Matthew 23:2,3) To Adonai Yeshua, this was the crux of their hypocrisy: the Pharisees taught Torah well but they didn't follow their own teaching. Clearly, not walking the talk is a hypocritical action and, therefore, a sin. However, the question may rightly be raised, when is it not right to be too obedient to God? The issue is not the being obedient but the object of obedience. Were the Pharisees, whom Adonai Yeshua called hypocrites, really being obedient to God or were they being obedient to a false god, their own desires for recognition and men's glory? I would argue, this was a matter of idolatry, not legalism. So, where do we go to find legalism, heaven forbid we should actually want to find it?

As I mentioned earlier, the behaviours of the Judaizers from Jerusalem might rightly be called legalistic, since they were attempting to lead Gentile believers away from Grace towards a legalistic practice of Torah, namely achieving salvation through conversion to Judaism.

So let's define legalism, as it applies to believers today. The Oxford Dictionary defines legalism as, *strict adherence to the law, esp. the stressing of the letter of the law rather than its spirit.* Removing the spirit of the law from its literal

meaning and application, creates a situation in which the law is dictatorial, without mercy or compassion. As with anything, if we remove the spirit of truth, mercy and justice and adhere to this, what we have is dry and lifeless and places us in bondage. Let's look at some modern examples of legalistic practice.

Jim Peterson, in his book *Living Proof*, provides us with a very clear example of how we turn love of Messiah into legalistic practice, "*What must I forsake?*" a young man asked. "*Colored clothes for one thing. Get rid of everything in your wardrobe that is not white. Stop sleeping on a soft pillow. Sell your musical instruments and don't eat any more white bread. You cannot, if you are sincere about obeying Christ, take warm baths or shave your beard. To shave is to lie against him who created us, to attempt to improve on his work.*" Do you believe this is slightly over the top, in terms of demands of a Believer? There are many examples of legalism right within the Messianic movement.

First, we have the condemnation of anyone who practices the traditional church feasts, as being pagan and idolatrous. Why is this legalistic? Because in doing so we are setting ourselves up as judges of others' behaviours and taking a holier-than-thou approach to others' practices. Obviously we are correct and they are incorrect – we are right and they are wrong – they are idolaters and we are righteous; I think you get my point. What we think of their behaviour is irrelevant; it is how Adonai Elohim perceives their hearts that is pertinent and relevant. If asked for our opinion, we may respond with biblical facts but not within a judgmental frame. Remember, as Adonai Yeshua shared with us, in Matthew 7, *For the way you judge others is how you will be judged - the measure with which you measure out will be used to measure to you.* (Matthew 7:2) A similar injunction is issued by Rav Sha'ul, in Colossians 2, *So don't let anyone pass*

*judgment on you in connection with eating and drinking, or in regard to a Jewish festival or Rosh-Chodesh or Shabbat.* (Colossians 2:16) And, if we are not to let others judge us for our practices, then we are not to judge others for their practices. However, believe me, that is easier said than done.

I have also heard it said, right here in Kehilah, following the traditions of men, rather than the practices mandated by Adonai Elohim, is legalistic practice. The example provided me was celebrating the festival of Chanukah. Since it was created by man and is not mandated in either the Tanakh or the Brit HaDashah, its observance constitutes legalistic practice. Well, for that matter, we could say the same of many of the practices we follow in Kehilah, such as lighting the menorah, touching the Torah, walking Torah around the room, blessing the children, etc. But are these really legalistic or are they symbolic representations of God's commands? Let's take, for example, the touching of Torah and walking the Scroll around the hall. Mark 16 shares Adonai Yeshua's command to His disciples with us, *Then he said to them, "As you go throughout the world, proclaim the Good News to all creation.* (Mark 16:15) Touching the Torah with our fingers is a symbolic act of being empowered by God's Word. It is not an act of idolatry and it is not legalistic. Spirituality is filled with symbolism. As an example, for traditional Christians, the cross is a symbol of Christ's victory over death. In much the same way, Moshe's elevating the copper snake was symbolic of God's victory over the death caused by the snakes in the wilderness. I wonder why it is permissible for God to use symbols but not believers. Let's turn this one around. Is it legalistic to forbid the use of man-made symbols of God's commands to us? Is it legalistic, for example, to light candles before Shabbat, on the evening of the sixth day? Some would say it is, because the lighting of Shabbat candles is not

mandated in Torah or anywhere in Adonai's Scripture. But is it legalistic? Or, could it be this practice is symbolic of the love we have for Adonai's giving us this day of rest. And why two candles? Why not seven candles? Why not one candle? Dear ones, the issue is not one of number; we can create many different rationales for as many candles as we wish. What is important for us is the recognition our symbolic behaviours honour Adonai Elohim Tzivaot. Returning to the issue of celebrating Chanukah, we find Adonai Yeshua celebrated this man-made festival and used it as an opportunity to teach His people who He really is. We find this in John 10, *Then came Hanukkah in Yerushalayim. It was winter, and Yeshua was walking around inside the Temple area, in Shlomo's Colonnade.* (John 10:22,23) It was during this festival, He announced, in John 8, *Yeshua spoke to them again: "I am the light of the world; whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light which gives life."* (John 8:12) If the celebrating of Chanukah was a legalistic practice, would Adonai Yeshua have violated His own law to teach a point? Wouldn't that be opportunistic and therefore hypocritical?

The double-edged nature of Torah may be seen in how we use and abuse the life instructions contained within God's word. Obviously His Word was not designed to enslave us or to condemn us; we do that quite nicely ourselves, thank you. His Word in Torah (Genesis to Revelation) was and is designed to lead and guide us, as Rav Sha'ul wrote in Philippians 2, *keep working out your deliverance with fear and trembling.* (Philippians 2:12) In this way, maintaining a reverent awe of our God we will ensure our love for Him grows with each passing day. Beloved, as are told in Hebrews 3 and 4, faith in Adonai Elohim and following His life instructions are inseparable.



**Pray we never fall into the legalism of rigid and spiritless following of Torah.**