



Torah, no Torah? -



Getting down to Business...

Some people tend to find nuanced distinctions abhorrent and seek "either/or" answers to complex questions. Unfortunately, it's just not that simple when it comes to understanding the role of Torah in our lives as Messianic Jews and Christians.

This reminds me of a famous quote from Soren Kierkegaard, the great Danish thinker:

“There are many people who arrive at conclusions in life much the way schoolboys do; they cheat their teachers by copying the answer book without having worked the problem out themselves.” (Diary, 1837)

We want to think clearly and ask the right sorts of questions so that we may arrive at conclusions for which we will take personal responsibility and ownership. This is a matter of intellectual honesty. We must do the work.

One issue that regularly comes up in the Hebrew4Christians forums is whether or not Christians (or Messianic Jews) are required to “follow the Torah.” Much of the confusion centers on the question of what Torah actually *means*: Is it to be equated with the entire law code given at Sinai (i.e., the various *mitzvot* (commandments) listed in the *sefer habrit* that was sprinkled with blood and ratified by the 70 elders of Israel), or does it refer simply to the two *luchot* (tablets) inscribed with the words of the Ten Commandments? Or perhaps Torah is a more *general* term that simply means the will of God? First we need to be clear about what we are talking about, *chaverim*.

If by Torah we mean the entire law code given in the *sefer habrit* (with the Levitical system as its ritualistic expression), then by no means are followers of Yeshua to regard its terms as part of their covenant relationship with God (as is clearly taught in the books of Hebrews, Galatians, and Romans). No, though the various *korbanot* (sacrifices) marvelously prefigured Him, Yeshua is indeed the Substance of all that they foreshadowed. Indeed, Yeshua is the true *Kohen Gadol* (High Priest) after the order of Malki-Tzedek, who mediates the New and Better Covenant, based on its better promises (Hebrews 8:6, 13:10).



On the other hand, the spiritual teaching of the Torah (i.e., the first five books of the Bible) is indeed valuable to Christians (since it centers on the Person and work of Yeshua), and the New Testament itself assumes that followers of Yeshua will be intimately familiar with it (as well as the Writings and Prophets, collectively referred to as the Tanakh). Recall that Paul himself wrote: “All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable...” (2 Tim 3:16-17), referring to the Jewish Bible (and not the New Testament writings since they had not yet been compiled).

When you work through the semantics, the issue comes down to **the central concern** of being in a love relationship with the LORD. That was Moses' experience after *chet ha'egel* (the sin of the Golden Calf), when he smashed the Torah tablets and despaired before the LORD. Read the poignant Scriptures about how Moses later communed *panim el panim* (face to face) with the Father in the Tent of Meeting located *outside* the camp (Ex 33:7-34:7). Only after he understood God as *rachum v'chanun* was the breach restored and the covenant was renewed... In other words, Moses had to re-experience the LORD according to His mercy and grace before he could find hope to be in relationship with Him.

The point here is simple: the law code given to ancient Israel was not, and never was intended to be, an unchanging set of laws that would determine someone's relationship with God. Those who want to return to ancient Israel perhaps need to be reminded of Yeshua's words in Matthew 23:15, wherein He warned otherwise well-meaning people of the dangers of affecting self-righteousness, and they also might want to reread Galatians 4:21-5:1 where Paul likens those who advocate adherence to the law as slaves (i.e., children of Hagar), but those who hold to the promise of the gift of life through faith as free (i.e., children of Sarah).

The true remnant of Israel has always been composed of those whom God chose as His own, based on His sovereign purposes and love. Indeed, Yeshua gives us a BETTER WAY to come to God (Heb. 8:16, 12:24). The very word Torah means “teaching” and has always been a description of our responsibility to the LORD in light of the covenantal actions He performed on our behalf. Since God gave up His Son in order for us to be free from the penalty of sin and death, why should we seek to go back to a system based on righteous deeds that are grounded in life apart from the ultimate *Tzaddik* Himself? “For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them” (Gal. 3:10). If we are *justified* by faith, *chaverim*, we are also *sanctified* by grace.



Regarding the underlying moral intent of the Torah, we know that it is indeed “holy, just and good” (Rom 7:12). However, even if we were to limit ourselves to just the moral aspects of the Ten Commandments we will quickly realize that we need serious intervention in order to attain genuine holiness. On the day of our death, will we trust in our own adherence to the moral law as our appeal before a perfectly holy and absolutely righteous God?

Listen to how the apostle Paul, the greatest Torah sage of his day, put it:

Is the law then contrary to the promises of God? Certainly not! For if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law. But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith (Gal. 3:21-26).

The law of the LORD is perfect (Psalm 19:7), yet we are fallible and in need of salvation from the righteous judgment of an utterly holy God based on our (chronically) sinful condition.

Rule-following behavior is not the same thing as attaining the righteousness of God imputed to those who, like father Abraham, believed that God Himself could and would justify the ungodly based on faith. “For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith” (Rom. 4:13).

Most of us, I am afraid, don't want to be free. It's so much easier for us to regard ourselves as pleasing to God on the basis of some litany of rules that we are following. Or perhaps we are trusting in our participation in various sorts of ritual acts. But *freedom*? Nakedness before God? To come to Him utterly bankrupt, broken and in need, while trusting that His love covers our sinful condition by clothing us with the very righteousness of His Son? To no longer need a list of “do's-and-don'ts” or some liturgy to come before His glorious presence? To trust that you have direct access to the very Holy of Holies and can relate to God as His own beloved child? No -- it's too much for most people, and therefore the mad rush to find some sort of “catch” in the contract, some sort of loophole, some fine print that obliges us to propitiate an angry and spiteful god.

Beloved, when we walk by the power of the *Ruach HaKodesh* (Holy Spirit), there is peace and there is liberty (2 Cor 3:17).