

## Traditions of Men & the Commandments of God

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For many of us, it's a common refrain:

Because of our traditions, we've kept our balance for many, many years. Here in Anatevka, we have traditions for everything... How to sleep, how to eat... how to work... how to wear clothes. For instance, we always keep our heads covered, and always wear a little prayer shawl that shows our constant devotion to God. You may ask, "How did this tradition get started? I'll tell you! ... I don't know. But it's a tradition... and because of our traditions... Every one of us knows who he is and what God expects him to do.

For many people, that bit of dialogue from the musical "Fiddler on the Roof" encapsulates Judaism: a life lived in accordance with a body of tradition. And for many Messianics, that encapsulates their Messianic practice as well. But also in the Messianic community, many people balk at this idea. They want to practice just quote "Biblical Judaism" unquote. And these two groups are frequently at loggerheads.

But there are problems with both positions. On one side, we have a group that wants to swallow whole a canon of Jewish LAW – and you will note I use the "L" word there, a word I don't use often – a canon of LAW that Paul described in Galatians as perversion of the Torah into legalism. And on the other side, you have a bunch of people who want to play Lone Ranger, as it is written in Judges 17:6, "In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes." This brings us to Proverbs 14:12, "There is a way which seems right to a man, But its end is the way of death."

These people forget that Yeshua taught us in Matthew 23, "The Scribes and the Pharisees sit in the seat of Moses. So whatever they tell you, take care to do it. But don't do what they do, because they talk but don't act!" They also – although they don't want to admit it – keep traditions of men. Oh, they'll fight you on it, but some man's interpretation is always being followed – even if it's THEIR interpretation, and a tradition is just an interpretation kept by more than one person.

We also read in 2 Thessalonians 3:6 that Paul tells the congregation in Thessalonica, "Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Yeshua the Messiah, that you keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us." There is obviously a balance that needs to take place between the Commandments of God and the Traditions of Men, and that's what I'm teaching about today. There is a natural antagonism between the Traditions of Men and the Commandments of God, because man tends to elevate his opinions above God, even if he doesn't intend to. This goes all the way back to the first people. We read in:

### **Genesis 4:2-7**

And Abel was a keeper of flocks, but Cain was a tiller of the ground. So it came about in the course of time that Cain brought an offering to the LORD of the fruit of the ground. Abel, on his part also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and for his offering; but for Cain and for his offering He had no regard. So Cain became very angry and his countenance fell. Then the LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will not your countenance be lifted up? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it."

What is the purpose of the tradition? Well, as I said earlier, it's about how to keep the commandments. For example, we read in

### **Numbers 15:37-40**

The LORD also spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak to the sons of Israel, and tell them that they shall make for themselves tassels on the corners of their garments throughout their generations, and that they shall put on the tassel of each corner a cord of blue. It shall be a tassel for you to look at and remember all the commandments of the LORD, so as to do them and not follow after your own heart and your own eyes, after which you played the harlot, so that you may remember to do all My commandments and be holy to your God."

That's it. It doesn't tell us HOW to do it. And there are several different ways to do this. There is a standard knotting pattern used by the Ashkenazi, another used by the Sephardi, and various others.

Back in Biblical times, there many, many, many more knotting patterns, that were a language code you could read that told you a person's name. The tradition, the interpretation that tells us how to keep a commandment is called in Hebrew **halacha**, or the way to walk.

There are also other traditions that do not tell us how to keep a commandment but that are simply traditions of the people. For example, the ordinance of the kippah is not found directly in Scripture. But it is a tradition of the people, one that many of us keep.

The rabbis tell us there is another function of traditional **halacha**, and that is to erect an **eruv** or fence around the Torah. This idea comes from an interpretation of what is commanded many places in Torah, for example in Exodus 34:11, "Be sure to observe what I am commanding you this day..." The Hebrew word translated as "observe" is "**shamar**", which can also be translated as to guard, to keep watch over, and even, in a different tense, to keep oneself from.

It is from this that the rabbis teach that we must erect a fence around the Torah with our tradition, so we will not even come close to trespassing it. They also teach that this idea goes back to the giving of the Torah, because God tells us, in Deuteronomy 12:21, "If the place which the LORD your God chooses to put His name is too far from you, then you may slaughter of your herd and flock which the LORD has given you, as I have commanded you; and you may eat within your gates whatever you desire." So, they say, God gave commandments for slaughtering animals, but Scripture doesn't record those commandments, they say, so God must've given commandments that were not written down, and thus are "Oral Torah."

Well, I don't think that's correct. Let's look first at the kosher slaughter issue in particular and then to the question of "Oral Torah" in general. God does, in fact, give commandments for slaughter that are recorded. The funny part is that this statement in Deuteronomy 12:21 is right in the middle of an iteration of these commandments! We read in:

### **Deuteronomy 12:20-27**

"When the LORD your God extends your border as He has promised you, and you say, 'I will eat meat,' because you desire to eat meat, then you may eat meat, whatever you desire. If the place which the LORD your God chooses to put His name is too far from you, then you may slaughter of your herd and flock which the LORD has given you, as I have commanded you; and you may eat within your gates whatever you desire. Just as a gazelle or a deer is eaten, so you will eat it; the unclean and the clean alike may eat of it. Only be sure not to eat the blood, for the blood is the life, and you shall not eat the life with the flesh. You shall not eat it; you shall pour it out on the ground like water. You shall not eat

it, so that it may be well with you and your sons after you, for you will be doing what is right in the sight of the LORD. Only your holy things which you may have and your votive offerings, you shall take and go to the place which the LORD chooses. And you shall offer your burnt offerings, the flesh and the blood, on the altar of the LORD your God; and the blood of your sacrifices shall be poured out on the altar of the LORD your God, and you shall eat the flesh.”

These seem like commandments for slaughter to me! I'm not saying the rules of **shechita**, of ritual Jewish slaughter are bad, I'm just saying that that's not necessarily what God is referring to. But maybe I just don't understand, as a lot of Messianic advocates for the view of the traditional canon of Jewish law tell me. Okay, maybe I don't. But do I also not understand what the Torah says in

#### **Exodus 24:3-4**

Then Moses came and recounted to the people all the words of the LORD and all the ordinances. And all the people answered with one voice and said, “All the words which the LORD has spoken we will do!” Moses wrote down all the words of the LORD.

Let me repeat that: “Moses **wrote down all** the words of the LORD.” To me, this doesn't seem to leave any room for an Oral Torah given at Sinai by God, does it? We also read in:

#### **Deuteronomy 30:11-14**

“For this commandment which I command you today is not too difficult for you, nor is it out of reach. It is not in heaven, that you should say, ‘Who will go up to heaven for us to get it for us and make us hear it, that we may observe it?’ Nor is it beyond the sea, that you should say, ‘Who will cross the sea for us to get it for us and make us hear it, that we may observe it?’ But the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may observe it.”

The Torah is not out of reach, it's near to us, it's in our mouth, and our heart... does that sound to you like there is a fence around the Torah?

“It is not in heaven, that you should say, ‘Who will go up to heaven for us to get it for us and make us hear it, that we may observe it?’ Nor is it beyond the sea, that you should say, ‘Who will cross the sea for us to get it for us and make us hear it, that we may observe it?’” Does that sound to you like there **should be** a fence around the Torah?

In his excellent novel, “Piercing the Darkness,” Christian author Frank E. Peretti discusses the importance of moral fences in defining human behavior:

So all that “maximum autonomy” wasn't the great liberation and joy I thought it would be. I felt like a kid let loose to play in an infinitely huge yard – I started to wish there was a fence somewhere. At least then I would know where I was. I could run up against it and tell myself, “I'm in the yard,” and feel right about it. Or I could climb over the fence, and tell myself, “Oh-oh, I'm outside the yard,” and feel wrong about it. Whether right or wrong, and with infinite freedom to run and play, I know I would still stay near the fence. At least then I would know where I was. I would know something for sure.

So, obviously, the idea of a fence around our lives is important. But today, I want to turn the idea of the fence around Torah completely around. This is going to be another one of those statements that is likely to get me in trouble, even though it shouldn't. Instead of erecting a fence around Torah, I'd like to suggest to you that the Torah **IS** the fence! The Torah is supposed to be the outer perimeter, the borders of acceptable behavior!

Once, when I was in elementary school, it was recess, and I was playing a game called “four square,” which involves bouncing a large, soft rubber ball back and forth among four players. Sometimes, the ball bounces outside of the “four squares” you’re playing in and can go pretty far. Well, one time, the ball bounced over the schoolyard fence and onto Cedar Avenue, a very busy street. To the horror of all who witnessed, I promptly ran through the gate, outside the fence, onto Cedar, and retrieved the ball!

As you might expect, I was severely disciplined. Why? The purpose of the fence was to keep us safe. The world is a dangerous place for children. They lack understanding of the world around them. They don’t get that there will be people who are cruel and evil and just want to hurt them, who might walk onto the playground and take them away. They don’t get that people driving cars down the street may not see them, or may not be able to stop in time if they do see them, and they may get hurt or even killed.

Are we not God’s children? The fence of Torah defines the outer limits of where we are to go. It is designed to keep us from going into dangerous territory, like a busy street. It is designed as a defense against the evil of the world, to keep it out of our community, God’s community. Only when the Torah is our fence can we live a safe life.

Now, within that fence of Torah, there are all sorts of options. Like in the Peretti book, some will want to use that room to run and play, staying near the boundaries but not going outside of them, like I did when I ran after the ball. Others will want to gather in one part of the yard or another and play quietly traditional games that have been passed down from generation to generation. And as long as neither group tries to force everyone to play their way, there will be peace on the playground.

The problem comes when one group – even if they are in legitimate positions of authority – try to force people to do things that are additions to the Torah, and can come between those people and God’s Word. We read in:

### **Matthew 15:1-9**

Then some Pharisees and scribes came to Yeshua from Jerusalem and said, “Why do Your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread.” And He answered and said to them, “Why do you yourselves transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? For God said, ‘HONOR YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER,’ and, ‘HE WHO SPEAKS EVIL OF FATHER OR MOTHER IS TO BE PUT TO DEATH.’ But you say, ‘Whoever says to his father or mother, “Whatever I have that would help you has been given to God,” he is not to honor his father or his mother.’ And by this you invalidated the word of God for the sake of your tradition. You hypocrites, rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you: ‘THIS PEOPLE HONORS ME WITH THEIR LIPS, BUT THEIR HEART IS FAR AWAY FROM ME. BUT IN VAIN DO THEY WORSHIP ME, TEACHING AS DOCTRINES THE PRECEPTS OF MEN.’”

We must be very careful about the traditions of the elders that are not anchored in the literal reading of a particular commandment in Scripture. As Yeshua has shown us, some of them do, in fact, come between us and God’s Way. So, how can we tell what traditions to keep and which to discard? Well, I have a three-part test that I use on each tradition. I analyze the tradition against God’s Word and ask myself:

- 1) Does the tradition uphold the Letter of God’s Word (the entire Word, Genesis to Revelation), does it go against the Letter of God’s Word, or is it neutral to the Letter of God’s Word? If it goes against the Letter of God’s Word, we should obviously discard it. If it upholds the Letter of God’s Word or is neutral to it, subject it to the second test.

- 2) Does the tradition uphold the Spirit of God's Word (the entire Word, Genesis to Revelation), does it go against the Spirit of God's Word, or is it neutral to the Spirit of God's Word? If it goes against the Spirit of God's Word, we should obviously discard it. If it upholds the Spirit of God's Word or is neutral to it, subject it to the third test.
- 3) Does the tradition point towards Yeshua as Messiah, does it point away from Yeshua as Messiah, or is it neutral towards Him? If it points away, we should obviously discard it. If it is neutral towards Him, we may keep it or not keep, as we choose. If it points towards Him, I believe we should probably keep it, but it is still optional.

A few examples of how to judge traditions by this test, two Jewish traditions and one Christian tradition:

#### SEPARATION OF MEAT & DAIRY:

- 1) Although the commandment cited to justify this tradition – you shall not boil a baby goat in its mother's milk – does not literally mean the separation of meat and dairy, it doesn't say not to do it either. There is no violation of the Letter of God's Word. There is also no direct upholding of the Letter of God's Word. Therefore, it is neutral to the Letter of God's Word, and we may subject it to the second test.
- 2) Although some may find support in the Spirit of God's Word for this practice and others may not – I don't, it is certainly not against the Spirit of God's Word, therefore it is at least neutral, and we may subject it to the third test.
- 3) I am sure that some brilliant ecclesiastical gymnast could come up with a way that this points to Messiah. I can't. But I don't see that it points away from Messiah either. So, my conclusion is that this tradition is acceptable for us to either keep or not keep, as we see fit. Obviously, we must not violate the literal commandment not to boil a baby goat in its mother's milk, but how far we take that is up to us.

#### SAYING THE SHEMA THREE TIMES A DAY:

- 1) The source of this tradition is Deuteronomy 6:4-7:  
 "Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your hear You shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up."

From "when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up," the Sages interpreted that one should say the Shema at least three times a day: upon rising from bed, upon retiring to bed, and sometime midday. Although there is obviously no literal commandment to do that, there is no violation of the Letter of God's Word. There is also no direct upholding of the Letter of God's Word. Therefore, it is neutral to the Letter of God's Word, and we may subject it to the second test.

- 2) However, we can obviously see how saying the Shema three times a day upholds the Spirit of this passage, and therefore we may subject it to the third test.
- 3) Yeshua cites the Shema as the Greatest Commandment, and one of the two upon which the entire Torah and the Prophets depend. We have even added these statements to our saying of Kriat Shema, the Recitation of the Shema. Therefore, saying the Shema – especially if it is the full Messianic version of Kriat Shema, as we do at the beginning of our Mincha service – points towards Yeshua as Messiah, and therefore, we should probably do it.

## TAKING COMMUNION ON A REGULAR BASIS:

1) Obviously, Communion is a part of the Passover Seder, the Afikomen and the Cup of Redemption, and so we take it as a part of our Passover festivities, and there are differences of opinion as to how that is done. But there is a Christian tradition to take it more often: some do it weekly, others monthly, others quarterly, and there are other traditions as well. Although the passage cited to justify this tradition – 1 Corinthians 11:23-27 – does not literally say how often to do it, it does say to do it. Depending on the motivations – if you truly view it as consuming the Body and Blood of Messiah, you are re-crucifying Him and therefore it violates Scripture. However, if you see it as a symbol only, it is upholding to the Letter of God’s Word, and we may subject it to the second test.

2) What does the passage say:

For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you, that the Lord Yeshua in the night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, “This is My body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of Me.” In the same way He took the cup also after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.” For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes.

One may dispute the meaning literal meaning of these words, or even their Spirit, but again, there is certainly nothing against the Spirit of God’s Word and we may subject it to the third test.

3) Again, one may dispute this. Some would say that taking Communion even every week points toward Yeshua as Messiah. While I can understand that argument, I would hold to an opposite position: because the Afikomen and the Cup of Redemption are integral parts of Passover, and Passover speaks prophetically of our redemption in Messiah because of our redemption from slavery in Egypt, then to do this outside of the Passover setting would point away from Yeshua as Messiah. So, I would say that we may say it is neutral, or at least that one may see it different ways. Therefore, while we should not forbid the keeping of this tradition, we should be very careful about how common we make Communion.

I hope you have seen from this how critical it is that we view tradition in its proper way. It can either set itself against the Word of God, or it can uphold the Word of God. We are told to **shamar** the Commandments, to be watchful, to guard them. In order to guard them, we must be careful about heeding the words of:

### **Deuteronomy 4:1-2**

“Now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and the judgments which I am teaching you to perform, so that you may live and go in and take possession of the land which the LORD, the God of your fathers, is giving you. You shall not add to the word which I am commanding you, nor take away from it, that you may keep – **shamar** – the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you.”

If we are truly the watchmen on the wall, we watch over, we guard the Torah. Let us be careful not to exchange it for the traditions of men.