

Torah Talk - Emor

- Yerachmiel Seplowitz.

"The Passion of the Pharisees". 1) "Asher Kidishanu B'mitzvotav V'tzeevanu". Most religious Jews lie every day. They recite prayers that seem to be inaccurate. 2) The discussion of the calendar-based Festivals is interrupted with a statement about the Sabbath. Shabbos is not Yom Tov, and Yom Tov is not Shabbos. Why the mix?

Torah Talk, Parshat Emor: "The Passion of the Pharisees"

"Asher Kidishanu B'mitzvotav V'tzeevanu"

Most religious Jews lie every day. They recite prayers that seem to be inaccurate.

Let us take, for example, one of the first prayers of the day. One rises from his bed, and immediately pours water several times from a cup onto his hands. This practice, ordained by the Rabbis of the Talmud, is done for several reasons. (See http://www.askmoses.com/qa_detail.html?h=259&o=1361 for more details.)

As is the case with most Commandments, it is accompanied by a Blessing:

"Blessed are You, G-d, our G-d, (two different words in Hebrew) King of the world, who made us holy with His Commandments, and commanded us to wash the hands."

This is a standard "boiler plate" Blessing. It is recited in reference to many Commandments, changing only the final phrase. E.g., "... commanded us to sit in the Sukkah," "... to hear the sound of the Shofar," "...to light Chanukah candles," etc.

The problem with this Blessing is that it often makes a statement that appears to be untrue. How can we say that G-d "... commanded us to wash the hands?"

Nowhere in the Torah will you find a Commandment to wash one's hands in the morning, or to light Chanukah or Shabbos candles. These are not Biblical laws. They are rabbinic, man-made laws. It is true that we have great reverence for our Sages, and we accept their advice. However, are we not overstating rabbinic influence by claiming that rabbinic laws were ordained by G-d?

Let's leave this question for a few moments and talk about movies.

The world is abuzz about "The Passion." I, for one, am neither a movie critic nor an expert on the Christian Bible. Therefore, it is difficult for me to speak with much authority on the subject. (Especially since I haven't seen the movie!) However, I do have a few thoughts I'd like to share with you.

I recently heard a fellow on the radio defending the movie from charges of being anti-Semitic.

"The Jews are NOT being blamed. The people at fault were a small number of Jews who controlled the Temple. The common folk had nothing to do with this murder. It was the fault of the corrupt priests and the Pharisees!"

As I said above, I am not an expert in Christianity. And I certainly have no quarrel with the millions of decent, honest Christians who practice their faith with devotion. Judaism obviously has a very different approach to the events described in that movie, as well as a totally different belief system. However, I don't believe in debating theology. I have stated before that Jews in our generation tend to be better off in Christian-majority countries than in Muslim ones, and I am a big advocate in living in peace and mutual respect.

However, I do want to clear up one thing. My father-in-law was a Priest <http://www.ou.org/about/judaism/jl.htm#kohen>, and I am a Pharisee. And neither of us was portrayed fairly in the movie.

The American Heritage Dictionary defines "Pharisee" as:

"1. A member of an ancient Jewish sect that emphasized strict interpretation and observance of the Mosaic law in both its oral and written form.

2. A hypocritically self-righteous person."

Throughout our history there have been those who chose to challenge the authority of our leaders. Moses had his detractors and David had his.

Groups such as the Sadducees had their own, literal interpretations of the Torah. For example, they read in the Torah, "Do not light fire in any of your camps on the Sabbath day," (Exodus, 35:3) and decided that that meant that you have to sit in the dark on Shabbos. The Sadducees, in Hebrew, Tzaddokim, the followers of Tzaddok, rejected the rabbinic interpretation of "on the Sabbath day" as a prohibition of IGNITING a fire only on the Sabbath itself, while permitting it to be lit on Friday to provide light and heat during the Sabbath.

The Sadducean courts interpreted "an eye for an eye" literally, blinding and maiming those who had injured others. The Talmudic interpretation of monetary compensation for damages was unacceptable to them.

During the time of the Second Temple, the Sadducees attempted to subvert Judaism by waging war on the rabbinic leaders. They argued that the Torah was an open book, available to be interpreted by anyone. Many of the Sages were arrested and killed, at the instigation of the Sadducees. (The Talmud relates [Kiddushin 66a] that King Yannai was encouraged to get rid of the Sages. "But what will become of the Torah?" he asked. "It is rolled up in a corner. Whoever wants, can come and learn." Based upon that argument, Yannai felt free to murder many of the Sages of Israel.)

Who were these Sages, that were opposed by the Sadducees? The Talmud calls them Perushim -- those who separate themselves. They were called that because they carefully adhered to the Laws

of ritual purity. Most people went to the Temple Mount three times a year, or if they had a personal requirement to bring an offering. Consequently, most people cleansed themselves from ritual contamination (e.g., contact with the dead) those few times a year. The Perushim, or Pharisees, avoided close physical contact with ritual impurity all year round.

By and large, the masses, even those who were not so scrupulous in all the laws, accepted the Pharisees as their leaders. The Pharisees represented a link in the unbroken chain back to Moses. It is axiomatic to Judaism that the Torah is meaningless without the Oral Law. When Moses received the Torah on Mount Sinai, G-d explained to him orally the explanations of what was written. (See "Write Between the Eyes!"
<http://www.torahtalk.net/index2.htm?576146>)

Without the Oral Law, that was passed down from generation to generation via the Sages, we would have no idea what the Torah means. There is no verse in the Torah that tells us to fast on Yom Kippur, or how to write a Mezuzah.

The Laws of Kosher slaughtering of animals are nowhere to be found. Without the Oral Torah, we would celebrate Shavuos on a different date every year.

(This concept, based on this week's Torah Reading, will be discussed, G-d willing, in a future Torah Talk, before Shavuos.)

Judaism, as we know it today, is the religion of the Pharisees. Perhaps the early Christians, in their desire to create a religion distinct from traditional Judaism, chose to distance themselves from the Pharisees.

The movie's accuracy vis-à-vis the Gospels is something upon which I am not qualified to comment. However, I state unequivocally that a condemnation of Pharisees is a condemnation of traditional Jews. Does that make Mel Gibson an anti-Semite? Not necessarily. He probably doesn't realize that you and I are Pharisees.

This week's Torah Portion gives us an overview of the Festivals:

"...These are My Festivals. You may work for six days, but the seventh day is Sabbath ...These are G-d's Festivals...The afternoon of the fourteenth of the First month is G-d's Passover..."
(Leviticus, 23:2-5)

The Talmud points out a problem with these verses. The Torah seems to be changing the subject midstream. A discussion of the calendar-based Festivals is interrupted with a statement about the Sabbath. Shabbos is not Yom Tov, and Yom Tov is not Shabbos. Why the mix?

The answer, according to Toras Kohanim, is that the Torah is warning us not to treat the Festivals lightly. Now, why would anyone be tempted to treat Festivals with any less respect than the Sabbath?

The reason is that the Festivals are established through human input.

The Jewish calendar is based upon the moon. Every new moon is the first of the month. In

Biblical and Talmudic times, the new month was declared by the High Court, based upon testimony of witnesses who had seen the new moon.

No one knew what day to bring the Passover offering, (the 14th of the month) until the court declared which day was the first of the month.

The reason the Torah talks about Shabbos in the middle of a discussion about Festivals is in order to equate the two. Shabbos comes every Saturday, without a rabbinic declaration. Passover is only Passover because the Rabbis declared when the month begins. We should not make the mistake of thinking that the Festivals are any less important than Shabbos. "One who violates the festivals is considered the same as one who violates the Sabbath." He who commanded us to observe the Sabbath is the same One Who commanded us to observe the rabbinic determinations of the Festivals.

Now, this brings us back to our original question: How can we say in a Blessing that G-d "...commanded us to wash the hands" when it was actually the Rabbis who told us to do it?

We now see the answer. Judaism is Biblical Law with Rabbinic input. As we said above about the Festivals, G-d commanded us about the Sabbath, and He commanded us to observe the Festival dates that are set by the Rabbis.

Did G-d command us to wash our hands in the morning and light Chanukah candles? Of course He did! There is a Biblical Commandment that requires us to follow Rabbinic Law:

"You will come to the Levitical Priests and to the judge... Be careful to do whatever they tell you...According to the Torah that they will teach you, do not turn from the word that they will tell you, right or left."
(Deuteronomy, 17:9-11)

Apparently, G-d, too, is a Pharisee.

Have a great Shabbos.
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