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Spiritual Insight For The Week

with Rabbi Bentzion Kravitz

Teenage Girl Confused by Missionary Video

I received an email from parents concerned about their teenage daughter. She was confused by a YouTube video that appeared to be Jewish but was produced by missionaries.

What upset their daughter was the missionary's claim that Jews must accept Jesus because the God-given commandments are impossible to observe.

Although many Christians believe the commandments are too difficult to keep, I was able to explain to this family why this is incorrect.

The apostle Paul promoted this idea in the New Testament with statements such as, *"Those who rely on the law are under a curse"* (Galatians 3:10). Considering the Torah's many positive statements about the law, Paul was faced with a dilemma, as he admitted, *"If righteousness comes through the law, Christ died in vain"* (Galatians 2:21).

To validate his belief that Jesus replaced the law, Paul had to discredit the Torah.

However, in this week's Torah portion, *Nitzavim* (Deuteronomy 29:9–30:20), there is a powerful passage that puts Judaism's detractors in their place. God declares that the commandments of the Torah are not impossible to keep. They are actually *"Very easy for you to carry out with your mouth and heart to do them"* (Deuteronomy 30:14).

If we falter, we should correct our ways and return to God.

Additionally, God does not demand perfection. God desires that we try our best, and, if we falter, we should correct our ways and return to God. This is stated clearly when the prophet Samuel witnesses the Jewish people sinning and tells them, *"Even though you have committed all this evil, do not turn aside from following God, but serve God with all your heart.*" (I Samuel 12:20).

Repentance is a cornerstone of Jewish belief. In Hebrew it is referred to as תשובה–*teshuvah,* which means to "return," as in the verse, *"Return to Me and I will return to you"* (Zechariah 1:3). In addition, the prophet Ezekiel says, *"When a wicked man turns away from his wickedness which he has committed and practices justice and righteousness, he will save his life"* (Ezekiel 18:27).

Missionaries argue that without sacrifices we cannot do *teshuvah*. However, they are mistaken and are ignoring this prophecy, *"For the sons of Israel will remain many days without a king or prince and* ***without sacrifice*** *or sacred pillar…. Afterwards, Israel shall* ***return*** *and seek the Lord their God and David their king"* (Hosea 3:5). (Note that God and David their king [the messiah] are separate entities)

This passage demonstrates that Jews can return to God even when sacrifices are unavailable. Furthermore, the prophet Hosea tells the Jewish people that they can return to God by offering *"their prayers in place of sacrifice"* (Hosea 14:1-3).

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Judaism and Christianity have very different views of the law as outlined in the Torah. This difference is highlighted in the way the different two religions translate the word Torah. The New Testament was written in Greek and translates the word Torah as Nómos–*νόμος*, which simply means "law." However, the Jewish Bible was written in Hebrew; and when translated into Aramaic the word Torah was rendered as אורייתא–*Oraita*, which means "light." The difference is striking.

The Torah is not merely rules and regulations. It is light [instruction] and life. The root of the word Torah [תורה] is "הוראה–*horaah,"* which means "an instruction"; as King David said, *"I have not departed from Your laws, for You have taught* [הורתני] *me"* (Psalms 119:102; Exodus 24:12).

Furthermore, David's son King Solomon refers to the Torah in this way, *"The commandments are a lamp, and the Torah is a light"* (Proverbs 6:23).

Rather than seeing the Torah's laws and commandments as impossible obstacles, we view the mitzvot as an amazing opportunity to connect to our infinite Creator, refine ourselves, and perfect the world. This is alluded to in the word mitzvah, which is related to the word צוותא–*tzavta*, which means "a connection." We connect to God through the commandments that God gave to us.

It is ludicrous to think that we should do away with laws and commandments simply because someone thinks they are too difficult to observe.

The mitzvot are an amazing opportunity to connect to our infinite Creator.

Imagine a king who oversees traffic court for his country. One day, the bailiff brings into the courtroom a young man who broke every traffic law on the books. Rather than disciplining the young man and requiring that he correct his behavior by attending traffic school, the king makes an astonishing ruling.

Since the lawbreaker is the king's only son whom he loves, the king rules that it is too difficult to keep the traffic laws and they should be abolished. Releasing his son without consequence might seem like an act of compassion; however, the opposite is true. Not only does the young man fail to take responsibility for his actions, but a society without traffic laws will quickly dissolve into chaos.

If a king's decision to abolish traffic law would be absurd, how much more so is the Christian belief that God would abolish the Torah laws which are *"a tree of life to those who take hold of her; those who hold her fast will be blessed"* (Proverbs 3:18).

The importance of keeping the law is stated by King Solomon when he summarizes the purpose of mankind, saying, *"The end of the matter, when all has been heard: Fear* [be in awe of] *God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man"* (Ecclesiastes 12:13).

Shabbat Shalom,

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