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Spiritual Insight For The Week
with Rabbi Bentzion Kravitz

Israeli Missionaries Distort a Rabbi's Words

When we were expecting our first child, my wife and I were ecstatic. Our joy turned to concern when my wife went into labor ten weeks before her due date. After checking with our doctor, we rushed to the emergency room.

For 24 hours, the doctors tried to stop the premature labor. When this was unsuccessful, they gave us the bad news. An ultrasound confirmed that the baby was in breech [feet first] position, the umbilical cord was wrapped around the baby's neck, and the lungs were not developed. The doctors gave the baby zero chance of surviving as my wife was prepared for an emergency cesarean operation to save her life.

We trusted the doctors but prayed fervently to God for a miracle. My wife survived the operation, and the medical staff rushed the tiny baby boy to the neonatal intensive care unit. A few hours later, the surgeon told me no one could explain the baby's survival, and that everyone was calling him the "miracle baby."

Our sages state that there are three partners in creating a child, the mother, the father, and God–Who gives the soul (Niddah 31a). We thank God every day for His blessings and the miraculous intervention in the birth of our son. Today, he is married and has children of his own.

This week's Torah portion, *Tazria* (Leviticus 12:1-13:59), speaks about the circumstances of a woman giving birth and the offerings she presents to God in gratitude for this momentous event. With this in mind and having personally witnessed the "miraculous" birth of my son, I would like to respond to an erroneous statement made by Israeli missionaries concerning the so-called miraculous virgin birth of the messiah.

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Each year, missionaries in Israel spend millions of dollars to promote social media and in-person propaganda to share the gospel in the guise of authentic Judaism. These missionaries regularly misquote biblical passages in their attempt to prove their Christian theology. However, when these so-called proofs are debunked, missionaries resort to misquoting rabbinical sources to justify their claims.

For example, missionaries claim the prophet Isaiah foretold the virgin birth, saying, *"Behold a virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and she shall call his name Immanuel"* (Isaiah 7:14). There are numerous mistakes in their translation, including changing it from present to future tense, and mistranslating the Hebrew word "העלמה–*ha'almah*" as *"a virgin"* rather than as *"the young woman."* The prefix "ה–*the*" indicates that the woman was right there with them. The verse correctly states, *"Behold the* [this] *young woman* [not a virgin] *is pregnant and will conceive a son and call his name Immanuel."*

In context, Isaiah Chapters 7 and 8 describe an imminent invasion threatening the southern kingdom of Judea ruled by King Ahaz. Isaiah tells Ahaz to ask God for a sign that the nations threatening Judea will fail. When Ahaz stubbornly refuses to ask for a sign, Isaiah provides one.

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Isaiah tells Ahaz that the young woman standing before them [who is identified in Isaiah 8:3 as Isaiah's wife] is pregnant and will give birth to a child. He assures Ahaz that before the child is old enough to choose between right and wrong, with God's help, the two nations threatening Ahaz will be laid to waste. These events could not refer to Jesus because they were fulfilled more than 500 years before he was born.

The young woman's child is named Immanuel, which is similar to other biblical figures who have God's Name incorporated into their names. For example, Daniel means *"God is my judge,"* and Gavriel means "*God is my strength."* Immanuel means *"God is with us,"* and signifies that the Jewish people defeated their enemies with God's help, as it says, *"Devise a plan, but it will not stand, for God is with us"* (Isaiah 8:10). It does not mean, as Christians allege, that the baby was God [with us] in bodily form.

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The context and Hebrew original so clearly support this explanation that missionaries must desperately turn to the very rabbinical tradition they reject in order to substantiate their position. One blatant example is found in a video featuring two Israeli-born missionaries. They attempt to validate the "virgin birth" by claiming that a renowned 11th-century rabbi, known as Moshe haDarshan, states that "the Messiah will not have a father."

A careful review of the Midrashic sources related to Moshe haDarshan's statement demonstrates that his comment is taken out of context and misinterpreted.

Based on his comment in Bereishit Rabati on Genesis 49:15-16, Moshe haDarshan clearly believes that the Messiah would have *"a human father from the tribe of Judah and a mother from the tribe of Dan."*

However, when Moshe haDarshan mentions that the Messiah will be "fatherless," he is quoting the words of Rabbi Berachia in the Midrash Eichah Rabbah 5:3. Rabbi Berachia explains there that being "fatherless" refers to being an orphan. His proof is Queen Esther, who was adopted by Mordechai, as it says, "*He brought up Esther, his uncle's daughter; for she had neither father nor mother"* (Esther 2:7). Obviously, Esther had a physical father [Mordechai's uncle], but, being orphaned, she is referred to as "fatherless."

Missionaries who use rabbinic sources as proofs are either disingenuous or ignorant. Regardless of their motive, we are instructed to *"know what to answer"* someone who challenges our beliefs (Ethics of our Fathers 2:14; Rashi on Deuteronomy 18:9).

Although missionary claims may sound impressive, a careful examination inevitably reveals their distortion of the truth. The key to success in our pursuit of truth is to use critical thinking and to make informed decisions; as King Solomon says, *"The first to bring an argument sounds correct until someone examines him"* (Proverbs 18:17). It is also important to explore and experience the beauty and spirituality of Judaism.

Shabbat Shalom,

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