

SPIRITUAL THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK

with Rabbi Bentzion Kravitz

Israeli Missionaries Distort The Rabbis' Words

My wife and I were ecstatic when we were expecting our first child. Our joy turned to anxiety 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 failed, they gave us the bad news. On top of being premature, the baby was in the 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 a zero chance of surviving an emergency cesarean operation required to save my wife's life.

We trusted the doctors but prayed fervently to God for a miracle.

My wife survived the operation, and they rushed the tiny baby to the neonatal intensive care unit. A few hours later, the doctor told me they cannot explain the baby's survival, and everyone was calling him the "miracle baby."

Our sages say 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-Metzora (Leviticus 12:1–15:33), speaks about the circumstances of a woman giving birth and the offerings she presents to God in gratitude of this momentous event.

Since the Torah discusses childbirth and having witnessed my son's "miraculous" birth, I would like to respond to an erroneous statement on a missionary video from Israel concerning the so-called miraculous virgin birth.

Israel has become "ground zero" for missionary activity targeting Jews for conversion to Christianity. 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.

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, Christians claim the Prophet Isaiah predicts the virgin birth of the messiah. 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 Isaiah 8:3 identifies 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 child is named Immanuel, which is similar to other biblical figures who have God's name incorporate 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.

In addition to quoting Isaiah out of context, most, but not all, Christian bibles mistranslate the Hebrew word "העלמה – Almah" as "*a virgin*" rather than "*the young woman.*" This mistranslation distorts the meaning of the text, a fact recognized by many Christian scholars who acknowledge this mistake.

Therefore, it is not surprising, although it is ironic, that missionaries turn to the very rabbinical tradition they reject to substantiate their position.

One blatant example is promoted on a video featuring Israeli-born "One for Israel" missionaries Eitan and Moti. They attempt to validate the "virgin birth" by claiming that Rabbi Moshe haDarshan, who lived in the 11th century, states that "*the Messiah will not have a father.*"

A careful review of the Midrashic sources related to Rabbi Moshe haDarshan's statement demonstrates that his comment is not meant to be taken literally. This is the approach of the Midrash that tends to be allegorical rather than literal.

Based on his comment in Bereishit Rabati on Genesis 49:15-16, Rabbi 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.*"

When Rabbi 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 attempt to 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 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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