

SPIRITUAL THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK

with Rabbi Bentzion Kravitz

She Cried When He Said Her Parents Were in Hell

Sarah grew up in Brooklyn surrounded by Jewish friends and family. Her parents were highly educated and although the family was not religious, they were proud Jews.

When Sarah encountered a Jew who believed in Jesus, she was skeptical at first, but she was drawn to the love and acceptance her new friend provided.

For years she read the Bible, attended church, and considered herself more Jewish than the religious Jews from her old neighborhood. At one point she joined a “messianic synagogue” where they called their leader a “rabbi” and practiced Jewish rituals. Sarah believed she had found a solution for her nagging guilt about abandoned her Jewish heritage.

When both of Sarah’s parents died within a year of each other, she asked her messianic “rabbi” to say the mourner’s Kaddish prayer for them.

Sarah was devastated when he told her, “There is no reason to say Kaddish since your non-believing parents are burning in hell.” Sarah cried over the callousness of this statement and she started to entertain doubts about Christianity.

Sarah purchased a Jewish Hebrew-English Bible to reexamine the passages she thought proved that Jesus was the messiah and the only savior from sin. When Sarah compared the Jewish Bible with her Christian translation, she noticed some significant differences.

She wasn’t sure what to make of them until an acquaintance suggested she contact Jews for Judaism. She reached me by phone and asked for my viewpoint on several biblical passages that Christians refer to as “proof-texts.”

Every week, for nearly a year, we studied the Bible over the phone. I patiently demonstrated how the passages were mistranslated and taken out of context. I also explained how the correct translation validated Judaism as a spiritually fulfilling path to God.

Considering the hurtful remark about her parents, the passage that confused Sarah the most is found in this week’s Torah portion Acharei Mos (Leviticus 16:1–20:27). The verse says. *“The life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement on your soul”* (Leviticus 17:11).

Christians taught Sarah that we are sinners, and as a result of the original sin, we are born separated from God. They told her Leviticus 17:11 teaches that the only way to achieve forgiveness from sin was to offer blood sacrifices upon the Temple altar. Additionally, they erroneously explained that since the Temple was destroyed, we are no longer able to offer sacrifices. Therefore, they conclude that Jesus died to shed his blood as a final sacrifice, and believing in him is the only way to achieve forgiveness and avoid eternal damnation.

As Sarah and I studied the Bible in depth she discovered that the Christian explanation of sin and salvation was wrong for many reasons.

Leviticus 17:11 does not say that blood sacrifices are the ONLY way to make atonement, or, as missionaries like to say, “*there is no remission of sin without the shedding of blood.*” It was the apostle Paul who made this statement and in the New Testament it actually says, “*according to the law, one could ALMOST say, all things are cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.*” (Hebrews 9:22). Missionaries omit the word “almost” because it contradicts their argument.

According to the Bible, not all sins required a sacrifice. Furthermore, atonement can be achieved in a variety of ways, including giving charity (Exodus 30:16) or burning incense (Numbers 16:47). It is noteworthy that if someone could not afford an animal sacrifice, they could “*offer fine flour*” (Leviticus 5:11).

A sin sacrifice was primarily for unintentional sins (Leviticus 4) and did not automatically guarantee forgiveness of the sin. People who relied solely on sacrifices were repeatedly criticized by the prophets with statements like, “*Will God be pleased with thousands of rams*” (Micha 6:7) and “*What are your multitude of sacrifices to Me?*” (Isaiah 11:1). Sacrifices that were not preceded by repentance were meaningless, as King Solomon says, “*The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination*” (Proverbs 15:8).

The main way of receiving forgiveness has always been repentance and acts of righteousness. As it says, “*The sacrifice acceptable to God is a contrite heart*” (Psalm 51:17), “*To do righteousness and justice is more acceptable to God than sacrifice.*” (Proverbs 21:3), and “*atone for your sins with righteousness*” (Daniel 4:27).

The story of Jonah is another striking example of people receiving forgiveness without blood sacrifices, as it says, “*When G-d saw how they turned from their evil ways, G-d changed his mind about the calamity*” (Jonah 3:10).

In situations when Temple sacrifices are unavailable, we are instructed to “*offer prayers in place of sacrifices*” (Hoshea 14:3). These prayers serve to arouse remorse and repentance in the same way the preparation of the sacrifice once did.

When King Solomon prophetically foresees a time when the Jews will be taken into captivity and left without a Temple or sacrifices, God instructs Solomon to tell the Jewish people to “*pray toward the land, city, and house [Temple]... and God will hear their supplications and forgive them*” (1 Kings 8:46-53). This verse is the source for the tradition of facing toward Jerusalem when Jews pray.

I pointed out to Sarah another glaring contradiction in Christian theology, Paul says Jesus is the final sacrifice, and after his death “*there is no longer any offering for sin*” (Hebrew 10:18). This statement contradicts numerous places that speak about a third Temple and restoration of sin offerings, as it says, “*On that day the prince [messiah] shall provide for himself and all the people of the land a young bull for a sin offering*” (Ezekiel 45:22).

Sarah now understood that repentance has always been the most essential way to return and be close to God, as it says, “*return to Me, and I will return to you*” (Malachi 3:7). Sarah was reassured that the Bible does not teach eternal damnation, and her parents’ souls were with God as it says, the body “*returns to the ground it came from, and the soul returns to God who gave it*” (Ecclesiastes 12:7).

Sarah returned to Judaism right before Yom Kippur. She went to services to pray and ended up crying once again. This time she described her tears as cleansing and joyful because she had rediscovered her Jewish inheritance and a personal and spiritual relationship with God.

Shabbat Shalom,

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