



TORAH IDENTITY

PART I, II, III

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Jewish Identity and the Torah Identity: Part I

בס"ד

Being Jewish is a blessing that comes with a responsibility. In order to understand both the blessing and the responsibility one needs to study G-d's call to Abraham in Genesis chapter 12. Abraham was born a gentile who HaShem called into a covenant and to whom He gave a special call. Although there are many aspects to this call, the most relevant one for this article is that G-d would establish, supernaturally, a new people. The important thing to remember is that this new people group had a purpose. This purpose is clearly revealed in many places throughout the Bible. In the passage dealing with Abraham's call one reads,

"...and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." Genesis 12:3

G-d wanted and still wants to use the people who would be established from Abraham and Sarah to bless each and every family upon the face of the earth. This new people group eventually became known as Israel. Today the individuals who make up Israel are called Jewish. Therefore Jewish individuals have a G-d given responsibility to bless gentiles. The question which needs to be answered is how does a Jewish individual fulfill this obligation? The answer in a general sense is to be a light unto the nations. What does this mean in practicality? This is where the Torah comes into this discussion.

The phrase "to be light to the nations" implies providing illumination, i.e. revelation of divine truth. Divine truth is synonymous to the word of G-d. Hence Jewish individuals have been uniquely called by HaShem to educate the world in regard to the Scripture. Rav Shaul echoes this when he says,

"What advantage then has Jewish individuals...mainly the word of G-d was entrusted to them." Romans 3:1-2

Why would G-d entrust the word of G-d to Jewish people with the instruction to illuminate gentiles with it? For the purpose of gentiles embracing the word of G-d and applying it to their lives as well. This conclusion is so basic it is amazing that it escapes the consideration of so many people. Jewish identity is not based in culture or environment, but in divine revelation. This identity is not reserved for the Jewish people, but entrusted to them to be demonstrated and embraced by all the families of the earth. Let us review some of the most relevant biblical passages that speak to this issue.

In order to understand the subject of Jewish identity one must begin with Abraham. Abraham (Abram) was born a gentile and HaShem called him to respond to His covenant promises; that is, to exercise faith. It was faith that made Abram, Abraham or in other words a gentile into a Jew. This faith expresses a change in one's life from following one's own will, to now following HaShem's will. Man's will is rooted in the flesh while G-d's will is rooted in the Spirit. This is why Abraham was called to be circumcised. Circumcision is a removal of skin from the body. What happens when skin is removed from the body? That piece of skin will die. It is not a coincidence that the one who performs the circumcision is required by Jewish law to bury the foreskin. Why? Because the commandment of circumcision teaches that faith which began Abraham

"conversion" is ultimately for the purpose of bringing death to the flesh, i.e. the carnal / sinful nature.

Not only was Abraham circumcised but so, too, were all the male slaves in his house (see Gen. 17:23). Why was this? This was in order to show that Abraham was called to bring this faith, which causes the death of the flesh, to all those under his sphere of influence. The account of Passover is very similar in the fact that in order to observe the commandments of the festival one had to be circumcised (see Exodus 12:43-51). Once again one learns from the account of the Exodus from Egypt that not only the natural offspring of Abraham came out of Egypt, but there was also a mixed multitude with them (see Exodus 12:38). According to rabbinical sources those from Abraham's literal offspring (600,000 Hebrew males) made up a minority of the total number of Hebrews who were in Egypt during this time. This minority was joined by a multitude of gentiles who were moved by divine revelation, i.e. the manifestation HaShem's providence seen in the plagues, to enter into a covenant relationship with G-d via circumcision and partake of the Passover and receive redemption.

This mixed multitude was never mentioned again in the Bible. Why was this? This was because the mixed multitude was integrated into the Children of Israel as full members of the people of G-d. Although they were not all biological descendants of Abraham they all had one thing in common—they shared a common Passover experience. It was this same group, descendants of Abraham and the mixed multitude that arrived at Mt. Sinai as one body to receive the Torah. Did HaShem make any distinction between them? No, He made no distinction what so ever.

Torah Identity

Chassidic Judaism teaches that the world was created for two things, Israel and the Torah. This is not the case! Israel was created supernaturally by G-d in order that through this people, the gentiles would be blessed by HaShem. Hence, Israel must also be defined by its relationship and responsibility to the gentiles. Unfortunately this truth has been lost by all expressions of Judaism today. One might raise the objection and ask, "what about Messianic Judaism"? The verdict is still out concerning this question, but there seems to be a shift within Messianic Judaism to the same error of traditional Judaism. It is for this reason that this brief article was written.

In regard to the second part of the Chassidic view that the world was created for Torah, one must ask the question, why was the Torah given? There are multiple reasons why the Torah was given, but we will only investigate one of them. The Torah reveals to the people of G-d His standards for living. In other words, the Torah reveals that which is right and that which is wrong in regard to one's behavior. To what group of people was it given? If one responds that this question has already been answered, it is Israel. This answer is insufficient. Why? This is because HaShem did not want to give the Torah to the Children of Israel (including the mixed multitude) in their current state of being. This is seen in Exodus chapter 20.

In this passage, beginning in verse 18 the people who were at Mt. Sinai saw various supernatural activities, one of which was the mountain became engulfed in smoke. Due to these occurrences, and what Moses would reveal in verse 20, namely that HaShem was approaching the people, the Children of Israel were very frightened. In verse 19, they responded to Moses that he should speak with them and that they would listen, but they did not want G-d to address them directly because they feared that they would die. Why would this be?

Remember the context for this section. The people had just heard the Ten Commandments and understood two vital aspects: the first is the Holiness of G-d and the second are His expectations for His people. The people were convicted by their sinfulness and felt that if this Holy G-d drew near to them that they would die. In verse 20, Moses states that this is not why G-d is drawing near to the people. He is not coming to destroy but rather to cause a new reality to come upon the people. This new reality consists of two things: First is that His fear would always be before them. This means that they would understand His priorities and what they should do. The second thing Moses reveals is that G-d was going to transform them into a new condition where they could not sin. Obviously, knowing the will of G-d and being unable to sin is what one should desire. Why was G-d willing to do this? Once again, context is the key. He was giving them at Mt. Sinai the Torah and thereby teaching that man, in his natural state, cannot keep the Torah.

That which is most disappointing is what occurred in verse 21,

"And the people stood at a distance and Moses approached the fog, for G-d was there."

This verse is seen as Israel's rejection of what G-d wanted to do at Mt. Sinai. The transformation that HaShem wanted to bring upon Israel was not realized and Israel remained in a natural state. In this condition Israel could not keep the Torah.

People ask then why would G-d go ahead and give to them the Torah? The answer to this question is found in the end of the book of Joshua. In chapter 24 of Joshua, Joshua is approaching his death. He invites the people to renew the covenant that Moses made with the people, i.e. the Torah as a basis of having a relationship with the Living G-d. After Joshua speaks to the people about their history from the days of Abraham to the present, he commands the people in verse 14,

"Now fear the L-rd and serve Him in purity and truth and remove the gods which your forefathers served on the other side of the river and in Egypt. You are to serve HaShem."

In verse 16 the people answered in the affirmative that they wanted to renew their covenant relationship with HaShem via the Torah. It is most significant that Joshua tells the people, beginning in verse 19, that this is not a possibility. Joshua is the only one who understood why HaShem had given the Torah. The reason was to show them that in their present condition that they could not please G-d and would fail in serving Him. They needed to be transformed.

The Lubavicher rebbe once gave a teaching on a saying which he introduced to the people of Israel. This saying that the rebbe taught is "Mashiach (Messiah) Now". In his teaching, he gave several examples of times where the Children of Israel should have beseeched HaShem to send the Messiah. One of these times occurred in Joshua 24. Joshua was teaching the people that the problem with a covenantal relationship with G-d, based upon the Torah, is not the Torah but the people. This is why Joshua loudly protested the people's enthusiasm to accept the terms of the Torah. Joshua states in verse 19,

"And Joshua said to the people, 'You are not able to serve the L-rd, for He is Holy, He is a jealous G-d, He will not forgive your transgressions and sins.'"

This verse presupposes the people's inability to keep the Torah. Joshua knew the people could not keep the covenant. So why did he offer it to them? In the words of the Lubavicher rebbe, so the people could say "We want Mashiach now". Messiah does the work of redemption and brings about a new reality to those who receive Him through faith. Such individuals are transformed by this faith.

This is why Paul writes, in Romans 7:14, that the Torah is spiritual. If one continues to read in this chapter, he will find that one, in his natural state, is condemned by the Torah. Paul says in verse 24,

"Woe is me, wretched man that I am, who will save me from this body of death."

This verse makes it very clear that man, in his natural state, has no ability to obey the Torah. In the next verse, Paul reveals the only hope for mankind. He writes,

"Thanks be to G-d concerning our L-rd the Messiah Yeshua..." Romans 7:25

In the same way that G-d wanted to bring about a transformation of the Children of Israel at Mt. Sinai, so too is there a transformation through faith in Messiah Yeshua. Ultimately, followers of Yeshua will not experience the total outcome of this transformation until we receive our new/ glorified bodies, by means of the Holy Spirit, Whom every believer receives. However it is through the Holy Spirit that every believer receives the potential to obey G-d and keep His Word.

It is important that one understands the patterns given within scripture. All would agree that the Jewish nation was born by means of the Exodus from Egypt, i.e., the Passover. Judaism teaches that Shavuot, the holiday which commemorates the giving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai, should be viewed as a marriage ceremony between the Children of Israel and HaShem. Hence, according to Judaism, the Jewish people are inherently linked to G-d as His people through these two events.

There are those who say that only those who are the physical offspring of these people have been called to embrace this heritage; i.e., a Jewish lifestyle rooted in the Torah. However, it is not a coincidence that Messiah laid down His life on the 14th day of Nissan (Passover) and is called by Paul our Passover Lamb. Nor is it a coincidence that the Holy Spirit was first poured out upon those who accepted Yeshua as their Passover Lamb on Shavuot. In the same way that Passover and Shavuot created the congregation of Israel from an Old Testament perspective, the death of Messiah on Passover and the giving of the Holy Spirit on Shavuot also create the New Testament people of G-d.

Today, within the Messianic movement, there is a growing belief that Jewish lifestyle should be reserved for those physical descendents of G-d's Old Testament people, i.e., Jewish individuals alone. There are problems with this view. First it has already been stated that the "Jewish lifestyle" was one given to Jewish individuals for the specific purpose of demonstrating to the gentiles how G-d wants all people to behave. Second, those physical descendents are not able, in their natural state, to obey G-d. It is only the believers in Yeshua, who by means of the Holy Spirit can obey the righteousness of the Torah,

"...That the righteousness of the Torah should be fulfilled in us, who do not walk after the flesh, but rather the Spirit." Romans 8:4

This verse makes it clear that it is believers who are called and are the only ones who have been equipped by the Holy Spirit to embrace, demonstrate, and fulfill a biblical lifestyle. As Paul states in the verse from Romans chapter 8 this lifestyle is inherently linked to the Torah.

People talk today about Torah observance when in reality the Torah Law is not even in force today. The rabbis acknowledge this and state that it is rabbinical law which is incumbent upon Jewish individuals. They correctly point out that without a Temple that the Torah cannot be observed. So what does this mean to a follower of Messiah Yeshua?

The believer, Jew and gentile alike, is called to apply the word of G-d to his life and fulfill the righteousness of the Torah, not in the oldness of the letter, but in the newness of the Spirit (see Romans 7:6). How does one do this? What are the implications of this theologically and in practicality?

These questions will be the subject of the next article.

Jewish Identity and the Torah Identity: Part II

בס"ד

Part one finished with the idea that the Torah is not in force today. Therefore it is incorrect to speak about Torah observance in the sense that an individual can keep Torah law. I am not speaking about the impossibility of Torah observance in the same way that Joshua did as I spoke of in my first article; i.e. humanly impossible because of one's sinful nature; but rather the impossibility today because of the fact there is no Temple. The destruction of the Temple brought a monumental change to Judaism. In the same way that in Psalm 137 the statement appears, "How can we sing the L-rd's song in a foreign land" one needs to recognize that it is impossible to keep the Torah without a Temple in Jerusalem.

Both Biblical and Rabbinical perspectives understand the Torah as a unit. This means that Torah is only observed when all of its commandments are potentially possible to be fulfilled. James also alludes to the Torah being a unit when he says,

"For whoever keeps the entire Torah, but stumbles in one (commandment), he is guilty of all."
James 2:10

Rabbinical Jewish Law says in regard to a Torah scroll, that it is only Kosher when all of its letters are correct. This means that if one letter is missing, or one letter written in a wrong place, then the entire Torah scroll is not valid.

Hence today because there is not a Temple in Jerusalem, the Torah cannot be observed in its totality and if not in totality then it becomes not in force. This should not be a surprise because the prophet Hosea wrote about the period of time when the Torah would not be in force, saying,

"For many days the Children of Israel will dwell without a king, without a government official, without a sacrifice, without a pillar, without an ephod, and without teraphim. Afterwards the Children of Israel will return and seek the L-rd their G-d and David their King, and they will fear the L-rd and His goodness in the last days." Hosea 3:4-5

These two verses are critical in understanding the time in which we are living. Hosea informs the reader that the Children of Israel will go through a long period without a king or a government. There will be no sacrifices offered nor will there be any remnants of the Temple, nor will there be any active Priesthood. However in the last days the Children of Israel will return to the land of Israel and seek the Lord. How? They will seek G-d by means of the Messiah. Notice that the text actually says David. This is of course a reference to the Son of David, i.e. Messiah. Why is this text so important? It is important because it reveals that since the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D. that the Torah could not be observed. This is the basis for the shift away from the Priest and Levites and the leaders of Israel to the Rabbis. Now it is rabbinical law which is binding according to Judaism and not the Torah. Therefore, when one speaks about Torah observance today, the real allusion is to rabbinical law and not the Biblical Torah. It is amazing to me that people find it hard to believe that the Rabbis teach that the Torah is not in force. Here is a classic example to illustrate this point.

According to the Torah if a Jewish individual knowingly and willfully transgresses the Sabbath day the punishment is death. However if a secular Jew today chooses not to follow rabbinical law in regard to the Sabbath law, a rabbinical court cannot inflict any punishment on this individual whatsoever. It is most clear that Torah law and rabbinical law differ in many points.

A friend of mine asked me to read a couple articles in regard to Jewish and Gentile obligations to the Torah. The articles grapple with the question of if there is a difference between the obligations of a Jew to that of a Gentile in regard to the Torah. The fallacy of these articles is that they assume one can keep / observe the Torah today. As we learned from the prophet Hosea, G-d has providentially placed us in a time period where neither a Jew nor a Gentile can keep / observe the Torah. Some will read this and immediately think about the words of Yeshua where He says,

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets, I have not come to destroy the law, but to fulfill." Mt. 5:17

Is not this conclusive proof that Yeshua is not against the Torah? Absolutely, but most do not understand what He was intending in this verse. Yeshua was without sin, and in regard to the Torah commandments, every commandment that was pertinent to Him (some of the commandments were addressed to women, or kings, or priests, therefore not relevant to Him) He preformed perfectly. Hence Yeshua was the only One Who was Torah observant. When He laid down His life on the cross the Bible says that He Who knew no sin, became sin for us. That is, our sins were placed upon Him and His righteousness (Torah obedience) was placed upon us (believers in the Gospel). Hence every believer is declared righteous before G-d because of the sufficiency of Messiah's work.

This declarative statement that the believer is righteous is known as a salvation experience. Believers are told to work out their salvation. This statement is speaking to the issue of sanctification. Sanctification is related to one's behavior. This is really the issue at the heart of this article (Part 1 & 2). In other words, should our behavior include observing the Torah and is there a different answer to this question for a Jew compared to a Gentile?

The first part of this question has already been answered—no one today can keep / observe the Torah. However one needs to be careful. Just because one cannot keep the Torah does not mean that it has been done away with. We read in the Scripture that until heaven and earth pass away not one part of the Torah will be done away with (See Mt. 5:18). The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews says that the Torah is getting ready to vanish (see Hebrews 8:13) but it is clear that the Torah will not vanish away until the New Jerusalem is established. Please note that the New Jerusalem will not be established until after the Millennial Kingdom. It is also most significant that in the New Jerusalem there will not be a Temple (See Rev. 21:22). Proving the point where there is no Temple the Torah is not in force.

Even though this is the case today, the Torah does teach me about sin and righteousness; that is, that through the Torah commandments and all of Scripture for that matter, one can learn how G-d wants one to behave. Is this not Torah obedience? Not exactly, for this is why Paul was inspired to write to believers,

"But now we who are delivered from the Torah, being dead therein where were held; since now we serve in the newness of the Spirit (The Holy Spirit) and not in the oldness of the letter."
Roman 7:6

I ended the first part of this article with this verse because it accurately and succinctly states the position of a believer in regard to the Torah. One is not under any obligation to a law or a commandment. This is what Paul was saying when he wrote,

"All things are lawful for me, but all things are not profitable. All things are lawful for me, but all things do not edify." I Corinthians 10:23

Frequently people will respond and say does that mean I can do whatever I want? Does not such a view give people a license to sin? Notice that Paul says in this verse, "All things are lawful for me..." One needs to understand the unique position of a believer. The Bible is most clear that the punishment of sin, i.e. violation of a Torah commandment is death. Hence because every person is sinful we all deserve death. The death that Messiah died he died for humanity. This is why Paul says in Romans chapter 6 that when Messiah died, so also the believer died. Hence through Messiah's death, the believer has already received the punishment of the Torah and no longer bound to the Torah (for death frees an individual from the Torah). This truth is demonstrated in the fact that Jewish law forbids one to wear tzitzit (the fringes at the end of a four corner garment that relates to the commandments of the Torah- see Numbers 15:37-41) in a cemetery.

Even though the believer is free from the punishment of the Torah, one should not conclude that this will lead to ungodly behavior. The one who accepted Messiah did so because he wanted to be free from not only the punishment of sin but also from sin itself. Paul makes it clear in this chapter of Romans that the believer wants to now live his life unto the L-rd and serve Him. Paul expressly says the believer will want to use his body for the purpose of righteousness. (See Romans 6:1-18) Once again the true believer will want to live in a manner that fulfills the righteousness of the Torah, not according to the oldness of the letter, but in the newness of the Spirit. What does this mean? Yeshua reveals this in the Sermon on the Mount when He spoke concerning the true application of the Torah. Yeshua selected two examples to illustrate this point; murder and adultery. His disciples would understand that not only are murder and adultery wrong, but so also is having hate or lust in one's heart. The goal of the Torah was for man to love the L-rd with all of his heart, soul and might and his neighbor as himself. This is exactly what the believer is led to do by faith in Messiah, and what he is empowered to do by the Holy Spirit.

Micah the prophet stated this same goal in a different way in this well known verse,

"Declared to you o man what is good and what the L-rd seeks from you; that you do (execute) justice and love mercy and humbly walk with your G-d." Micah 6:8

For the believer, there is no longer a divine punishment for violation of a Torah commandment per se, but when a person does not behave in accordance with the aforementioned goal of the Torah, then one is guilty of sin. A believer then should study all the commandments and the rest of Scripture and utilize the wisdom and admonitions contained therein having been endowed with the Holy Spirit to behave in a manner that fulfills the righteousness of the Torah. This is true not only for the Jew, but also for the Gentile.

Before I conclude the second part of this study I want to deal with an issue that is related in practice to what we have been discussing. This issue is the concern of some within the Messianic community that there will be a loss of Jewish Identity if Gentiles adopt a lifestyle based on Jewish tradition.

I find this concern is baseless. Those Messianic leaders who describe Gentiles practicing Jewish traditions or even adopting a rabbinical observant lifestyle as a type of theological or spiritual holocaust is much to do about nothing. First I think the term holocaust should only be used in regard for the attempted extermination of the Jewish race during the World War II era that led to the tragic death of over six million Jewish individuals. Second, even though assimilation is a problem, one must define assimilation properly. It is not when a Jewish individual adopts a lifestyle devoid of rabbinical cultural norms, but when a Jewish person fails to embrace the righteousness that is contained in a personal relationship with Messiah Yeshua and embraces a lifestyle that is based in the principles of the world. To me it is just as problematic when a Gentile also rejects Yeshua and lives according to the ways of the world.

Related to this issue is the question, should a Jewish believer live differently than a Gentile believer? This will be the subject of the third and final part of our study.

Jewish Identity and the Torah Identity: Part III

בס"ד

In this third and final article, dealing with the relationship between the Torah and Jewish Identity, I will respond to a growing perspective within Messianic Judaism that Gentiles are not under the same mandate as Jewish individuals in regard to the obligations of the Torah commandments. In regard to those who hold the point of view that there is a difference between a Gentile believer's obligations and that of a Jewish believer's, I most strongly disagree. In reading several articles dealing with this issue I find that there are two primary causes for those arriving at this errant view. The first is an improper credence given to norms and standard practices of believers historically. This is to say because "Christianity" has not historically embraced the commandments of the Torah and most of the Church is Gentile, then it follows that there must not be a mandate for Gentiles in regard to the Torah. The second is a faulty handling of key Biblical passages which relate to this issue.

As has been addressed in the previous two articles, there is no mandate today upon Jewish believers or non-believers in regard to the Torah commandments. In the last article Hosea chapter three (verses 3-4) was cited as proof that the Bible predicted a time when the Torah would not be in force due to the lack of a Temple. Once again the problem with those who promote Torah observance for the 613 Biblical commandments of the Torah is that nearly half are impossible to fulfill today because of the fact that there is no Temple.

In examining the writings of several messianic leaders who have written to this issue, it would seem that at the heart of the matter is not so much a fidelity to each of the Torah commandments, but a concern whether Jewish identity will be lost if Gentiles attempt to observe the Torah. The first critical point that one needs realize is that Jewish identity is not defined by Torah observance. Would one question the Jewishness of Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob or for that matter any of the descendants of the twelve tribes who lived in the land of Goshen? Yet they did not have the Torah. What about during a good portion of the time when the kings of Judah reigned in Jerusalem when the Torah had been literally lost, did the people of Judah lose their identity as Jews? Today it is estimated that less than twenty percent of the world Jewry practice rabbinical law, yet does a secular Jew like comedian Jerry Seinfeld lose his identity as being Jewish? The answer to all these questions is no; hence "observance" of the commandments is not what imparts a Jewish identity.

At the end of the book of Zechariah the reader is informed that Gentiles will come up to observe the feast of Tabernacles. There are other Biblical passages as well as rabbinical writings that say that in the Millennial Kingdom that all Gentiles will observe the Torah; therefore one must ask the question, "does this mean that in the Kingdom that Gentiles will lose their identity as non-Jews? Once again the answer is certainly not, because it is the vast number of Gentiles who will come to faith in the G-d of Israel, embracing the Torah and Messiah Yeshua in the last days which will be a testimony to Israel's faithfulness in the last days.

What is important to realize are the different groups who will make up the Millennial Kingdom. The first group will be those Jews and Gentiles who come to faith in Messiah Yeshua before the Rapture. These believers will receive a new body and will rule with Messiah during the thousand years. The second group will be Jewish individuals that come to faith in Messiah Yeshua after

the rapture, yet before the inauguration of the Kingdom. This group will be leaders in the Kingdom. The next group is the Gentiles who come to faith in Messiah Yeshua after the rapture, yet before the inauguration of the Kingdom. Whereas the second group is the leaders in the Kingdom, the third group is the citizens. The final group is those who will be born during the Millennial Kingdom. The purpose of this article is of course not to enter into a discourse about the last days, but there is a very important point that can be derived from these facts. Namely that in the Millennial Kingdom group one will be composed of Jews and Gentiles who have the same behavior, i.e. ruling with Messiah, yet their individual identity is not lost due to this common behavior. Also, group two and three (Jews and Gentiles) will be practicing the Torah in the Millennial Kingdom and neither will lose their individual identity.

I want to strongly emphasize that Jewish individuals who accept Yeshua do not lose their identity as Jews, nor do Gentile believers who in some form embrace a "Torah obedient" lifestyle become Jewish. In other words, a distinctive identity does not demand a distinctive set of practices or norms. Ruth for example, embraced a Torah lifestyle, yet she was always known as a Moabite. Uriah the Hittite, served in the Israelite army and spoke of the Ark of the Covenant (a reference to the commandments) yet retained his identity as a Hittite.

Another common mistake that individuals frequently make in regard to this issue is to fail to understand circumcision and what was implied by Paul during his frequent discussions involving the term. In order to assist one in comprehending this issue it must be stated that simply because the Scripture mentions a position, this does not necessarily mean that the position is Biblical. Such is the case with how some sects of Judaism saw circumcision. During the latter Second Temple period, much of Judaism understood circumcision as relating to the Law of Moses; that is, that circumcision was a symbol or sign of one's acceptance of the Torah. Biblically this is incorrect. Circumcision relates to the Abrahamic Covenant which is established by faith, of which Messiah is the foundation. Circumcision, as was stated in part 1 of this series, represents the death of the flesh. One learns from the New Covenant that the Law arouses the desires of the flesh (See Romans 7:5) and reveals one's sinful nature which is in opposition to the will of G-d. Hence the Law, which is good, holy, and true, brings a death sentence upon the unregenerated man. The point is that the view that the Law is an instrument of salvation is in error. When Paul spoke negatively about circumcision it was in regard to those who had accepted the incorrect view that through circumcision, i.e. the acceptance of the Torah, one is saved.

This was the purpose of the Jerusalem Council in Acts chapter fifteen. Most Christian commentaries are wrong when they assert that the debate was about whether Gentiles which accept Messiah Yeshua are obligated to keep the Torah. If one simply reads the first verse of the chapter it clearly reveals the actual reason why this assembly took place.

"And certain men came down from Judah and taught the brethren, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the manner of Moses, you cannot be saved.'"

It was Peter who stood up and pointed out before the council that numerous uncircumcised Gentiles had believed the Gospel and then received the Holy Spirit which was evidence of their salvation experience. Peter then stated that G-d,

"...makes no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith." Acts 15:9

Peter continues in regard to the obligation to keep the Torah (once again implied from the discussion concerning circumcision) and says,

"Now therefore why do you tempt G-d, putting a yoke upon the neck of the disciples (context is Gentiles disciples) which neither our fathers (Jewish) nor we (Jewish believers) were able to bear." Acts 15:10

It is very important to understand this verse as speaking not only to the Gentiles, but obviously to Jewish believers as well. Many messianic leaders (First Fruits of Zion) interpret this verse as a proof text for exempting the Gentiles only from an obligation to keep the Torah. This of course is incorrect when the verse points out that neither Jewish individuals are able to bear an obligation to keep the whole Torah. If one wants to make the argument that Jewish believers by means of the Holy Spirit are able to be perfect like their Heavenly Father (See Matthew 5:48) well and fine, but would this not also apply to Gentile believers who have the same indwelling Holy Spirit? Regardless, since there is no Temple today, as has been pointed out numerous times in our study, Judaism, in agreement with Hosea, acknowledges that the Torah is not in force in this present time.

Peter closes out his speech with the statement that,

"We believe that by means of the grace of the L-rd, Yeshua the Messiah, we shall be saved, even as they." Acts 15:11

It is most interesting that Peter never deals with a lifestyle issue for believers, but deals with the means of salvation and strongly states the circumcision, i.e. the acceptance of the Torah, is not related to the means by which one is saved. It is only after James, the leader of the Congregation of believers in Jerusalem and the head of the Jerusalem Council, states his agreement with Peter's position that he then brings up a new but related subject. In verse nineteen he states,

"Therefore this is my judgment, that we do not trouble those from among the Gentiles which are turning to G-d."

It is very important for one to notice that the verb "turning" in regard to "the Gentiles turning to G-d" is in the present tense (in the original Greek), although some English translations place it in the past. This implies in the process of coming to faith. The implication is this: whereas there were those who wanted to add circumcision to faith in Messiah, i.e. the Gospel as the means of Salvation, James and the Council rejected this point. However James did list a few things which are incumbent upon Gentiles who want to receive the Gospel. This list appears in verse 20,

"But we write unto them (Gentiles) to abstain from the pollution of idols, sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood."

These four things were the basis for idolatry. The point was this, because Gentiles came from a culture that had idolatry very prevalent within it, James wanted the Gentiles to know that acceptance of Yeshua meant a turning away from idolatry. It was very simple for Gentiles who embraced a multiplicity of gods to add one more to their list and accept Yeshua. This of course could not be tolerated and therefore the list in verse 20 speaks against such a tendency. Hence this list does not represent a code of conduct for Gentile believers, but a minimum condition for

sharing the Gospel. It is very important to remember the context for the Jerusalem Council—does a Gentile have to be circumcised in order to be saved? The answer is no! However if a Gentile wants to accept Yeshua, but still maintains a desire to practice idolatry he is not a candidate for salvation. He must be willing to turn from idolatry in order to accept Yeshua. Here is a real example from my personal experience which illustrates the issue.

Once an individual who was practicing homosexuality wanted to accept the Gospel and asked if I would lead him in a prayer. I had known this man for several months and told him this was great news, but wanted to make sure he understood that homosexuality was sin. He responded that he did not agree. After looking at several Biblical passages which clearly teaches that such behavior is sinful, he said he did not care and would continue to live the lifestyle he wanted. I did not pray with him. Why not? Because acceptance of the Gospel implies a desire to turn away from sin. Had this individual acknowledged that homosexual behavior is sin, but he did not know if he could change, I would have prayed with him to receive Yeshua if he would ask Yeshua to help him turn away from this sin, and every sin. The point is the same for any type of sin and not just homosexuality. A person is not ready to pray to receive Yeshua if he does not have a desire to turn away from sin and embrace the lifestyle that Scripture teaches. One's salvation is not dependent upon his performance of turning away from sin, nor one's success in living a Biblical lifestyle, but one who does not possess a desire to walk in obedience is saying he wants to continue in sin, but be redeemed. In other words, he wants salvation, but rejects regeneration. Obviously such a view is incompatible with a true salvation experience.

This brings us to the next verse which is primary in arriving at the proper conclusion to the issue at hand. James ends his decision by saying,

"For Moses from the ancient days is read in every city being read in the synagogues each Shabbat."

This verse clearly says that Gentile believers will learn the Torah through their exposure to it in synagogue. What is the reason that Gentile believers will learn the Torah? The reason is the exact same reason that Jewish believers learn Torah, to apply it to one's life. Wait a second, if the Torah is not in force today then why learn it? This question brings us to one of the most common errors made today by the believing community—that the concept that the Torah is not in force means that the Torah does not have a purpose today. This is a serious error. Let us understand that although the Torah is not and never was an instrument of salvation, it still has several important roles.

The believer, whether Jewish or Gentile, is admonished in the Scripture to study the word of G-d—this means all of Scripture. Even though from an eternal judgment perspective the believer will not be condemned by the Torah, the commandments still reveal the standards of G-d. Because of the lack of a Temple, which was designed by G-d for this allotment of time, much of the commandments cannot be performed today; however the wisdom that is contained in such commandments can and should still be learned and applied to one's life. What is most important for one to understand is that the character of Yeshua is Torah obedience. The Scripture states that Yeshua never sinned, i.e. violated the Torah. Hence when one walks in accordance with the righteousness that the Torah reveals, this one also manifests the character of Yeshua. In other words, being like Yeshua is expressing the righteousness that the Torah manifests.

I strongly believe that Jewish individuals who accept Yeshua do not lose their Jewish Identity as Rabbis like to threaten, nor do Gentiles who accept Yeshua become Jews. One very important aspect to the Gospel is that it brings two peoples together and although both a Jewish believer and a Gentile believer express the character of Yeshua, their physical description whether it be Jewish or Gentile is not diminished nor needs to be lost. In fact, it is when the congregation of the L-rd is comprised of both Jews and Gentiles that one knows that it is meeting the expectation that Scripture teaches. This means a congregation which is only comprised of Jewish individuals or of Gentiles is manifesting a problem.

In conclusion, the Gentile believer is called to study each Torah commandment like the Jewish believer and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to apply the Spirit of the Law to his life. To those who are concerned that if Gentiles practice some of the Torah commandments and are thereby "infringing" upon the "Jewish identity" of a Jewish individual, I say your agenda is misplaced. Jewish identity is not imparted by the Torah according to Jewish law. One is born Jewish. Traditionally once a Gentile wants to embrace the Torah and the G-d of Israel, Judaism says let him convert, i.e. become a Jew. I take exception to this practice. I believe that Gentiles who embrace the G-d of Israel and His word remain Gentiles and there should not be the perspective that only a Jewish person can embrace Torah. I believe that when a Gentile embraces the G-d of Israel and His righteousness, the Jewish community does not need to panic and say he should convert, i.e. become a Jew, in order to maintain the position of Judaism that the Torah is strictly reserved for Jews only. The separation between the Torah and Gentiles is most strong in Judaism that the famed champion of Jewish Law, Rambam, writes in his Mishneh Torah in the section entitled "Judges", under the laws entitled "Kings" chapter 10 and paragraph 9,

"A gentile who engages in the Torah deserves death."

My hope is that the primary objective of Messianic Judaism is not to preserve "Jewishness" but to bring the Jew first and also the Gentile into a personal relationship with the G-d of Israel, by means of Messiah Yeshua and teaching them to observe all things which Yeshua taught, realizing that Yeshua's teaching did indeed deal with the proper application of Biblical commandments to one's life.