

Bar Mitzvah & Torah Observance

by Michael Rudolph

Delivered to Ohev Yisrael June 23, 2007
on the Occasion of Michael Eadie's Bar Mitzvah

Michael, today you had your *Bar Mitzvah* and it is well known that *Bar Mitzvah* means different things to different people. To some it is just something they have to endure in order to please their parents. They study to get through it, and hope never to have to think about what they studied again. Others look forward to their *Bar Mitzvah* because it is a time to party and get gifts. Still others understand it as a rite of passage – a day when they are received by their community as adult and are given adult responsibilities. This last way to look at it is correct; the first two are not.

But there is something even more to this than being a rite of passage and coming into adulthood. The key to understanding *Bar Mitzvah*'s deeper significance is in the words themselves. *Bar Mitzvah* is an Aramaic term that means "Son of Commandment." Some believe that by accepting *Bar Mitzvah*, a young man is committing to keep literally, every one of the 613 commandments given at Mt. Sinai and subsequently written in the Torah. I suggest to you that it cannot mean that, because no one today – not you and not I – can comply literally with every commandment in the *Torah*.

Does my statement surprise you? Let me show you some examples of what I mean. Take for instance Leviticus 23:27:

"The tenth day of the seventh month is Yom-Kippur; you are to have a holy convocation, you are to deny yourselves, and you are to bring an offering made by fire to Adonai."

From other parts of the Bible we know that the Yom Kippur offering is an animal sacrifice. Who then can keep *Yom Kippur* today exactly the way the Bible instructs? Yeshua our Messiah became our sacrifice for sin, so today the offering made by fire commanded in Leviticus is both unauthorized and unneeded. Not only that, doing the sacrifice the way it was intended is now impossible because there is no longer a standing Temple in which to conduct it.

Consider also Deuteronomy 21:18-21:

"If a man has a stubborn, rebellious son who will not obey what his father or mother says, and even after they discipline him he still refuses to pay attention to them; then his father or mother are to take hold of him and bring him out to the leaders of his town, at the gate of that place, and say to the leaders of his town, 'This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious, he doesn't pay attention to us, lives wildly, gets drunk. Then all the men of his town are to stone him to death; in this way you will put an end to such wickedness among you, and all Isra'el will hear about it and be afraid.'"

Who among us believes that God wants and expects the men of – say – Lorton, Virginia, to stone their rebellious children? Of course not. The town of Lorton is not ancient Israel, nor is its government the government of God.

Here's another one – Deuteronomy 25:5:

“If brothers live together, and one of them dies childless, his widow id not to marry someone unrelated to him; her husband’s brother is to go to her and perform the duty of a brother-in-law by marrying her.”

Well that’s all very well and good so long as the brother-in-law is not already married. If he is already married, obeying this statute literally results in his having two wives which is contrary to the laws of these United States.

So now let’s get back to *Bar Mitzvah* and being a Son of Commandment. Will any of us in this room who celebrated *Bar Mitzvah* in our youth be killing an animal next *Yom Kippur*? Would we bring our children out to the city gates to be stoned? Would we take a second wife? Of course Michael here is above suspicion on that one because he doesn’t even have a first wife. Or does he? Michael? {:-)

Clearly, being a *Bar Mitzvah*, a Son of Commandment has to mean something other than obeying every commandment in Torah literally. At the same time, are there not many commandments that we do obey literally? Do we not literally seek to love God and love our neighbor? Don’t we literally refrain from murder? Don’t we literally cease from work and rest on the Sabbath? Although Deuteronomy 27:1 instructs Isra’el to “Observe all the *mitzvot* (the commandments of *Torah*),” it seems that that we observe some literally and others not.

The answer to this inconsistency is that that being a *Bar Mitzvah*, a Son of Commandment, is indeed a commitment to being *Torah*-observant, but judgment has to be applied in the application. It’s a funny world. Some people believe that since Yeshua died for our sins all law has been done away with, while at the same time others believe that obeying God’s law requires complete literal compliance with all commandments, making no attempt at all to exercise judgment. These latter folks would say that anyone who seeks to exercise judgment in the application of God’s commandments are either liberals in their use of Scripture, or are not really Bible believers. I can show you that neither of these positions are correct, that God Himself exercises judgment in applying His Word, and that He expects the same of us.

Let’s look at Leviticus 18:4-5 as rendered by the New King James Version:

“You shall observe My judgments and keep My ordinances, to walk in them: I am the LORD your God. You shall therefore keep My statutes and My judgments, which if a man does, he shall live by them: I am the LORD.”

The Complete Jewish Bible translates these verses similarly but uses the word “rulings” instead of “judgments,” and the word “laws” instead of “statutes” and “ordinances.” Those substitutes are instructive because “statutes,” “ordinances,” and “laws” are explicit directives, while “judgments” and “rulings” are discerning decisions that God Himself makes when He assesses His own directives. The Torah has always consisted of, not only commandments, but also of discerning interpretive judgments.

Let me show you a biblical example of that principle that just about blew me away when I first saw it. In Leviticus 10 we read how two of Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, sinned against God and were summarily slain. Later that day, Moses instructs Aaron and his two remaining sons on how to conduct a very important sacrifice that God commanded. These instructions were very detailed and were apparently very important because when Moses came back to check and found that they had not done what he had directed them he became angry and said to them in Leviticus 10:17-18:

“Why didn't you eat the sin offering in the area of the sanctuary, since it is especially holy? He gave it to you to take away the guilt of the community, to make atonement for them by Adonai. Look! Its blood wasn't brought into the sanctuary! You should have eaten it there in the sanctuary, as I ordered.”

“Aaron answered Moshe, ‘Even though they offered their sin offering and burnt offering today, things like these have happened to me! If I had eaten the sin offering today, would it have been pleased Adonai?’ ‘On hearing this reply, Moshe was satisfied.’” (Leviticus 10:19-20).

What we see here is Aaron and his remaining sons failing to follow detailed directives given by God, presumably because they were in mourning for Nadab and Abihu or were in another impure state of mind. Perhaps they were even angry with God. In any event, after Moses heard their explanation for not conducting the sacrifice, he was satisfied that they had done the right thing, and presumably God was also satisfied because we don't read of God punishing them for their disobedience. This is an example of Aaron exercising judgment in the application of God's explicit commandment, and God affirming, by His silence, that Aaron did the right thing.

Michael, as a *Bar Mitzvah*, God expects you, like Aaron, to be observant of *Torah* but, at the same time, discerning in how you apply it. The reason you can discern as Aaron did is that you have the Holy Spirit dwelling within you also, and, if you listen, the Holy Spirit will give you wisdom in your application of *Torah*. Being *Torah*-observant in the New Covenant does require knowledge of God's commandments in Scripture, but it is not a mere exercise in rule-keeping. Rather, it is an exercise in Holy Spirit discernment and knowing the mind and heart of God. That is what God meant when he prophesied through Jeremiah:

“I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the LORD. “(Jeremiah 31:33-34)

Michael, don't listen to anyone who tells you that you should not be *Torah*-observant because you are not a Jew. Also, never think that you are not adequately observing *Torah* just because someone else comes to a different conclusion about an issue than you and, as a result, conducts himself in a different way. In your *Torah*-observance there may be some instances where the way you keep *Torah* will reflect your Gentile identity, but you have chosen to be part of a Jewish

community in your congregational life, and *Torah*-observance is characteristic of a Jewish community.

Michael, as a *Bar Mitzvah*, a Son of Commandment, and especially a Gentile Son of Commandment in a Messianic Jewish congregation, you have unique and valuable things to impart to those who will observe your life and come to know you. The first is your faith in Messiah Yeshua, testifying to all of God's gracious provisions, including his provision for the salvation of all who will knock and invite Yeshua to enter. The second is your faith in Messiah Yeshua exhibited in a Jewish context, testifying to the Jewishness of the New Testament and the New Covenant faith, and to the Gentile believer's connection to Israel. The third is your example of being a *Torah*-observant Gentile living as part of a Jewish community, testifying to the universal value of God's law, and of the unity and equality of Jews and Gentiles in Messiah Yeshua.

So, Michael, your identity as a *Bar Mitzvah*, a Son of Commandment, is a great and valuable one, made even more valuable by your being a Messianic believer who God made Gentile rather than Jewish.

I pray that you will embrace your *Bar Mitzvah* with a sense of purpose, calling, and excitement, as from this day on, you take your place among the adults of the Ohev Yisrael community, going forward in your observance of *Torah* in the power and discernment of the Holy Spirit, blessing all whom God causes to cross your path.