

The Meaning of Bar Mitzvah

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Delivered to Ohev Yisrael November 3, 2007
on the Occasion of Justin Parker's Bar Mitzvah

Today is Justin Parker's *Bar Mitzvah*, so let's talk about *Bar Mitzvah*. The word *Bar* is an Aramaic word that means "son," and *Mitzvah* is the Aramaic and Hebrew word for "Commandment." So *Bar Mitzvah* means "Son of Commandment." Notice that there is no article "the" in *Bar Mitzvah*, so the term does not mean "Son of **the** Commandment" – it means "Son of Commandment." All of them! Yes, today Justin became a *Bar Mitzvah*, a "Son of Commandment" – responsible as an adult for keeping all of God's commandments. And not only for keeping them, but also for teaching them to others and especially to his future children, for as the "*Sh'ma*," Deuteronomy 6:5-9 states:

"You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates."

So Justin, are you ready to marry and have children so you can fulfill those commandments?

Well, perhaps not quite yet, but you can comply – in fact God expects you to comply with parts of the *Sh'ma* right now! To begin with:

"You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength."

That is the part of the *Sh'ma* that Yeshua quoted when he was asked which is the great commandment in the law (Matthew 22:36), and he added another -- that to love our neighbor as our self is like it, and that on those two commandments hang the entire *Torah* and the Prophets.

Now that is a profound statement that should speak to every *Bar Mitzvah*. It is a statement that links God's commandments to loving Him, and loving our fellow man. It is a statement that tells us that doing what a commandment says to do is not good enough. It tells us that our motives count, and that whatever actions we take in response to God's Law must be based on love.

I have never heard God described as a flower child, but perhaps there are elements of truth in it that we should not be so quick to dismiss.¹ After all, do not the Scriptures say:

"...let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God, for God is love."? (1 John 4:7-8)

¹ Synonym for "hippie," circa 1967.

Some would ask: “How can we come to love God whom we cannot see, cannot touch, who is all powerful, and who holds our life and death in His hands?” The answer is given in 1John 4:19:

“We love Him because He first loved us.”

So the very first commandment of Jewish Law with which a *Bar Mitzvah*, a Son of Commandment, must come to terms, is loving God with all his heart, soul and strength. But related to it is God’s other commandment that we must love one another, because Scripture teaches:

“If we love one another, God abides in us, and His love has been perfected in us.” (1 John 4:12)

And God is very practical in telling us what loving our fellow man has to consist of; 1 John 3:17 states:

“But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him?”

Here God is talking about the *mitzvah* called *tzadaka* or compassionate charitable giving. And as the Good Book also says (Reb Tevye calls the Bible “The Good Book”):

“If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, “Depart in peace, be warmed and filled,” but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit? Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.” (James 2:15-17).

Finally, Scripture puts it in a way that no one can misunderstand:

“If someone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? ²¹ And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also.” (1 John 4:20-21).

But I thought we started out talking about *Bar Mitzvah*. Well, we did, and we still are, because the first thing a **real** *Bar Mitzvah* must do to keep God’s command-ments, is to love God, and to love our brother human beings. Justin, I know that you are that kind of *Bar Mitzvah*.

Let’s move on. If we go a little further in the *Sh’ma*, we are told to:

“...talk of them [meaning God’s commandments] when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.”

You know, Justin, you don't have to be a father of children to fulfill these, and today, as a new *Bar Mitzvah*, God holds you responsible for them. So let's take a closer look at these commandments in order to see what God expects of you. First, verse 7:

"...and you shall talk of them when you sit in your house"

You do not live alone in your house, Justin. You live with your mother and father, and although you are accustomed to them teaching YOU God's Word, there are times when they will need to hear God's Word spoken to them as well. What I am suggesting is that, as of today, as you have become a man, God wants you to begin giving back to your parents the blessing of the counsel of God that they have been pouring into you since your birth. Yes, you are young and not as knowledgeable or experienced as they. But through the *Ruach HaKodesh* (the Holy Spirit), God can speak wisdom, encouragement, and comfort through you to them when they need it.

And verse 7 goes on to say:

"You shall talk of them (meaning God's commandments) 'when you walk by the way.'"

In other words, when you leave your house, godliness should follow you, and the people you encounter – your friends, acquaintances, and even strangers – when they hear you speak, they should hear God's *Torah* come forth from your mouth, and they should experience God's love through you. That is your responsibility to others as a Jew, because you have a covenant responsibility to be a light to the people of the world who either do not know God at all, or who have an incomplete knowledge of God and need to know Him better. To fulfill such a high calling, you are commanded concerning how you are to speak thusly:

"Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers.." (Ephesians 4:29)

Moving along, verse 7 of the *Sh'ma* continues:

"You shall talk of them 'when you lie down, and when you rise up.'"

So God's words should not only be spoken when you are outside of your house going about your daily business, but they should be the last things you speak before you retire for the night, and the first things you utter when you wake in the morning. Between that and what we said previously, it is clear that God wants His Words to be on your lips all day long.

And verse 8 of the *sh'ma* goes on to say:

"You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes."

Orthodox Judaism interprets these words literally, so a small parchment scroll containing a portion of Deuteronomy is placed in black boxes called *t'filin*, and these are tied to one's arm and to one's forehead during morning prayer. You can do that or not as you wish, but what is

vital is that you understand its purpose – to remind you that whatever you put your hands to, and whatever you put your mind to, they must reflect God’s holiness. Putting it another way: You are always to direct your mind and your actions toward things that are godly:

“... brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy -- meditate on these things.”
(Philippians 4:8)

Finally, verse 9 of the Sh’ma commands us:

“You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.”

Again, Orthodox Judaism interprets the words literally, so the tradition developed of putting a portion of Scripture in a protective box called a *mezuzah*. The *mezuzah* is tacked to the outside doors and gates of our houses in order to remind us of God’s Word whenever we enter and whenever we leave, and that whatever happens in the house is godly. It is the remembering and the submission to God that is important.

So is that it? Everything a *Bar Mitzvah* needs to know? Not nearly. There are numerous commandments recorded in the *Torah* that defy anyone living today to keep. Things like sacrificing a goat in the Tabernacle on Yom Kippur when there is no Tabernacle or Temple. Things like asking a priest to diagnose your skin lesion when there is no functioning Levitical Priesthood. During the time of Moses when such commandments were given they could all be performed because God provided the infrastructure to be able to do them. But what is a *Bar Mitzvah*, a “Son of Commandment” to do about such commandments today? The answer lies in two Scriptures – one from the Book of Jeremiah and the other from the Kitvey B’rit Chadasha: first Jeremiah 31:31-34:

“Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah -- not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My Torah 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. For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.”

So Jeremiah prophesied a time in the future (which is today) when God would make a new covenant with the Jewish people whereby we could be so intimate with God, that the commandments of *Torah* would reside within us and we would not have to look outside our hearts and minds to know God’s will. The second Scripture, 2 Timothy 3:16-17, tells us:

“All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

So everything the *Bar Mitzvah* needs to know to serve God can be found in Scripture, and all Scripture is profitable for all the things that were listed. That means that even those commandments which are archaic, and today cannot be complied with literally, are usable if we know how to interpret and adapt them. And what is the key to knowing how to adapt God’s law? According to Jeremiah, it is God Himself who visits us personally and places His *Torah* in our hearts and minds, and [Ezekiel 36:26-27](#) further explains that this is accomplished through God giving us a new heart and a new spirit, and then putting His own Spirit, the *Ruach Kodesh*, within us:

“I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them.”

Most of Judaism still waits for a *Mashiach* who will send God’s Spirit to do what Ezekiel prophesied, but we who are Messianic Jews know that the *Mashiach* has already come, that He is Yeshua, and through Him we enjoy an intimacy with God that only the *Ruach HaKodesh* can provide. And so, Justin, you truly have everything you need to be a *Bar Mitzvah*, a blessing to your family, and a light to those around you. So in the name of Yeshua, I ask God to grant you long life, health, happiness, and His peace that surpasses all understanding as it guards your heart and mind in Messiah your entire life.

Shalom, Shalom.