

Ask the Rabbi

Submitted Question #8:

I would consider it a great blessing if you could tell me where the Messianic Jewish Congregations stand regarding buying and selling on the Sabbath (Nehemiah 10:31 and Nehemiah 13:15-22). Are there any other relevant scriptures or articles pertaining to this subject matter?

The Rabbi's Answer

There is no uniform understanding of this across Messianic Judaism. Within my congregation, some of us purchase on the Sabbath, and some of us abstain. I imagine it is similar elsewhere. There is also the matter of what is being purchased that figures into some people's decisions – i.e. whether the purchase is avoidable by doing it earlier in the week or postponing it until after the *Shabbat*.

Follow-up Comment

Thank you so much for your prompt response. Our Messiah said "if you love Me, obey My commandments," and so that was the whole premise of my question based on the two references/scriptures. I just want to love my King with all my heart and all of my soul and to seek truth. There are times when certain scriptures are allegoric or are written in parables but there are times when the scriptures actually interpret themselves. I thought that was the case with these two scriptures. I guess since you have members who buy and others that do not I suppose that these verses are not as straight forward as I thought.

The Rabbi's Follow-up Response

The reasons that the Scriptures you mention and the commandments (derived from the *Torah*) given at Mt. Sinai are not all applicable in a literal way today are:

1. The commandments were given as part of the Mosaic Covenant and we are now in a New Covenant. Scripture says that the First (meaning the Mosaic) Covenant is passing away (Hebrews 8:6-13). The book of Hebrews was written a long time ago and, by this time, the Mosaic Covenant might have already passed away. That is something that is argued both ways. Remember though, a covenant is an agreement between parties – in this case between God and the Israelites. Don't make the mistake of equating "covenant" with "law" or "Scripture." God's Scriptures never pass away (1 Timothy 3:16-17).
2. The commandments of the *Torah* were given at a time when all of God's commandments could be obeyed literally. Today, we have no Temple, no operating Levitical priesthood, and no sacrifices, so a very large number of the Commandments given at Mt. Sinai cannot be literally obeyed.
3. The commandments of the *Torah* were given to those gathered at Mt. Sinai (mostly Israelites but also Gentiles who joined them), so it is legitimate to ask how the commandments apply to today's Jews, non-Jews, and those of us who live in the diaspora. For example, is it God's law for the USA that all land on the North American continent should revert to its original owners every 50 years?

For these reasons, the commandments given under Moses must be properly applied to our New Covenant circumstances, and the only way for us to be sure that we properly applying them is by praying for the Holy Spirit to reveal the right application to each individual, and for each circumstance.

The laws of buying and selling (including the commandment to abstain from work on the *Shabbat*) were societal, and many of them can only be applied in a community where everyone (or most everyone) adheres to them. Such is the case in much of Israel and in Orthodox Jewish neighborhoods in the U.S. In the Washington Metropolitan Area in which I live, I suppose I can decide to not leave my home on *Shabbat* or to walk the thirty miles to my synagogue but, as soon as I leave my home, I am using the services of those who are maintaining our infra-structure such as police, parking attendants, sanitation workers, etc. Suppose I forget to fill my gas tank. Should I skip services or fill my tank and go to services? If my car breaks down on the road, should I use my cell phone to call for help? After all, those who will come to help me will be working on the *Shabbat*. What if I encounter a toll booth on a road on which I am driving? Should I pay the toll to the attendant who is laboring on *Shabbat*? When I attend Messianic Jewish conferences, should I refrain from eating because the food is cooked and served by persons who are drawing a salary on *Shabbat*?

One final thought: In most cases, we have to discern whether a certain commandment of the *Torah* that was given under Moses was intended only for Israelites (Jews), or whether it was intended for the other nations as well. No ambiguity exist, however, regarding the *Shabbat* commandment (Exodus 20:8-11), since we have Isaiah 56:1-7 that says "yes!"

I regret that there is no easy answer to your question regarding purchasing on the Sabbath; that is why we must rely heavily on the Holy Spirit to guide us each step of the way.