

A Frank Discussion of God's Law

Note from the author

The following address was given to an assembly of the Houtz's friends who gathered together to witness our daughter Tikvah's Bat Mitzvah. The group was diverse in doctrine spanning from those who proclaim the law to be of no consequence for the Christian to those who follow strictly the modern Pharisaic interpretation of Torah. Considering this diversity, there was much room for misunderstanding. The following address was given to clarify our position to those who might misunderstand and to instruct our daughter in the proper handling of these holy instructions.

Tikvah's Bat Mitzvah

Jezreel, my two-year-old, sometimes takes naps in the afternoon. It seems that this practice often depends on whether I will be able to lay down with him and **cause** him to lay still. Without this forced calm imposed upon this stormy two year old he probably will not sleep.

There are ways that I prefer to initiate our relationship prior to a nap. I prefer to pick him up and give him a few kisses, then ask him if he will snuggle with Daddy for a few minutes. If this technique is successful, he will willingly lay still and go to sleep. However, if he is thrust onto the bed with the statement "see if you can get this baby to sleep," he has now been challenged and will struggle till his eyelid drops for the last time. This can take several hours with me holding him tight while he squirms and struggles against my grasp. At the end of this time I need a nap and the little one may be so worn out that he sleeps until bedtime only to arise again and keep Mary and I up for several hours trying to reinstate sleep.

One day when I was trying to convert one of the later force-induced techniques into the preferred manner, I held him still just long enough to tell him I loved him. He replied, "Mommy loves Jeremiah." This seemed to be a counterpoint to me loving him. In his mind I was saying I loved him and this precluded that I did not love Jeremiah, Eleazar, Tikvah, and Eleeyah. It also meant that Mommy didn't love him. I assured him that this was not the case. I loved all his siblings and Mommy loved him. This was a new thought for him, but I doubt that it has fully developed yet.

A few months ago Mary was giving Eleeyah, our four-year-old, a bath. Attempting to protect her privacy she closed the bathroom door. After just a minute Mary thought she had better check on Jezreel who was to be in the living room with Tikvah and Eleazar. Unfortunately he was nowhere to be found. She looked in the yard and couldn't find him.

Before she went up the hill to see if he had gone over to visit his grandparents she took the prudent first step of taking the 500 foot winding drive toward the road. It was unlikely he went that direction, especially since it involved traversing great mud puddles or tromping through weeds that towered over his head. But when the road finally appeared in her view there was a

truck stopped at the side and a woman standing by the road holding Jezreel. She reported that he was standing in the middle of the road. His short legs only needed about a one-minute head start to run swiftly into mischief. His mother retrieved him from the arms of his rescuer and took him back to the house to put the fear of Mom, the road, Dad, and whoever else she could use to change this behavior. She tried to explain in terms that a two-year-old could understand, plus immediately acquired a latch which locked into the house all people shorter than five feet--*WELL*, at least this makes the two-year-old noisy enough while moving the stools to the door that it gives us time to react.

Mary was surprised to discover that some of her fear tactics had worked. When Mary was attempting to impute rest on Jezreel at a later naptime she told him that she loved him. He responded, "I don't want to go to the road. I don't want to get killed. Because I wuv you Mommy." Unfortunately this confession has not initiated a complete turn around in action. While he has never returned to the road, he has recited the same confession about other forbidden practices, such as getting in cars and has not exhibited any hint of perfection concerning actions.

Wouldn't it be a wonderful world if children would recognize the God-given authority of parents, understand that the rules and instructions given by parents are for the children's good, and willingly embrace and submit to those rules and instructions?

No parent likes imposing rules by force. I particularly am displeased with that method. I have a pride of strong willed lions which means that almost every edict will be challenged over and over again until either their or my will is broken. Being the parent, I feel it my God-given responsibility to never allow my will to be the one that is broken. This imposes a weight of performance that is exhausting. If Mary and I look like we haven't slept in months, it could be a fact. This brings me to a verse in Scripture, "He who keepeth Israel never slumbers nor sleeps." I have always considered this to be speaking of God, but since discovering that we are a part of Israel, I have been able to identify with this verse on a more personal level. God calls Israel a "stiff necked people." We are!

Ideally our children should immediately embrace and receive our instruction. In like manner, ideally we should embrace and receive the instruction of our loving heavenly father. The Hebrew word for instruction is Torah. Unfortunately this is most often translated as law, not instruction. The forceful interpretation of this word comes from who we are, a stiff necked people. Since God has the power to call all things into existence, His instruction is law, in the same manner as the law of gravity. It will be such, without regard to our thoughts on the matter. God's instruction is just plain fact; or the law of how things work. As parents, our instruction may not be fact, but it is wisdom that would do our children well to heed. God's Torah is fact and it is incumbent upon all His children to submit because He is omniscient and perfect in all his ways. God's primary purpose for the Torah was to give instruction to willing submissive people. We get a vision of this in Deuteronomy.

^{NKJ} **Deuteronomy 11:18** "Therefore you shall lay up these words of mine in your heart and in your soul, and bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your

eyes.”

This phrase “in your heart” speaks of a willing submission to God’s instructions, not a contentious forced submission. The submission is to be received because of love and relationship, not because of domination and power.

It is the Father’s will, much like my own, to have a peaceful, non-contentious relationship with His children. I much prefer loving Jezreel to sleep rather than bodily imposing his sleep. However, I will win, and so will our Heavenly Father.

Confession is good and far superior to a lack of confession. When Jezreel says, “I don’t want to go to the road,” I know we are making progress. But true compliance occurs when his actions immolate his words. Until that time discipline is necessary to enforce the restrictions that I have put upon him.

Most people recognize that the Torah of God came as a package deal. One cannot break one edict and then claim to be perfect in regards to Torah. This necessitates Yehoshua’s (Jesus’) perfection, being without sin in all the aspects of the law, in order to complete the work required of Him. In like manner, if we are not to receive the judgment of the law, we also are to be perfect in all our ways. Since our imperfection was established long before we saw the need to be perfect, we are left with the judgment of the law and no hope of ever re-establishing our perfection before God.

An idiom often misunderstood in modern times is the phrase, “under the law.” This does not refer to application or jurisdiction. God’s law applies as far as His jurisdiction extends. God has jurisdiction over all; and the law is wisdom without regard to our lineage. Since He is the author of all things, He has authority over His entire creation. That is one large jurisdiction! So as far as it is stated, the law is applicable to all within the Jurisdiction of God.

General application should not be confused with specific application. When Exodus 28 gives rules for priestly garments, it is not applicable to those who are not priests. In like manner when the sacrifices were moved to Jerusalem, we were to no longer offer sacrifices anywhere else. When the temple was destroyed in 70 AD, our modus operandi was removed, thus we could no longer offer sacrifices. To uphold the law was to not change it; hence our obedience was tied directly to the availability of the proper tools. So we must keep in mind that the law often states to whom it applies and by what method or implement can be used. Only those general laws or those specific laws that include us are the laws applicable to us.

It is said by Rambam, a Jewish Rabbi of the twelfth century, that there are 613 laws of God. I believe he added a few that fit his paradigm and left out a few that didn’t, but for the most part the number is fairly close. It would be an unusual person who had more than 400 specific laws that apply to him. In reality probably no more than a couple of hundred apply to any one person due to specificity and availability. Most recognize that the forbidding of murder is a law that applies to all, but there is debate about the specific application of other laws and I am not positive that I have a full understanding as to the application of each. However, I am willing to

share my thoughts with anyone who cares to listen.

Now that we have discussed what the phrase “under the law” is not referring to, let’s look at the proper idiomatic understanding. If a person was accused of transgressing the law and was being judged according to its tenants, he is said to be “under the law.” In other words he was being judged accordingly and will receive or is receiving the prescribed punishment.

When Yehoshua (Jesus), the second Adam, arose from the dead, he gained the right to perfect the entire creation. We look forward to this perfecting and rejoice that we will be included in this future event. We were¹ “under the law,” (tried and convicted) but were set free from the eternal condemnation demanded (pardoned) since Yehoshua has risen from the dead and has the ability to perfect *us* with the remainder of creation. A pardon is the removal of judgment, not the abrogation of the legal edict. It has not now become wise to break God’s instruction, rather in God’s grace He is willing to suspend the sentence.

God’s judgment is redemptive, not punitive.

I desire that Jezreel stay away from the road because of the danger. This does not mean I wish to have him killed if he goes to the road. I would do whatever is necessary to keep that from happening. However, I will not remove the rule as a means of keeping him safe. God has not removed instruction to keep us safe, He has instead given a method to re-instate ones perfection. So due to His work, we are no longer under the (punishment of) law, rather God’s grace toward us is allowing an alternative that He has personally worked out.

There are many misunderstandings that abound concerning how law applies to the modern Christian. People often tell us we are going back “under the law.” I am not sure that this is even possible. “Under the law” means to be condemned by it, and after the Lord has chosen to perfect us can we somehow remove ourselves from his choice?

We can mistakenly desire to be judged according to the law. If we do so, we are of the mistaken notion that we will do very well when we are compared to the law. Some people adopt this notion concerning themselves but in reality their actions show that they only wish to dominate and rule over others. These were the actions that Yehoshua (Jesus) and Shaul (Paul) were addressing when confronting the Pharisees. These particular Pharisees were using the law as a measuring stick, not proving their perfection, but trying to prove their superior obedience as compared to others. It was a comparison system that no one else could ever win, since not only did the Pharisees claim the superior manifestation of the law, they also claimed the exclusive right to interpret the law and explain to all others the meaning. This mimicked playing a card game with an opponent who has sole authority to make up the rules as the game progresses. In such a case, the rule maker will always develop rules according to his present hand. Some Pharisees were using the law as a means of control and superiority. Yehoshua and Shaul strongly addressed this, yet too often it is understood as referring to the law rather than to the

¹ *Were*, meaning prior to Yehoshua changing our heart. I mean that we were under the law in our present generation, not that mankind was under the law in a previous dispensation.

unauthorized actions of the Pharisees.

Upon our recognition of what God has done for us, usually we no longer desire the evil ways that contradict Torah. Most of us do not have a desire to murder with exception to a few brief moments in a marital debate or an overly long tight enclosure with five children on a trip. Truly our heart has been turned to God at least as far as we understand His desires for us.

There are varying interpretations that give different explanations concerning which laws do and do not apply to the believer in Yehoshua (Jesus) today. For the most part we all agree on the basics, but some of us have different lists and cause suspicion by having an unusual understanding. By having a Bat Mitzvah, we are calling my daughter a “daughter of the commandments.” This could open us up to criticism for returning to the law. If I were calling her to the law so that she might prove her superior execution of righteousness thus forcing God to give her eternal life, this criticism might be valid. Often within our family, a child will use this technique to manipulate a parent. They use our laws rather than God’s, but the result is the same. Our four-year-old constantly likes to point out that the two-year-old is climbing on the car. What is not stated is the numerous times this same four-year-old has been climbing on the same car. What she considers important at this time is that she wasn’t doing so at this very second.

The law can be used to justify one’s current actions, but few wish to use it in the manner of the covenant. The covenant doesn’t have a statement that ‘two out of three isn’t bad’, or ‘as long as your associates are worse, you deserve God’s favor’. This would only encourage us to hang out with a bad crowd so we can properly measure up. The covenant is a package, so when we embrace it, we should make sure our motives are correct.

We must not follow the example of the previous mentioned four-year-old, nor the particular Pharisees that Yehoshua (Jesus) and Shaul (Paul) dealt with. We must embrace the law in the manner I suggested proper for children. It is ideal for children to lovingly submit the rule of their parents; recognizing the parent’s authority and knowing that all the parent’s instruction is for their good. In like manner, the Bat Mitzvah is a recognition that God has the authority to command us, and that our best interests are the focal point of His commands.

God much prefers to put us at rest by kissing us and entering into a loving relationship, not by physically overpowering us and restraining us until we rest. He does not like holding a large stick over us threatening to use it, instilling fear of consequences. These are available if necessary, but not the preferred method. God has a job for Israel and He intends to do what is required in order to get submission. He has told us to put these laws on our hearts. This is the intent of this Bat Mitzvah. It is to proclaim a willing acceptance of the commandments and promises offered to the people of God.

We recognize that the child who obeys is no more of a child than the one who constantly challenges his parents. The question is not who is really the child, it is merely what kind of relationship do we prefer with the Father? An obedient heart recognizes that included in this covenant are those commands we understand as well as those we may never understand.

Tikvah has studied the 613 laws of God codified by Rambam.² She was required to write a Scripture verse supporting each one. Those that didn't have Scripture supporting them are questionable. She was to note those that were questionable. It may have been a good exercise for her to write an argument concerning their application to her. Maybe a further assignment is needed.

Instructions for Tikvah at Her Bat Mitzvah

Tikvah, before we continue with this Bat Mitzvah, I must caution you against one particularly misunderstood law. It is often proclaimed, but rarely followed. It is the commandment, ^{“NKJV} **Exodus 20:7** " You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold *him* guiltless who takes His name in vain." There is some question as to the meaning of vain. Some say that it is *speaking* the name. Since to profane something is to make it common, the common usage of a name could be considered to be profaning it. Others state it is *not speaking* the name properly. They would insist that mispronouncing, or substituting HaShem or Adonai is profaning it because we have chosen some other way of expressing it rather than the true way God gave it to us. We are then faced with two seemingly contradictory explanations and are forced to make a choice because there is only one proper way and the other is the evil. Since the command isn't clear, how do we make the proper choice? If we are truly faced with these two options, then it is a serious thing to get this one right.

Both of these views stem from the same error. Their adherents look at Scripture much like Jezreel interpreted my comment that I loved him. Remember, he responded, "Mommy loves Jeremiah." He was making an opposition that was not truly there because of his immature understanding. To get an understanding of the profaning of God's name we must know the definition of the word *name* as it is found in Scripture. God's name is not the verbal words that we use to call upon Him. It is His essence, attributes, dominion, authority, creation, jurisdiction, deeds, property, family and all that is called to mind at the uttering of His name. Both the Greek word **ὄνομα**³ (onoma) and the Hebrew word **שֵׁם** (Sheim)⁴ have this larger meaning. The *law*

² Rambam (Rabbi Moshe Ben Maimon also called Maimonides) was a 12th century Jewish Bible scholar who wrote an extensive commentary on the Jewish interpretation of the law and compiled the original codification of the 613 laws of God.

³ **3686** ὄνομα onoma {on'-om-ah}

Meaning: 1) name: univ. of proper names 2) the name is used for everything which the name covers, everything the thought or feeling of which is aroused in the mind by mentioning, hearing, remembering, the name, i.e. for one's rank, authority, interests, pleasure, command, excellences, deeds etc. 3) persons reckoned up by name 4) the cause or reason named: on this account, because he suffers as a Christian, for this reason

Origin: from a presumed derivative of the base of 1097 (cf 3685); TDNT - 5:242,694; n n

⁴ **8034** שֵׁם shem {shame}

Meaning: 1) name 1a) name 1b) reputation, fame, glory 1c) the Name (as designation of God) 1d) memorial, monument

Origin: a primitive word [perhaps rather from 07760 through the idea of definite and conspicuous position; TWOT - 2405; n m

Usage: AV - name 832, renown 7, fame 4, famous 3, named 3, named + 07121 2, famous + 07121 1, infamous + 02931 1, report 1, misc 10; 864

of God is a part of His name. It is his dominion, jurisdiction, authority and teaching. To profane the law is to profane the name of God.

1. When we use it as a measuring stick to place ourselves ahead of all others, thus manipulating others with our proclamations, we are profaning the name of God.
2. When we believe that we can manipulate God into giving us eternal life because we are **so good**, we are profaning the name of God.
3. When we put endless demands upon fellow brothers and sisters so that they can be accepted by us, we profane the name of God.

Teaching that law is right, and even teaching your understanding doesn't profane God's name, but using it as a tool to manipulate others does. So handle this holy instrument with proper caution. Law is much better to follow than to impose. It is better used as a guiding line rather than a driving rod. It is a greater surgical knife in the hands of the humble than in those of the prideful. If it is used to draw people to God, helping them to recognize their need, it is handled rightly. However, if it is used to draw people to us and to force them to submit to our understanding, it is being profaned by us, as is the name of God.

So as you embrace this wisdom (Torah) from God, use it to measure and correct your life, but always recognize that others older and wiser than you may see it differently and it is God's duty to determine who needs correction. The true understanding of law should never develop pride, rather it should humble all who study and recognize their personal inadequacy. The embracing of law should never be burdensome unless your view has been skewed by misunderstandings.

The law of God does not burden, rather it sets free an individual from the burdens and pressures of this world imposed by those whose motives are questionable. For example, "Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy..." delivers us from those whose focus is always set toward riches. One who is covetous toward money will hire someone and work him unmercifully until he is burnt out and incapable of doing his work. It even removes his ability to enjoy time off work. We cannot be trapped by such a person, because he wouldn't hire us. We can never give him what he wants, because we have already given a portion of what he wants to the Lord. By this law we are freed to have a day of rest, to be rejuvenated for the remaining six days. We are freed from the bondage of Mitzraim⁵ (double bondage).

Frank Houtz

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⁵ Mitzraim is the Hebrew word for Egypt and means double bondage. The first line of the ten commandments states, ^{Deu 5:6 KJV} "I *am* the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage."

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