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THE NEW SHOFAR

It (torah) is a tree of life to those who grasp her, and whoever holds on to her is happy.

Torah: Covenant and Law

Jesus was not opposed to the Law – (*the Torah* in Hebrew). What he did find unacceptable was the way in which the scribes and teachers were interpreting the Torah that had been given to Moses and the people on Mt Sinai. Those leaders were using the Torah as a kind of verbal club, as a weapon for trapping and beating Jesus.

The Greek word used to translate the Hebrew word *torah* is *nomos*. That Greek word means some kind of enacted law, a custom or human convention. It was clear from the *nomos* itself what was expected of men and women and could be measured. *Nomos* represents very much the way our western cultures understand laws.

Jewish rules and laws

Jews have traditionally placed great importance on abiding by the laws and rules set forth in the Torah and regard it as a religious duty to follow them. The Jewish Law is called the **Hal-a-kah**, which means quite literally *that by which one walks*. It is comprised of the laws laid out in the Torah and Talmud and interpretations of these laws. After the Jews had been scattered and the city and temple destroyed, it was the Torah observance that defined, identified and united their communities. It continued to shape them as a people set apart for the saving works of God in creation and in human history.

Almost every aspect of a Jewish life and every act of everyday living — from eating to dressing to working — has some religious aspect attached to it. Every part of life is governed by strict religious practices and rules. Faithful Jews understood their duty of obedience to all that God demanded of them. It was their sacred duty to observe the Sabbath and Jewish holidays, eat certain foods, performing specific rituals like the lighting of candles, and attending the synagogue. There are special blessings that are uttered when a Jew eats, smells a flower or puts on clothes in the morning. Torah was inseparable from everything else in living as a Jewish man or woman. And this truly was the way Jesus understood *Torah*. It was a way of living in the world. The Law was focussed on living in the way God created us to be living in creation and was built upon the understanding that we stand as a people *called*, a people *destined* to be God's light in the world.

There was also an *oral torah*. The Jews believe that this too was handed on to Moses. Without this oral torah it would be well near impossible to fulfil the demands of the Torah, to apply them to the way they were living each day.

The biblical Law is God breathing into our souls

When we read the Torah (the first five books of the Bible) there are commandments and laws but an even greater variety of **gaps**. The **torah** is not always unambiguously clear in setting down the way these divine commands are to be carried out. God expected the Law to be lived in its entirety by the people who had entered into covenant with him, people who

were promising lives of faithfulness. Hence the need to offer guidance on how best a life of obedience can be lived out.

These **gap fillers** are called the *Talmud*. *The Torah* contains 613 commandments but not all of these are as clear and precise as they needed to be in the changing social circumstances of Jewish communities. The rabbis would have a question asked of them and they would ponder the answer in the light of answers given by rabbis from the time of the end of the Temple in Jerusalem (70AD). They would write down their experiences of trying to live out the Torah of Moses and share these struggles with their students as an answer to the question. Those students in turn would teach their families and students and so the tradition goes on down through the ages. Here is an example. With the development of electricity to the family home, the rabbis had to come to a decision about whether turning the power on was breaking the commandment: *keep holy the Sabbath day*. Was it work -lighting fires was a prohibited form of working. What the written Torah did not flesh out, the Talmud did. The answer was that turning on the light was work and could not be carried out on the Sabbath. They could leave their lights switched on from the day before Sabbath but not actually turn them on. They filled that gap and possible disobedience averted.

Legalism gone mad? Not really. It reflects a people struggling to live under God in all things, in every aspect of their lives. Faith was a way of life and not a collection of beliefs.

Torah is a way of being in the world

These rabbinical teachings did not always agree with other rulings and the faithful had to struggle with balancing out conflicting teachings. But why is this important for us to understand? Because the Torah was given to us (meaning humanity) through the Jews as a means of teaching and guiding us throughout our lives. In a world that knows not God; a world offering a plethora of “ways” to fullness, peace and joy, the Torah stands as a rock, a safe home and sure guide. The thing about Torah is that it is nowhere near enough to simply know it. Torah is to be lived. It is a way of living under God that brings enlightenment, that guides us in the way of the Almighty.

The Torah is a unique gift in that it establishes God as the creator of all things, addresses the fall of humanity and evil in the world; it tells of the Israelites becoming God’s chosen people, and it introduces the covenants God made with His people. The Torah teaches the laws and guidelines of God, and truly captures how God loves and cares for His children, even when they are sinful and idolatrous.

Jesus and the Torah

Judaism engages human beings on both levels of their existence – body and spirit and these two realities dance together in a harmony that reflects life as God created it to be; life as we see Adam and Eve living in the garden before the Fall. We all have that divine spark within us and it is living the Torah that enables this spark to flame up into a bushfire revealing the face of God in whatever it is we are doing. The key to tapping into this grace and power of God is Jesus himself. Christians read the Torah through the lens of Jesus, for he is the gift from God revealing all Truth. Apart from Jesus the Torah remains sterile, a collection of regulations impossible to live out in their fullness. In the end, the entire Torah can be summarized as loving God and loving our brothers and sisters.