

Spiritual Insight For The Week

with Rabbi Bentzion Kravitz

Jeremiah's Eye-Opening Change of Heart



A valuable lesson I learned growing up is that our actions have consequences.

For example, if you treat someone kindly, they will most likely be kind to you. On the other hand, if you are mean toward someone, they will avoid you and may treat you harshly.

This week's Torah portion, *Bechukotai* (Leviticus 26:3-27:34), begins with a description of the consequences and remarkable benefits the Jewish people will receive if they

faithfully follow the commandments. For example, God will not only provide for our needs, but He will also "*Eliminate wild beasts from the land and no armed forces will pass through your land*" (Leviticus 26:6).

Eliminating wild beasts demonstrates that, if God chooses, He can change the very nature of physical existence. These changes are part of the messianic promises, which include bringing tangible and everlasting peace to the world, as it says, "*Nation shall not lift up sword against nation; neither shall they learn war anymore*" (Isaiah 2:4).

After describing the blessings the Jewish people will receive if they follow the commandments, the Torah describes the trials and tribulations that will befall the Jews if they abandon their covenant with God. Yet, as terrifying as these warnings sound, there is a light at the end of the tunnel. God promises that even if we renege on our obligation to follow the commandments, He will never abandon us or annul His eternal covenant with the Jewish people.

God assures us of His promise with these words, "*Yet in spite all of this, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not despise or reject them so as to destroy them or annul My covenant with them*" (Leviticus 26:44).

God's unwavering commitment to His covenant with the Jewish people refutes those Christians who claim that God broke His covenant with the Jews and replaced it with a "New Covenant." Moreover, God's promise to the Jewish people proves that neither the New Testament nor any other book will ever supersede the Torah.

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In a desperate attempt to prove their point, missionaries misquote the Prophet Jeremiah.

In the Hebrew original, Jeremiah reinforces the statement in Leviticus, stating that although the Jewish people may break the covenant, God will remain faithful to us. Jeremiah uses the metaphor of a faithful husband to his wife, and states it this way, "*I will make a new covenant with the House of Israel.... It will not be like the covenant I made with their fathers, when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, a covenant which they broke, though I remained a husband to them*" (Jeremiah 31:31-32).

In the New Testament, Jeremiah's words are mistranslated. Instead of saying that God remained a faithful "*husband*" to the Jewish people, the New Testament says that God "*turned away from [rejected] them*" (Hebrews 8:9). Furthermore, the New Testament claims, "*By calling this covenant 'new,' He has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and outdated is ready to vanish*" (Hebrews 8:13).

The New Testament blatantly distorts God's promise of an eternal covenant and contradicts both Leviticus 26:44 and Jeremiah 31:31-32. Some missionaries claim that the rabbis conspired to hide sensitive passages from the Jewish people to shield them from statements that appear to support Christian beliefs. In the case of Jeremiah 31, nothing could be further from the truth.

In what is considered the centerpiece of contemporary rabbinic Torah commentary, Rashi (Shlomo Yitzchaki 1040 –1105) does not avoid mentioning Jeremiah 31 and the "new covenant." On the contrary, commenting on the verse, "*I will maintain My covenant with you*" (Leviticus 26:9), Rashi cites the new covenant mentioned in Jeremiah and explains that it will not be nullified by God.

A careful reading of Jeremiah proves that this covenant will not replace the original; rather, it will be "new" because it will enhance the original. Not only will God keep His promise to never break it, but even the Jewish people will no longer break it. This enhancement will be possible because in the future, God will remove our inclination to rebel against Him (Ezekiel 36:26-27), and consequently we will serve God wholeheartedly. This change of heart is another example of a transformation that will take place in the messianic age.

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Additionally, a similar theme is found in the prophetic reading [haftorah] associated with this week's Torah portion. Jeremiah tells us that in the messianic age, the nations of the world will also have a change of heart. His eye-opening statement declares, "*To you the nations will come from the ends of the earth and say: 'Our fathers have inherited nothing but lies, worthless things in which there is no profit. Will a man make gods for himself, and they are not gods?'*" (Jeremiah 16:19-20).

Maimonides (Moses ben Maimon 1138- 1204) cites this passage as proof that in the messianic age, nations who believed that God appeared in the form of a man, will acknowledge their mistake, and they will turn to the Jewish people for guidance. This will fulfill the passage, "*In those days ten people from every language of the nations will grasp the corner of a Jew's garment and say, 'Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you'*" (Zechariah 8:23).

Each week I receive emails from former Christians who are disillusioned with their faith and are turning to Judaism for direction and meaning. Jews and non-Jews alike can share in the spiritual beauty of the Torah and serve God by practicing their respective commandments.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Bentzion Kravitz

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P.O. Box 351235, Los Angeles, CA 90035 • 310-556-3344
info@JewsforJudaism.org • www.jewsforjudaism.org/donate • www.SMARTalks.com