

## Spiritual Insight For The Week

with Rabbi Bentzion Kravitz

### She Cried When He Said Her Parents Are in Hell



Sarah grew up in Brooklyn, surrounded by Jewish friends and family. Her parents were highly educated, and, although the family was not religious, they were proud Jews.

When Sarah encountered a Jew who believed in Jesus, she was skeptical at first, but she was drawn to the love and acceptance her new friend provided.

For years, she read the Bible, attended church, and considered herself more Jewish than the religious Jews

from her old neighborhood. At one point, she joined a “Messianic synagogue” in which they called their leader a “rabbi” and practiced Jewish rituals. Sarah believed she had found a “perfect solution” for her nagging guilt about abandoning her Jewish heritage.

When Sarah’s parents died within a year of each other, she asked her messianic “rabbi” to say the mourner’s Kaddish prayer for them. Sarah cried when he told her, “There is no reason to say Kaddish since your non-believing parents are burning in hell.” Sarah was devastated by the callousness of this statement, and she started to entertain doubts about Christianity.

Sarah purchased a Jewish Hebrew-English Bible to reexamine the passages she thought proved that Jesus was the messiah and the only savior from sin. When Sarah compared the Jewish Bible with her Christian translation, she noticed some significant differences.

She wasn’t sure what to make of them until an acquaintance suggested she contact Jews for Judaism. She reached me by phone and asked for my viewpoint on several biblical passages that Christians refer to as “proof-texts.”

Every week for nearly a year, we studied the Bible over the phone. I patiently explained how the passages had been mistranslated and taken out of context. I also demonstrated how the correct translation validated Judaism’s spiritually fulfilling path to God.

Considering the hurtful remark about her parents, the passage that confused Sarah the most is in this week’s Torah portion, *Acharei* (Leviticus 16:1–20:27). The verse states, “*The life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement on your soul*” (Leviticus 17:11).

Christians taught Sarah that we are sinners, and, as a result of the original sin, we are born separated from God. They told her Leviticus 17:11 teaches that the only way to achieve forgiveness from sin was to offer blood sacrifices upon the Temple Altar. Additionally, they explained that since the destruction of the Temple, we can no longer offer sacrifices. Therefore, they erroneously concluded that Jesus died to shed his blood as a final sacrifice and believing in him is the only way to achieve forgiveness and avoid eternal damnation.

As Sarah and I studied the Bible in-depth, she discovered that the Christian explanation of sin and salvation was wrong, for many reasons.

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Leviticus 17:11 does not say that blood sacrifices are the ONLY way to make atonement, or, as missionaries like to say, *“There is no remission of sin without the shedding of blood.”* It was the apostle Paul who made this statement, although significantly different, as the New Testament states, *“according to the law, ALMOST all things are cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness”* (Hebrews 9:22). Missionaries omit the word “almost” because it contradicts their argument.

According to the Bible, not all sins require a sacrifice. Furthermore, atonement is achieved in various ways, including giving charity (Exodus 30:16) or burning incense (Numbers 16:47). Additionally, if someone could not afford an animal sacrifice, the person could *“offer fine flour”* (Leviticus 5:11).

A sin sacrifice was only brought as an atonement for unintentional sins (Leviticus 4) and did not automatically guarantee forgiveness of the sin. With statements such as, *“Will God be pleased with thousands of rams”* (Micah 6:7) and *“What are your multitude of sacrifices to Me?”* (Isaiah 11:1), the prophets repeatedly criticized individuals who relied solely on sacrifices for forgiveness and atonement. Sacrifices that were not preceded by repentance were meaningless; as King Solomon says, *“The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination”* (Proverbs 15:8).

The primary way to receive forgiveness has always been through repentance and acts of righteousness. As it says, *“The sacrifice acceptable to God is a contrite heart”* (Psalms 51:17), *“To do righteousness and justice is more acceptable to God than sacrifice.”* (Proverbs 21:3), and *“Atone for your sins with righteousness”* (Daniel 4:27).

### **Atonement can be achieved in a variety of ways.**

The story of Jonah is another striking example of people receiving forgiveness without blood sacrifices, as it says, *“When God saw how they turned from their evil ways, God changed His mind about the calamity”* (Jonah 3:10). In situations when Temple sacrifices are unavailable, we are instructed to *“offer prayers in place of sacrifices”* (Hoshea 14:3). These prayers serve to arouse remorse and repentance in the same way the preparation of the sacrifice formerly did.

When King Solomon prophetically foresaw a time when the Jews will be taken into captivity and left without a Temple or sacrifices, he told the Jewish people to *“pray toward the land, city, and house [Temple] ... and God will hear their supplications and forgive them”* (I Kings 8:46-53). This verse is the source for the tradition of facing toward Jerusalem when Jews pray.

I pointed out to Sarah another glaring contradiction in Christian theology: Paul says Jesus is the final sacrifice, and after his death, *“there is no longer any offering for sin”* (Hebrews 10:18). This statement contradicts numerous verses that speak about a Third Temple and the restoration of sin offerings, as it says, *“On that day the prince [messiah] shall provide for himself and all the people of the land a young bull for a sin offering”* (Ezekiel 45:22).

Sarah understood that repentance has always been the most essential way to return and be close to God, as it says, *“Return to Me, and I will return to you”* (Malachi 3:7). Furthermore, Sarah was reassured that the Bible does not teach eternal damnation and that her parents’ souls were with God, as it says, the body *“returns to the ground it came from, and the soul returns to God Who gave it”* (Ecclesiastes 12:7).

Sarah returned to Judaism right before Yom Kippur. She went to services to pray and ended up crying once again. However, this time she described her tears as cleansing and joyful because she had rediscovered her Jewish inheritance and a personal and spiritual relationship with God.

Shabbat Shalom,

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