



May 2012

Erev Shavuot
(Pentecost, Weeks)
May 26, 2012



Dear Lovers of God's Word,

What is Torah?

This month as we celebrate the Giving of the *Torah* on Mt. Sinai, beginning on the evening of May 26, 2012, we want to present God's Law to you in its proper context: Love. It was in love that God gave the *Torah* to His People, Israel. What exactly did He give them? The word *Torah*, often translated "law" in our English Bibles, actually means "instruction" or "teachings." God's desire as a loving Father was to teach a newly-redeemed people how they should live. The Israelites had no idea how to do this; they had been slaves for four hundred years!

When we use the word *Torah*, we are referring to the first five books of the Bible, Genesis through Deuteronomy (also called the Pentateuch). However, the term *Torah* is often used to mean more than just the first five books of the Holy Scriptures. To traditional Jews, it can refer to all Jewish law, as recorded in both the Bible and the Talmud. In other words, *Torah* can include the oral traditions of the rabbis. *Torah* can also mean the complete Old Testament, or *Tanakh* in Hebrew. In traditional Jewish thinking, the word *Torah* can refer to all authoritative teachings of the rabbis. This is unfortunate, since it gives equal weight to both God's divine Word and the words of the rabbis. We believe that, while the *Torah* was written by Moses as he received it from God on Mount Sinai, the oral *Torah* was not received directly from God, and therefore is not authoritative. The Oral Law is not the Word of God.

The Torah and Love

The Giving of the *Torah* to Israel on Mt. Sinai has been portrayed in Jewish houses of worship throughout the centuries as a wedding, with God as the Bridegroom and the People of Israel as His bride. The *Torah*, then, is a marriage contract, or *ketubah*, presented to the bride during the ceremony. In some Sephardic Jewish communities, a special *ketubah* celebrating the marriage of God and Israel is read before the ark on Shavuot. Verses such as the following are included: "*I will betroth you to Me forever; Yes, I will betroth you to Me in righteousness and justice, in loving kindness and mercy; I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness and you shall know the LORD*" (Hosea 2:19-20). The word "know" used here is "*yadah*," the same word used in Jer. 31:33-34 indicating a deep intimacy and knowing of another, as when Adam "knew" Eve, and she conceived (Gen. 4:1).

A portion of a "*Ketubah le-Shavuot*" from a Sephardic prayer book expresses the love relationship identified with the Giving of the *Torah*: "*The Bridegroom (God), Ruler of rulers, Prince of princes, Distinguished among the select, Whose mouth is pleasing and all of whom is delightful, said unto the pious, lovely and virtuous maiden (the people of Israel) who won His favor above all women, who is beautiful as the moon, radiant as the sun, awesome as bannered hosts: Many days wilt thou be Mine and I will be thy Redeemer...I will honor, support, and maintain thee and be thy shelter and refuge in everlasting mercy. And I will set aside for thee...the life-giving Torah by which thou and thy children will live in health and tranquility. The bride (Israel) consented and became His spouse*" (from **The Shavuot Anthology** by Philip Goodman).

In response to His loving selection of her, Israel said, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do" (Ex. 19:8). Unfortunately, Israel broke her marriage vows over and over again. Did God stop loving Israel? No. He loves the People of Israel up until this very day. Israel—or any of us—may be unfaithful, but the God of Israel remains Faithful (2 Tim. 2:13)!

The Yoke of the Torah

For the past fifteen years, we have had a small wooden replica of a "yoke" hanging in our home as a reminder of its spiritual significance. Although it is generally thought of in a farming context, "yoke" is very much a Bible concept, both in the *Tanakh* and the *Brit Hadasha*. A yoke implies submission and discipline. It constrains and directs. Animals yoked together must cooperate and keep in step with one another. A yoke is placed on the neck, symbolic in Scripture of the "will."

There is an idiom known as the "yoke of the *Torah*," which was well-known at the time of Yeshua and is still part of Judaism today. The basis for this concept is found in Deuteronomy 11:13-21. This includes God's exhortation to obey the commandments, beginning with, "*Therefore you shall love the LORD your God, and keep His change, His statutes, His judgments, and His commandments always*" (Deut. 11:1). Israel had been redeemed from slavery by the mercy and grace of God. In response to His loving act, they voluntarily submitted themselves to taking on the "yoke of the commandments," which consisted of observing 248 positive laws directing people what to do, and 365 negative precepts telling them what they should not do. This yoke was accepted, **not in order to be redeemed, but because they had been redeemed**. When Israel accepted the "yoke of the *Torah*" at Mt. Sinai, she was saying "yes" to being spiritually yoked together with God in marriage. This "yoke" is said to beautify Israel, as if it were a necklace of jewels.

Israel could not keep the whole "Law." The yoke of rabbinic conditions and fences placed around the *Torah* became too heavy, and even the best-intentioned, most godly Jew could not fulfill all the *mitzvot* (commandments) in his own strength, nor could he become more righteous through the performance of good deeds. God's solution to this dilemma was yet to come: the Messiah, the One who perfectly fulfilled the Law.

Yeshua was offering His Jewish listeners a better and easier way when He said to them, "*Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and my burden is light*" (Matt. 11:28-30).

What was Yeshua's easy yoke? He summarized the heart of God and the Torah of God by condensing it from 613 to 2 commandments: "*You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets*" (Matt. 22:37-40). Both center on LOVE. The Apostle Paul says it succinctly in Romans 13:10 "...Love is the fulfillment of the law." Love for God. Love for others. The easy yoke.

There is a beautiful simplicity in Yeshua. With Him, it's all about the heart. It is not, as some insist, that there was no grace and love in the *Torah*, but God had not yet fulfilled promises such as Jeremiah 31:33, which awaited the "*fullness of time*." When Yeshua came, He fulfilled the sacrifices of the *Torah* in a supreme act of sacrificial, unconditional love. This was God's gracious gift to all mankind. That is why the Apostle John said in His Gospel, "*For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ (Yeshua HaMashiach)*" (John 1:17). Through Yeshua's sacrifice, the Law, or *Torah*, moved from the outside to the inside—from tablets of stone to the human heart.

The Greatest Commandment

We have often wondered why Yeshua cited Deut. 6:4-5 (the Shema) as the greatest commandment, instead of the First of the Ten Commandments, *"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before Me"* (Ex. 20:2-3). Upon comparing the two portions of Scripture, we have come to the conclusion that they are both saying the same thing with the central thought being: WORSHIP GOD ALONE. Deut. 6:4 in Hebrew is, *Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheynu Adonai echad*. This is usually translated, "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one," but rabbis such as the famous Rasbam (12th century) have translated the Shema as, "Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone." This makes the proclamation qualitative instead of quantitative, with the emphasis on loving ONLY ONE GOD, **THE ONE AND ONLY GOD**, rather than an emphasis on GOD AS A UNITY, ONLY ONE (as opposed to three). [Believers over the centuries have been accused of worshipping three Gods, which is not the case!] We believe that God is a unity, albeit a complex unity. Messianic Jews recite the Shema on a regular basis.

The first sentence of the Shema, which occupies the central place in Jewish religious thought, actually sums up the meaning of the first and second commandments. The God who brought Israel out of Egypt is the ONLY TRUE GOD. To worship any other god is idolatry and spiritual adultery. The God of Israel is jealous in His love for His people and actually demands, even commands, love in return: *"You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might"* (Deut. 6:5).

How can we love God in the way in which He wants to be loved? The answer is found in the verse following the exhortation of Deut 6:5: "And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart..." (Deut 6:6). When we read, study, and immerse ourselves in God's Word, we get to know Him. The more we know Him, the more we love Him. You can't really love a person totally and unreservedly until you know them. God has revealed Himself through His *Torah*, *Tenach*, and *Brit Hadasha*. The more we understand who God is and what He has done for us, the more our love for Him grows.

God continues exhorting Israel (and all believers) through all generations to demonstrate their love for Him by teaching His words diligently at all times and in all situations. Love, in the Hebrew mind, is always an action word. We see this in Yeshua's conversation with Simon Peter: *" 'Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me more than these?' He said to Him, 'Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.' He said to him, 'Feed My lambs' "* (Jn. 21:15). God alone is God. We come to understand His will, His ways, and His heart through immersing ourselves in His Word. Then we are able to teach that Word to others, to nurture and nourish them just as the LORD has nourished us.

The Yoke of the Kingdom

Commandment #1 gives us further insight into how we can love God in the way in which He deserves to be loved. Our love is a response to what God has done for us. In the Brit Hadasha, John explains it thus: *"We love Him because He first loved us"* (1 Jn. 4:19). God is a God of relationships (*"I am the LORD your God"*) and action (*"who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage"*) Ex. 20:2). God wants his People to forever remember what He did for them when they were slaves to a cruel human taskmaster. He purchased them (Ps. 74:2) in the same manner that bridegrooms in ancient times purchased brides. The bride price for Israel was the blood of all the firstborn in Egypt. Since they were purchased, Israel belonged to God. He paid the *mohar*, or bride price, for her. This demanded loyalty, consecration, and gratitude for having been chosen and set free. God wanted Israel's confession to be: "I, Israel, take Thee יהוה to be my ONLY GOD!" Embracing this truth as well as reciting the words of the Shema (Deut. 6:4-9) is known as accepting the "Yoke of the Kingdom of God," or the "Yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven." This has been done twice daily by observant Jews throughout the centuries, in the morning upon waking and before retiring at night. The words of the Shema are recited before those of Deut. 11:13-21 in order to take upon oneself the Yoke of the Kingdom before taking on the Yoke of the Commandments. Love first. Action next. Obedience precedes both.

We believe that the two yokes of loving God and keeping His commandments were pleasing to Him. However, in practice, the Yoke of the Commandments became laborious, difficult, and demanding. Religious authorities turned what God meant as freedom into a rigid set of rules and regulations—man's interpretation of how various commandments should be followed. A striving for an impossible self-righteousness entered in. That is why we hear Yeshua saying quite often, "You have heard that it was said...but I say to you..." (Matt. 5:21-22). He was giving His listeners the correct interpretation of the *Torah*. He was, in effect, "fulfilling the law." When rabbis of Yeshua's time misinterpreted a passage of *Torah* or added demands and burdens that God never intended, they were said to be "destroying the law." Yeshua said, "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill" (Matt. 5:17).

None Like Our God!

Every Friday morning from 10-11:30 A. M., we conduct a Shabbat service at a local assisted living facility here in Fort Lauderdale. Jewish seniors, most over seventy-five years of age, sing with all their heart, "Eyn keloheynu, eyn kadoneynu" ("There is none like our God, there is none like our Lord"). This is one of the best-known songs in Jewish synagogue liturgy. It proclaims the utter uniqueness of the Creator, the one true God of the universe. We explain each week that this God, the God of Israel, is Mighty, Holy, Awesome in praises, Working Wonders, Faithful, Loving and Alive! He gave the *Torah* in love, and He also sent the Messiah in love. Please pray that the eyes and ears of these precious elderly Jewish people will be opened to hear and understand these truths.

The Greatest Commandment by Irene Lipson goes far beyond what space allows in this letter. We highly recommend this book by a seasoned believer in Yeshua. Irene gives an in-depth analysis of the Shema, delving into what it means to love God with all your heart (*b'kol l'vav'cha*), with all your being (*b'kol nafsh'cha*), and with all your resources (*b'kol m'odecha*). Let May be the month in which our love for God blossoms! He loved us extravagantly by sending His only son, the **Living Torah**, into this fallen world to be the final sacrifice for sin. Such great love deserves a response: total yielding to the Beloved. The *Ruach HaKodesh* makes this possible.

Praying for Love to increase in your life and ours,

Neil & Jamie

P.S. NEW! A bracelet bearing the 10 Commandments from the Torah is available this month in either silver or gold. (a lovely way to wear the Word of God)

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LOCAL TV STATIONS

AIRTIME:	STATE:	CITY:	STATIONS:
TUE 6:00 PM	AK	North Pole	KJNP TV 4
MON 10:00 PM	FL	Tampa/St. Pete.	WCLF TV 22
THU 11:30 AM	FL	Miami/Ft. Laud.	WHFT TV 45
SUN 1:30 PM	FL	Tallahassee	WVUP TV 45
SAT 10:30 PM	FL	West Palm Beach	WFGC TV 61
SUN 2:30 PM	GA	Columbus	WYBU TV 16
SUN 1:30 PM	IA	Dubuque	KFXB TV 40
SUN 1:30 PM	MO	New Bloomfield	KNLJ TV 25
SUN 4:00 PM	NJ/NY	NYC/New Jersey	WMBC TV 63

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 SUN 4:00 PM Ch. 93 or 900 - WMBC
 MON 8:30 PM Ch. 376 - CTN (Christian Television Network)

Dish Network

MON 8:30 PM Ch. 376 - CTN (Christian Television Network)



CABLE NETWORKS (EST)

AT&T U-Verse

FRI 5:30 PM Ch. 575 - WORD Network

Comcast Cable

FRI 5:30 PM Ch. 486 - WORD Network

Time Warner Cable

FRI 5:30 PM Ch. 386 - WORD Network

For other cable networks check local listings....
