

“To Fulfill the Law - A Rabbinic Idiom”

This weeks reading is from Parashat Ki Tisa (*Shemot / Exodus 30:11-34:35*). The portion opens with the Lord instructing Moshe to take a census of the people (*30:12*). The Scriptures say that and each person is to give a ransom (half-shekel) to the Lord when numbered. Moshe instructs to make the bronze laver (*30:17-18*), and the perfume for incense to be used to make the cloud within the tabernacle (*30:23-33*). Moshe went up the mountain (Sinai, *32:1*) and spent a considerable amount of time on the mountain. The people then asked Aaron to make gods for them to worship. Aaron took gold from the people and made a golden calf for them to worship (*32:2-6*). The Lord seeks to destroy the people and Moshe reminds the Lord of the covenant promises He had made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (*32:7-13*). Moshe descends the mountain and destroys the two tablets (Aseret Hadibrot) because of the people’s sin (*32:14-19*). Moshe grinds the golden calf into fine powder, mixes it with water, and causes the children of Israel to drink it. He then instructs the people to dedicate themselves to the Lord as he returns in an attempt to make atonement for their sins (*32:29-30*). Moshe asks to be blotted out of the book of life if the Lord will not forgive the people (*32:31-34*). Moshe asks that the Lord’s presence come with the Children of Israel (*33:12-17*) and he asks to see God’s Glory (*33:18*). The Lord shows Moshe His glory and declares who He is, merciful, gracious, slow to anger, loving, and having grace, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin for thousands (*34:6-7*).

Reading through the Torah portion this week, notice how the people did not understand what it means to obey God, or what it means to fulfill the Law. One of the major concepts found within the rabbinic literature is the concept of what it means to fulfill the Torah. Had the people understood the meaning of “to fulfill the Torah,” would they have taken better counsel to not make the mistake they did asking Aaron to build them a golden calf?

ספר שמות פרק לא *Shemot / Exodus 31:1-3*

א וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: ב
 רְאֵה קָרָאתִי בְשֵׁם בְּצַלְאֵל בֶּן-אוּרִי
 בֶן-חֹר לְמִטֵּה יְהוּדָה: ג וְאִמְלֵא
 אֹתוֹ רוּחַ אֱלֹהִים בְּתַכְכְּמָה וּבְתוֹנָה
 וּבְדַעַת וּבְכָל-מְלָאכָה: *31:1 Now the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, 31:2
 ‘See, I have called by name Bezalel, the son of
 Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah. 31:3 ‘I
 have filled him with the Spirit of God in wisdom,
 in understanding, in knowledge, and in all kinds of
 craftsmanship, (NASB)*

The Torah portion for this week speaks of the Lord telling Moshe that He had called by name Bezalel to construct the Tabernacle. Based on the opening verse from Parashat Ki Tisa, the rabbis comment in Midrash Rabbah to say the following:

Midrash Rabbah Shemot, Parashat 39, Part 2

And the Lord spoke unto Moshe, saying See, I have called by name Bezalel (Shemot / Exodus 31:2. Rabbi Tanhuma son of Abba began thus, Then did He see it and declare it; He established it, yea, and searched

it, and declared it (Job 28:27). *Had it not been that God foresaw it that Israel would receive the Torah, He would not have created the world; for it says, Then did He see it, and declare it.*

...

Rabbi Hoshaya said, Anyone who has knowledge but lacks the fear of sin, really has nothing, just as a carpenter who has no tools with him is not a real carpenter; because the bolts which guard learning are the fear of sin, as it says, And the fear of the Lord is its treasure-house (Isaiah 33:6). Rabbi Johanan said, If one knows the Torah but does not fulfill it, it were better for him that he had not been born, and that the after-birth in which he lay had been turned over his face; for this reason does it say, and unto man He said, Behold the fear of the Lord that is wisdom. Rabbi Hayya son of Abba said, What is the meaning of The fear of the Lord, that is wisdom? God said, I will give you a reward in return for your good deeds; the reward being Torah as it says, And unto man He said, Behold the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to depart from evil is understanding. The second half of the verse means, If you depart from evil, then will I raise men from you who will understand Torah. This we have derived from Jochabed and Miriam who feared God, as it is written, And it came to pass, because the midwives feared God, that He made them houses (Shemot / Exodus 1:12). Rabbi Berekiah, in the name of rabbi Hiyya son of Abba said, The reward of fear is Torah, for the Lord raised up jochabed Moshe, who had the distinction of having the Torah ascribed to him, as it says, Remember the law of Moshe My servant (Malachi 3:22), and also, Moshe commanded us a law (Devarim / Deuteronomy 33:4). As for Miriam, because she departed from evil and from sin, God raised up from her Bezalel, who attained to wisdom and understanding. Hence does it say, See I have called by name Bezalel, etc. And I have filled him with the Spirit of God, in wisdom, and in understanding, and in knowledge.

ב רָאָה קְרָאתִי בְשֵׁם בְּצַלְאֵל בֶּן-אֹרִי, The midrash begins by interpreting the Scripture, *ב רָאָה קְרָאתִי בְשֵׁם בְּצַלְאֵל בֶּן-אֹרִי, 31:2 'See, I have called by name Bezalel, the son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah. (NASB) It appears that the rabbis recognize the significance of the name Bezalel (בְּצַלְאֵל) which means "in the shadow of God," which is indicated in the midrash by the statement, "Had it not been that God foresaw it that Israel would receive the Torah, He would not have created the world."* The idea is that Israel's acceptance of the Torah was what led the Lord to having created this world as we know it. The important concept being taught here is that one stands in the protection of God, in His shadow, by walking in His ways, in the way of God's Torah. This idea is taken further in the midrash indicated by the rabbis comments that say, *"Rabbi Johanan said, If one knows the Torah but does not fulfill it, it were better for him that he had not been*

born, and that the after-birth in which he lay had been turned over his face; for this reason does it say, and unto man He said, Behold the fear of the Lord that is wisdom.” The illustrations used of the carpenter who has no tools, is paralleled to one who calls himself a child of God and does not walk in God’s ways. Rabbi Johanan says that knowing the Torah should be followed by fulfilling it. The fear of the Lord is also paralleled to the one who fulfills the Torah. Let’s discuss what it means to fulfill the Torah?

The Apostle Paul said to the *Romans 13:10 Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.* (NASB) What does it mean to fulfill the law (Torah)? The phrase “fulfill the Torah” is a rabbinic idiom that is still in use today. The word “Law” or “Torah” is understood from the sense of teaching, guidance, and instruction, rather than the “legal regulation.” Note from last weeks Torah portion, the Torah is understood as the light of God which provides for us guidance and instruction for living. Commentators have often understood the Torah to refer to the first five books of the Bible but tend to look at the Torah purely from the perspective of being a legal regulation rather than a loving God giving His children loving instructions for living. According to the Scriptures, we also know that the word Torah may be used as a reference to the Scriptures in general.

In Yeshua’s time, and amongst Jews today, the Torah is a very positive thing, the Lord God gave us His instructions for living because He loves us and wants the best for our lives. As a result of this, the rabbis made it their goal to understand these instructions and to teach people to live by them just like we read in *Ezra 7:10*.

Ezra 7:9-10

7:9 For on the first of the first month he began to go up from Babylon; and on the first of the fifth month he came to Jerusalem, because the good hand of his God was upon him. 7:10 For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the Lord and to practice it, and to teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel. (NASB)

Looking at the Hebrew translation of *Romans 13:10* (האהבה לא תרע לרע על כן האהבה) (קיום התורה כלה: we can see the translation of “to fulfill” or “fulfillment” is taken from the word קיום which means לקיים “to fulfill, carry out, hold, save” not to destroy. This word means to uphold or establish as well as to fulfill, complete, or accomplish. In rabbinic thought, the phrase “fulfill the Law” is often used as an idiom to refer to the proper interpretation of the Torah so that people can follow in God’s ways in the way that He had intended. The difficulty today is that there are some interpretations that are designed to undermine the meaning of the Torah by misinterpreting it. The rabbinic concept of to fulfill the Law is how to properly obey God’s commands. Take for example, the mitzvah concerning adultery. One could interpret this command to say that this is specifically against one’s spouse, and not about pornography, thus, looking at pornography is OK. When Yeshua declared lust as also being a violation of the command (*Matthew 5:28*), he was clarifying the true intent of the Torah, looking at pornography is also adultery, thus, Yeshua clarified the true intent of the law in the sense of the rabbinic understanding of “to fulfill the Law.” Yeshua was teaching in *Matthew 5* how to properly obey God’s

command. In a similar manner, the rabbinic understanding of “*fulfilling the Law*” is within this context. Another example may be found in *Mishnah, Horayot 1:3*. (Note that the *Mishnah* is a composition of Jewish law that contains sayings from 200 BC to 200 AD.)

Mishnah, Horayot 1:3

If the Sanhedrin gives a decision to abolish (uproot) a law, by saying for instance, that the Torah does not include the laws of Sabbath or idolatry, the members of the court are free from a sin offering if they obey them; but if the Sanhedrin abolishes only one part of a law but fulfills (lekayem) the other part, they are liable.

Mishnah, Pirke Avot, 4:14

Go away to a place of study of the Torah, and do not suppose that it will come to you. For your fellow disciples will fulfill it in your hand. And on your own understanding do not rely. (Here “fulfill” means to explain and interpret the Scripture.)

Here we another sense of the phrase “*fulfill the Law*,” is given which means “*to carry out a law*,” or what it means to actually do what it says. In the rabbinic rulings near Yeshua’s time, we can find many examples of this usage, such as from *Mishnah, Sukkot 2:7*, “*If this is how you act, you have never in your whole life fulfilled the requirement of dwelling in a sukkah!*” Here, one rabbi is criticizing another’s interpretation of the Torah, which caused him not to do what it really intends. Teaching that Christians are not obligated to obey the Torah is a gross error if the Apostolic writings are written from the rabbinic point of view of doing what the Torah really intends in the fulfillment of the Torah as opposed to its being destroyed or done away with.

Another example may be taken from *Mishnah, Pirke Avot 4:9*, which reads, “*Whoever fulfills the Torah when poor will in the end fulfill it in wealth. And whoever treats the Torah as nothing when he is wealthy in the end will treat it as nothing in poverty.*” Again, the rabbis discuss “*to obey*” as opposed to the modern mindset that “*fulfill*” was meant to do away with something. In the Apostolic Writings, these two usages of “*fulfill*” appear to be key to understanding Yeshua’s words on the passage in *Matthew 5* that begins with him speaking about “*fulfilling the law.*”

Matthew 5:19

Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. (NASB)

¹⁹ὅς ἐάν οἷν λύση μίαν τῶν ἐντολῶν τούτων τῶν ἐλαχίστων καὶ διδάξῃ οὕτως τοὺς ἀνθρώπους, ἐλάχιστος κληθήσεται ἐν τῇ βασιλείᾳ τῶν οὐρανῶν: ὅς δ’ ἂν ποιήσῃ καὶ διδάξῃ, οὗτος μέγας κληθήσεται ἐν τῇ

βασίλεια τῶν οὐρανῶν.

לכן מי אשר יכר אחת מן המצות הקטנות האלה וכן ילמד את בני האדם קטון יקרא במלכות השמים ואשר יעשה וילמד אותן הוא גדול יקרא במלכות השמים:

Here we find two actions (i) “*practicing*” and (ii) “*teaching others to do the same.*” These two are a parallel to the two idiomatic senses of “*fulfill,*” while the words “*break*” and “*teach others to break*” are the idiomatic senses of “*abolish.*” Yeshua’s statement about fulfilling and abolishing the Torah is a parallel to this sentence. Remember that parallelisms were also a very common rabbinic method for emphasizing an idea in the Bible. By understanding the idiom of “*to fulfill,*” we see that Yeshua was emphatically stating his intention, which was to explain God’s word and live by it, and not to undermine it. Based upon this analysis, to teach that the Torah is abolished or done away with is to undermine the true meaning of God’s word.

The question then is if the Torah is God’s instructions for how to live, then are Gentiles entirely excluded from its wonderful truths? In both the epistles of Paul to the Romans and Galatians, following Paul’s having spent time arguing over the halachah regarding how to observe the Torah and its relationship to salvation in Yeshua the Messiah, he answers this question by speaking about how the Gentiles can “*fulfill the Law*” according to *Romans 13:8-10* and *Galatians 5:14*.

Romans 13:8-10

13:8 Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law 13:9 For this, ‘You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,’ and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this saying, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ 13:10 Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law. (NASB)

Galatians 5:14

5:14 For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ (NASB)

The question about these Scriptures is whether “*Paul is using the idiomatic sense of ‘fulfill the Torah or not?’*” If Paul is using the idiomatic sense of “*fulfill the Torah,*” he is reiterating Yeshua’s key teaching about loving God and neighbor that says “*All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments*” (*Matthew 22:40*). These two commands are the summation of all the Torah. Remember, summation is a mathematical operation that is inclusive, not exclusive. There is Torah principle that is at work here in the sense that is taken from the opening chapters from Vayikra / Leviticus on the sacrifices which say “*if you sin, then you are to bring a sacrifice, etc*” The key word is “*if*” whereby the sacrifice would not be necessary “*if*” one did not sin. Under this Torah

principle, “Love” is the fundamental tenet or motivation that shapes how all laws are obeyed, we obey God’s law because we love Him. Paul also seems to be using the idiomatic sense of “*fulfill the Torah*” to say that loving your neighbor is actually the living out of the Torah. When we love our neighbor, it is as if we have done everything God has asked of us. The point is that a person who is honest and praiseworthy in all his dealings with others has truly hit God’s goal for how he should live. This may be achieved only by the power of the Holy Spirit working in our lives. Neither Yeshua or Paul canceled the Law, they actually taught and lived it to the utmost! In parallel fashion, Paul is saying that when we love our neighbor, we have truly achieved the goal of all the mitzvot. The motivation for obeying God’s commands should be out of our love for him, this is why the Apostle John wrote in his epistle in *1 John 5:1 Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and whoever loves the Father loves the child born of Him. 5:2 By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and observe His commandments. 5:3 For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome. (NASB)*

One of the major events in this week’s Torah portion is the story while Moses was up on the mountain receiving God’s laws, the people were getting anxious down on the plain. Moses spent forty days (*Shemot / Exodus 24:18*) up on the mountain with God, and by the end of that time, the people were beginning to think he had died or left them. The people then urged Aaron to make gods for them to follow. Since they were accustomed to having visual representations of gods in Egypt, this was the natural (but sinful) result of their thinking. Contained within the command to Love one another and to Love God, we are also to lovingly wait and be patient with both God and one another. The rabbinic concept of “*to fulfill the Torah,*” that is found within the fundamental tenet of Love for God and others, would have led to the people taking better counsel than to build for themselves a god of their own making. If they had known, would they have taken better counsel to not make this mistake? It is difficult to say. The first and greatest commandment indicates to us the most important, first, or chief manner in which the commands are to be observed, which requires the whole heart, soul, mind, and all the strength and power of a man. The principle duties and actions of a man, who is in a covenant relationship with God, hinge upon love, a love for both God and his neighbor. The causality of our lives is love, to serve the Lord in love, to serve one another in love, and to seek the Lord’s help to do the same. This command to love God and others was given to remind us of the centrality of the Lord and His Messiah in our lives. Without the power of the Messiah and the Spirit of God in our lives, it would be impossible “*to fulfill*” His commands which is the definition of a covenant relationship according to the Scriptures. The people did not understand this in Parashat Ki Tisa. We however do understand this today and we can thank the Lord in heaven for the mercy that He has shown us and the help He continues to provide to keep us on the path of righteousness and truth. Halleluia!