

What is the Meaning of an Obligation?

In this weeks reading from Parsahat Shoftim (*Devarim / Deuteronomy 16:18-21:9*), Moshe writes on the establishment of offices of administration, judges, and officers and the necessity for justice in our lives and in the land in which we live saying, כ צדק תרדף למען תחיה וירשת את- "16:20 *Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue, that you may live and possess the land which the Lord your God is giving you.*" (NASB) Are these commands obligatory in the Messiah Yeshua? What does it mean to be "*obligated*" to obey? We are told to judge with justice in the English translation, the Hebrew text states to judge righteously (משפט-צדק) where justice is an act of righteousness (16:18-17:20). Moshe continues by describing the portion to be given to the children of Levi (18:1-8), he speaks about the nations and what they do is forbidden and detestable (18:9-14), and to not bear false testimony (19:14-21). We are told what to do when going out to battle (20:1-20), and how to make atonement for a crime (21:1-9). Based on this week's portion of how we are to conduct justice according to the righteousness of God, the question is "*are we obligated to obey the Torah commands being in a new covenant relationship with the Lord in the Messiah Yeshua?*"

ספר דברים פרק טז Devarim / Deuteronomy 16:18-20

יח שפטים ושטרים תתן- 16:18 *You shall appoint for yourself judges and officers in all your towns which the Lord your God is giving you, according to your tribes, and they shall judge the people with righteous judgment.* 16:19 *You shall not distort justice; you shall not be partial, and you shall not take a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and perverts the words of the righteous.* 16:20 *Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue, that you may live and possess the land which the Lord your God is giving you.* (NASB)

Some people would say that we are not “*obligated*” to obey the Torah because Yeshua had fulfilled the Torah. The understanding of Yeshua “*fulfilling*” the Torah has been discussed in a previous Torah portion (see *Bits of Torah Truths 2015, Parashat Ki Tisa, To Fulfill the Law – A Rabbinic Idiom* for more info).

To begin, what is the meaning of the word “*obligation?*” The word “*obligation*” is a noun meaning, “*an act, or course of action to which a person is morally or legally bound; a duty or commitment.*” The origin of this word is from Middle English in the sense of making a “*formal promise.*” An obligation therefore is a course of action that someone is required to take, whether legal or moral. So for example, the question is, “*as believers in the Messiah, are we obligated or required to live a moral life?*” Think carefully how you answer that question. Note that one does not earn entrance into heaven through the merit of living a moral life, but that living a moral life is a part of the covenant agreement and effects our relationship with our Father in heaven and our relationship with Yeshua the Messiah. Did the disciples tell gentile believers that they would “*do well*” to live a moral life? (see *Acts 15*) No, they said these things you “*must*” do.

For perspective, there are many obligations in a normative context, such as obligations of etiquette, social obligations, and for example, in terms of politics, where obligations are requirements which need to be fulfilled as part of one’s duties in office. For example, regarding legal obligations, if one does not abide by the Law, one can incur a penalty for the non-fulfilment in the society that we live in. Another example, certain people are obliged to carry out certain actions for different reasons, whether by tradition or for social reasons. Regarding the Law of God, are we obligated (“*did we make a formal promise*”) to live a moral life before God when we placed our faith in Yeshua the Messiah? (*1 John 2:4 The one who says, “I have come to know Him,” and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him; NASB*) Is there a penalty for not living a moral life before the Lord God in heaven? (See *Hebrews 10*) As mentioned earlier, obligations may vary from person to person, such as in the case of a person holding a political office will generally have far more obligations than the average citizen, who naturally would have more obligations than a child, who would have more obligations than an infant, etc. Obligations relating to health and safety in the work place are

also an important perspective. In the work place, one agrees (*employer to employee verbal or written contract*) to function in the laboratory to ensure the safe operation of equipment, disposal of chemicals, and ensuring fire exits are not blocked etc. In addition, when raising a family, we are obligated to cover the electrical plugs so our children do not stick their fingers into the sockets and receive an electrical shock. In this case, one has not necessarily made a verbal “*formal promise*” to his/her child to protect them from electrical shock, it is just a natural consequence of a parents love for their children. As you can see, there are many examples that may be given in this world with regard to being “*obligated*” to doing something. The question is, “*are we obligated to obey God’s Torah?*” If one sets aside the Torah, to live according to his own will, what are the consequences of such actions? (See *Matthew 7* and the concept of ἀνομία which means “*the condition of without law or having contempt coupled with the violation of law.*”)

In this week’s Torah portion, we are given many “*obligatory commands*” from the Lord regarding how we are to live with justice and truth in the land that we dwell in. To begin, let’s summarize the Torah portion and discuss what it means to be “*obligated to obey the Torah?*” And do these commands “*really*” apply to us today?

Parashat Shoftim Summary

The administration of justice. The Lord commands and Moshe states, *16:18 “You shall appoint for yourself judges and officers in all your towns which the Lord your God is giving you, according to your tribes, and they shall judge the people with righteous judgment. (NASB)* The Lord commands that we are to appoint judges and maintain justice (*16:19*), not accept bribes, and to pursue justice so that we may live and possess the land. We are told not to plant trees or create pillars for pagan worship. The Lord tells us that we are to not give Him defective offerings (*17:1*), and that we are to remove what is evil from our lives and our towns (*17:2*). Note that this is related to having justice in the land and the communities that we live in

which is a necessity of living in a peaceful society. Justice is to be administered at the hand of two or three witnesses (17:2-7). In the case of homicide, we are told to perform an investigation (17:8-13). Moshe speaks of establishing a king (*leadership*) over the nation, and how a leader is to conduct himself before the people and before God (17:14-20). The leader is told to make a hand written copy of the Torah for himself in the presence of the priests, and to fear the Lord, to obey the Lord, to conduct himself righteously before the people and the Lord, and to not make his heart to be raised up in pride above his fellow man (17:20).

Moshe continues speaking of the Levites, for Israel to give their tithes and portions to the priests (18:1-8), so that they are able to survive, because we were told previously in the Torah that their portion is the Lord (*Bamidbar / Numbers 18:20, Devarim / Deuteronomy 10:9, Joshua 18:7*), they have no inheritance besides the service to the people and the Lord God in heaven. Moshe continues saying that we are not to learn to do the what the nations do (18:9, ט כִּי אַתָּה בָּא אֶל-הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר-יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ נָתַן לָךְ לֵאמֹר, (תִּלְמַד לַעֲשׂוֹת כְּתוּעֵבֹת הַגּוֹיִם הֵהֵם: In this command, we are forbidden from spiritism, divining, witchcraft, omens, sorcery, all of these things are detestable things to the Lord our God (18:9-14). The Lord God will raise up men (a prophet) who will lead the people, and the Lord will speak through them.

Moshe continues speaking of the cities of refuge (*Devarim / Deuteronomy 19*). The cities of refuge are designed for the purpose of “*a person is considered innocent before he has been judged to be guilty.*” Within the city walls, the man is safe from being killed by the blood avenger (19:1-7). The Lord again speaks of justice, and calls for an investigation to be made when one has been murdered to determine who is guilty of the crime (19:25-21). We are told that if a witness comes forward and is a false witness, how to deal with such a person, they will be considered guilty of the crime as if he had committed the

crime himself, for the purpose of purging the land of evil and corruption (19:18-19). In addition, the Torah speaks of setting markers to show the extent of one's property (19:14). Laws are also given for conducting warfare, what to do when going out to war (*Devarim / Deuteronomy 20*). We are told not to be afraid because the Lord our God is with us (20:1-4). Provision is given to the one who has recently married, who is afraid, or built a new house or vineyard, to go back to be with his wife and family. (20:5-9) We are told when approaching a city, to first offer peace (20:10), and what to do if the city does not want peace (20:12-16). The command to drive out the inhabitants of the land of Canaan is emphasized because the Lord had allow them 470 years to repent, and His judgment is now coming down upon these nations (20:17-20).

At the end of the Torah portion, we are told that one is to make expiation for a crime (*Devarim / Deuteronomy 21*) in the case that if a murder is not found, then the men of the closest city are to break the neck of a heifer and rinse their hands over the heifer declaring, "*Our hands did not shed this blood, nor did our eyes see it.*" They ask the Lord God in heaven to forgive the people of Israel whom the Lord has Redeemed, so the blood-guiltiness will be forgiven them, and to remove the guilt of the innocent blood from their midst (21:7-9).

Reading through these commands, are we really required to live with justice towards others? Should we obey the Torah command to establish officers, judges, and courts of law for the land and the people to regulate how one is to live? For example, "*do we really need to stay away from idolatry being in the Messiah Yeshua?*" Is justice really necessary for the land and the communities that we live in? Is justice really a necessity of living in a peaceful society? Should leaders be allowed to take bribes? As a leader, would it be OK to take a bribe because the Lord has forgiven you of your sins because of Jesus? Should murder really be investigated, is that just an option? Should a witness really be considered guilty of the

same crime if he is attempting to cover up the crime or help the criminal? Are these things obligatory for all believers who are in a covenant relationship with Yeshua the Messiah? I would say “*YES!*” Do you agree or disagree?

The disturbing thing is that frequently it is necessary to ask this question of Christians today. The average Christian will quote from Galatians which states the following:

Galatians 5:1-5

5:1 It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery. 5:2 Behold I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no benefit to you. 5:3 And I testify again to every man who receives circumcision, that he is under obligation to keep the whole Law. 5:4 You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace. 5:5 For we through the Spirit, by faith, are waiting for the hope of righteousness. 5:6 For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but faith working through love. (NASB)

The bondage that Paul is speaking of, is it really concerning the “*keeping*” of the command, or is there something else that he is talking about? *Galatians 5* explains what he is referring to, the act of keeping the Law for the purpose of self justification is the problem as described by the act of circumcision. The point and intent of the Torah was not for the purpose of self justification (pride) before God. Many theologies today (e.g. dispensationalism) suggest that man had to “*earn*” his salvation through the bringing of the sacrifice, whereas today we have Jesus and grace. The point is that Mercy, Forgiveness, and Salvation has always come by the way of faith which is followed by obedience. (*1 John 2:4*) Throughout his writings, Paul equates faith or faithfulness with obedience to the Lord God and he equates unbelief with disobedience to our Father in heaven. Paul never contrasts “*faith*” opposing “*doing good*” as the later theologies of Christendom do. Rather, he emphasizes the need for “*obedient faithfulness*” or the “*obedience of faith.*” (see *Romans 1:5, 2:8-10, 6-8,*

11:30-32, and 16:26, etc.) The goal of the Messiah is to lead the people to our Father in heaven, and to make atonement on behalf of the people before God. The Deliverer (sent by HaShem) motivates us, by the power of God's Holy Spirit, to turn away from our unbelieving transgression and to participate in a life of faithful obedience to our Father in heaven. Therefore, faith in the Messiah couples worshiping our Father in heaven and doing what He commands us to do. The book of Hebrews describes the importance and the place of the Torah in our lives today who are in the Messiah Yeshua, according to *Hebrews 7:22-8:13*.

Hebrews 7:22-8:13

7:22 so much the more also Jesus has become the guarantee of a better covenant. 7:23 The former priests, on the one hand, existed in greater numbers because they were prevented by death from continuing, 7:24 but Jesus, on the other hand, because He continues forever, holds His priesthood permanently. 7:25 Therefore He is able also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them. 7:26 For it was fitting for us to have such a high priest, holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens; 7:27 who does not need daily, like those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the sins of the people, because this He did once for all when He offered up Himself. 7:28 For the Law appoints men as high priests who are weak, but the word of the oath, which came after the Law, appoints a Son, made perfect forever. 8:1 Now the main point in what has been said is this we have such a high priest, who has taken His seat at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, 8:2 a minister in the sanctuary and in the true tabernacle, which the Lord pitched, not man. 8:3 For every high priest is appointed to offer both gifts and sacrifices; so it is necessary that this high priest also have something to offer. 8:4 Now if He were on earth, He would not be a priest at all, since there are those who offer the gifts according to the Law; 8:5 who serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly

things, just as Moses was warned by God when he was about to erect the tabernacle; for, 'See,' He says, 'that you make all things according to the pattern which was shown you on the mountain.' 8:6 *But now He has obtained a more excellent ministry, by as much as He is also the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted on better promises. 8:7 For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion sought for a second. 8:8 For finding fault with them, He says, 'Behold, days are coming, says the Lord, When I will effect a new covenant With the house of Israel and with the house of Judah; 8:9 Not like the covenant which I made with their fathers On the day when I took them by the hand To lead them out of the land of Egypt; For they did not continue in My covenant, And I did not care for them, says the Lord. 8:10 'For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel After those days, says the Lord: I will put My laws into their minds, And I will write them on their hearts. And I will be their God, And they shall be My people. 8:11 'And they shall not teach everyone his fellow citizen, And everyone his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' For all will know Me, From the least to the greatest of them. 8:12 'For I will be merciful to their iniquities, And I will remember their sins no more.'* 8:13 *When He said, 'A new covenant ' He has made the first obsolete. But whatever is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to disappear. (NASB)*

Note how the author of Hebrews states that Yeshua became the guarantee of a better covenant (7:22) and then contrasts this by the temporal inability of the present day priests in the Temple to make atonement eternally due to being limited by death (7:23-24). This contrast shows how Yeshua, who was raised from the dead, holds a permanent position being capable of saving us forever (7:24-25). The service of man on earth in the Temple is contrasted to Yeshua serving in heaven. The author references *Jeremiah 31* and the new covenant, the one upon which the Lord establishes His Torah in our hearts. The significance of this statement is that the eternal nature of God's Torah is emphasized *Hebrews 7-8* in the sense that the

Lord is the One who moves to write His Law on our hearts by the power of His Spirit, to give us a love and desire to draw near, to obey, and to overcome sin in our lives, and to love one another. Paul also wrote contrasting the Torah and its importance today in *Romans 7*, speaking of 4 laws, the (i) God's Law (Torah), (ii) the law of sin, (iii) the law of the mind, and (iv) the law of the body. In *Romans 7*, he parallels the Law of God to the law of the mind, we have the desire to obey, but the law of sin which is coupled to the law of the body, the flesh, prevents us from success in obeying the law of the mind, which is God's Torah that is written upon our hearts. The new verses old statements in *Hebrews 8:13*, are the method of contrasting these things, the greater hope that we have in the Messiah Yeshua, because of God's Spirit that dwells in us, empowering us to live lives that bring glory to his name, something that was more imperfectly done prior to the Lord writing his Torah on our hearts, making us completely new people. The comments of almost passing away is a reference to the Olam Haba when these thing will pass because there will be no sin in the world to come. The point is, God's Torah is eternal because it contains the holiness and righteousness of God which will never end!

In this weeks reading from *Parsahat Shoftim (Devarim / Deuteronomy 16:18-21:9)*, Moshe writes on the establishment of offices of administration, judges, and officers and the necessity for justice in our lives and in the land in which we live. Are we obligated to obey God's Torah? The Torah (*the law of Moses*) was not abolished by Yeshua's death upon the cross. Rather, it continues on, its commands being bound upon the believers in the Messiah and its necessity for each member of the body of Christ. This is why the Apostolic Writings, the words of Yeshua and the disciples affirm strongly to fulfill the commandments of God (e.g. *Matthew 5, 1 John 2:4*, etc). Yeshua said, *"Whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven! But whoever keeps them and teaches others to do the same will be great in the kingdom of heaven."* I strive and keep the Torah not because I want to be considered great in the Kingdom of Heaven, but because this truth is missing from the modern church theologies of the Messiah. The fact that many of the Torah concepts foreshadowed the work of the Messiah, does not nullify the Torah, rather, it makes the Torah even more beautiful and meaningful. The Torah speaks of believing and having faith in the God of Israel who places His righteousness upon His

people for the purpose of their salvation and life. This is exactly what has and is taking place in Yeshua, God's Messiah! Both Moshe and the rabbis speak of this. The Torah is not something to be ignored as a history book; it is something to be taken hold of and lived out for the glory of God because this is the will of our Father in heaven. Obedience to the Torah is not about earning one's salvation, it is about living for the Lord because we love Him and desire to live for him in the way that He has chosen and designed from since the beginning of time. Just as Paul said to the Ephesians in *Ephesians 2:10* *For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them. (NASB)*

