

Responding to Rabbinic Judaism

✖ When we are filled with the Spirit and our faith is centered on Yeshua, on all that He has done and will do for us, a wonderful transformation takes place: We are endowed with a renewed mind which can weigh viewpoints, practices, and philosophies (see Rom. 12:2).

In this regard, when we reflect on that huge corpus of literature known as rabbinic literature—and I include in this the prayer books—we are filled with what I would call profound ambivalence. What do I mean by this term?

A Personal Response to Rabbinic Judaism

As a young leader in the Messianic Jewish movement, I devoted myself to working my way through the Talmud, the primary multi-volume corpus of the application of Jewish Law. I was also taking a course in Jewish worship at Spertus College of Judaic that concentrated on the prayer books.

There is no doubt that I missed a great deal; the literature is difficult to interpret. However, I think I also gained a sense of what was going on. I was positively amazed at the doctrine of grace in the Siddur (the prayer book) and also some of the wonderful values reflected both in the Talmudic stories and also in the good applications of Torah.

On the other hand, the level of legalism, foolishness and superstition stunned me. These types of statements are never found in the Bible itself. Lest some think this is an anti-Semitic statement, I want to clarify that other religions and some sectors of Christianity entertain similar legalism and foolishness.

Defining Profound Ambivalence

I was beginning to respond with profound ambivalence. Ambivalence alone does not describe my response then or now. For example, when I went to buy a car a few years ago, I asked myself if I should buy a hybrid. I was ambivalent. It seemed good for the environment, but then would it be too costly? Would I recover the cost? Which way should I go? I decided against it. However, this was not momentous. It would not make a big difference in my life; I was simply ambivalent.

But when something is profound, it is important, deep with meaning and significance. Rabbinic Judaism is sometimes profound and is clearly important.

How we respond to it is very important, fraught with significance. Rabbinic Judaism has a depth of wisdom, a doctrine of grace and mercy and a projection of biblical values known to no other religion that does not embrace Yeshua and the New Covenant. It has been the instrument God has used to preserve our people with a basic historical unity. God could have used something else, but He used Rabbinic Judaism. If this were the extent of the matter I would want to embrace Rabbinic Judaism fully and then simply add to it our belief in Yeshua and the content of the New Covenant Scriptures.

However, when I study the passages that the detractors of Judaism point out, when I read the summary of Jewish Law known as the Shulhan Aruch, I say to myself, there is no way the amazing levels of legalistic hair splitting or ingenious ways to get around the Law can reflect the real desire of God.

We see such foolishness in discussions now in Israel as to whether or not the Sabbath elevator should be legal. The Sabbath elevator was developed so Orthodox Jews would not have to push a button to go between the floors of a high-rise building. By so doing they avoid deliberately making a fire (an interpretation of electricity).

Likewise, the 'eruv' –a legal fiction that unites many private

dwelling into a communal 'domain' of the synagogue so that children and the elderly can be pushed in buggies or wheelchairs to and from the actual synagogue on Shabbat—has been hotly argued for centuries. Does God really want our people to engage in debates like this? Yet such debate is part of the spirit of the Jewish tradition rooted in the Talmud. I think it is profoundly wrong.

Facing the Paradox

There is a paradox here: the excellent entwined with the foolish. When one tries to embrace all the right things in Rabbinic Judaism and squarely faces the wrong things, one comes to a place of profound ambivalence. There is profound respect for what is good and a profound distancing from what is bad.

Some years ago I was close to a Messianic Jewish leader whose orientation was not ambivalent. He was simply able to reject Rabbinic Judaism and felt fully justified. I could not do this and it was one of the key points of our disagreement. Others, largely I believe due to ethnic pride, find some way to totally embrace Rabbinic Judaism and are so enamored of it that they defend the indefensible.

Generally when I find people in the former camp, eventually they or their children will assimilate since there is not much value in living a Jewish life for its own sake; indeed, Torah patterns without Jewish tradition are colorless and unattractive. Even the secular in Israel, people who say they reject Rabbinic Judaism, often participate in traditions that have enriching color and emotional connection to our people. These practices are part of the rabbinic heritage.

The people in the latter camp who are overly enamored seem to lack a Yeshua-centered focus in their teaching and worship. The rich emphasis on New Covenant meaning is lost and everything is geared to extolling Judaism, a kind of ethnic

self-worship. This ethnic worship may be a reaction to the rejection we face from the larger Jewish community on account of our faith in Yeshua.

Through a renewed mind, profound ambivalence leads us to really embrace what is good in Judaism. On the other hand, such ambivalence also takes a stand where we maintain the centrality of Yeshua and the right emphasis on all the New Covenant benefits that are given to us. I only discovered the significance of this term “profound ambivalence” a few months ago, but I now realize that this term is an excellent descriptor of my perspective.

Why is Judaism the Way it is?

I have come to the belief that Judaism is as it is, partly through God’s grace at work in Jewish history. The Holy One did not leave Himself without a profound witness to truth. However because our people’s stand against Yeshua can be traced to the first century, to the Sanhedrin and then to the first school of Rabbinic Judaism in Yavneh, there is also judgment.

Jewish life did not have to be so restrictive and legalistic. Can we grasp the idea that Judaism shows a direction that was both positive and negative, both the grace of God and sowing and reaping—at the same time? I think if we study Judaism with a renewed mind we will understand this to be true.

A Plea for Wisdom and Discernment

In this regard, I again give a plea for a Messianic Judaism that is wise and discerning, that emphasizes the centrality of Yeshua in our worship and teaching so we might, as He taught us, “Honor the Son as we honor the Father. “Lastly, we seek a Messianic Judaism that demonstrates that the Messianic Jewish community is called to live and identify as part of the Jewish community and to demonstrate unity with the whole body of Believers.

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