

Traditions

Some Thoughts on the Place of Tradition in Torah Communities

An Article in Four Parts

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Part One

In our continuing dialog at Beit Hallel, the topic of “tradition” has often come up for discussion. Since we incorporate a good deal of the traditional liturgy in our services and practice many traditional aspects of Judaism, this topic is both important and natural as one which brings questions and deserves further investigation.

The first point I would like to make is that we must not begin our discussion about tradition with a jaundiced view of “tradition” in general. Some people have a “built in” suspicion of traditions for one reason or another, but we all should affirm that tradition may be either righteous or unrighteous, entirely dependent upon the tradition itself. We should not therefore fear tradition, but should, as in all cases, scrutinize traditions through the lense of the word of God. Those that align with the revelation of God are valid, and those which do not should be rejected. Once again God's word is the standard for what we believe and how we live (*halachah*).

The first place we should look, then, is in the Scriptures. What do we find there regarding tradition? The Hebrew word for tradition is מְסֹרֶת, *m'soret*, (from מָסַר, “to hand on” or “pass on”) from which we derive the name “Masorete,” the scribes who passed down the “tradition” of the received, Hebrew text of the Tanach. This Hebrew term is found only one time in the Tanach, at Ezekiel 20:37, in the phrase מְסֹרֶת הַבְּרִית, translated “bonds of the covenant,” but could just as well be understood as “tradition of the covenant.”

Since *masar* means to “hand on,” it stands to reason that the Hebrew for “receive” could likewise have the meaning “receive tradition.” The piel form קָבַל (*qibbel*) is used this way in later rabbinic Hebrew (*kabbalah* = to receive tradition). In the Hebrew Scriptures we find the term used only once in a context which would allow the meaning “receive tradition,” and this is at Prov 19:20, “Listen to counsel and accept instruction (מוֹסֵר), that you may be wise the rest of your days.” This “accepting instruction” is, as the Hebrew text indicates, “accepting the traditions which the father or mother teaches.” In fact, the Lxx actually includes the word “father” in this verse, understanding the Hebrew terms to denote family heritage/traditions which are taught from parent to child.

The Apostolic writings have corresponding terms to those I've mentioned from the Tanach. When Paul writes the Corinthians (1 Co. 11:23), “For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you . . . (also cf. 1Co 15:3), he is employing “tradition language,” for what he has received and what he is handing on is something other than written Scripture, yet something that in his mind has divine sanction and is therefore binding. In fact, what Paul had received by way of tradition regarding the events of Messiah's death and resurrection would, in the minds of the Messianic Jews, become Scripture at the hands of the Apostle, for the divine tradition which existed orally would become written under the divine inspiration of the Ruach. Such “received/delivered” language is standard in the Mishnah (note, for example, how the early chapters begin in *Perkei Avot*).

Yeshua spoke of the “traditions of the elders” (τῶν παραδόσεων τῶν πρεσβυτέρων) by which He most likely meant “teachings of a particular rabbinic tradition” (such as of the House of Hillel or the House of Shammai), and He spoke of them in a very negative way. When judged by the Pharisees as unrighteous for not maintaining the traditions, Yeshua responds (in Mark 7:6ff) by first quoting Isaiah (29:13):

And He said to them, “Rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: ‘This people honors Me

with their lips, But their heart is far away from Me.
But in vain do they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.'

He then continues:

Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men.
He was also saying to them, You nicely set aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition.

At first glance it may appear that Yeshua is against all traditions, i.e., if it's not written in the Tanach, He wants nothing to do with it. But reading the Gospels with open eyes just does not allow such a naive interpretation, for it is clear that Yeshua Himself participated in standing traditions! Note the following examples from the Gospel of Matthew:

Matt. 3:15 But Jesus answering said to him, "Permit it at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he permitted Him

Yeshua spoke this to John just before being baptized. Where in the Tanach is public *mikveh* commanded (=fulfilling all righteousness)?

Matt. 12:5 "Or have you not read in the Torah, that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple break the Sabbath and are innocent?

Where in the Tanakh does it say this? Does Yeshua refer here to the oral traditions as the Law? (Cf. b.Pes. 64a; b.Yoma 66a both of which touch on the controversy of whether or not the priests break the Sabbath when they do their work at the altar.)

Matt. 23:16 "Woe to you, blind guides, who say, 'Whoever swears by the temple, that is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple is obligated.' 17 "You fools and blind men! Which is more important, the gold or the temple that sanctified the gold? 18 "And, 'Whoever swears by the altar, that is nothing, but whoever swears by the offering on it, he is obligated.' 19 "You blind men, which is more important, the offering, or the altar that sanctifies the offering?

It appears that Yeshua accepts the rabbinic tradition that the Temple and the altar has sanctifying authority, but where would this be found written in the Torah?

Matt. 24:20 "But pray that your flight will not be in the winter, or on a Sabbath.

Why would Yeshua think "flight on the Sabbath" to be a problem? Where in the written Torah does it prohibit travel on the Sabbath? It appears that He has accepted the rabbinic tradition of how far one can walk on the Sabbath, i.e., a Sabbath's day journey, approx 2000 cubits (cf. Acts 1:12)

These few examples raise the question of what Yeshua accepted by way of the "traditions of the elders," why He accepted some and rejected others, and how this should affect our thinking on the whole issue of "traditions."

Part Two

In Part One we looked briefly at some of the biblical words and phrases used to denote the passing of traditions. Tradition, it seems, may be defined as "the passing down of elements of a culture from generation to generation, especially by oral communication" (*American Heritage Dictionary*). As it

relates specifically to biblical themes and Judaism in particular, “tradition” has to do with those practices (or *halachah*) which we accept as normative but which either have no direct command in the Scriptures or are at best implied by the Scriptures. As I noted in Part One, it seems beyond doubt that Yeshua participated in many of the traditions of His day, and it even appears (at times) that He considered some traditional *halachah* to be proper and a matter of personal piety. Yet also, as noted in the former article, Yeshua makes a very bold statement when, commenting on the fact that some were neglecting their parents in order to fulfill a vow (based upon Dt 23:21-23 where vows must surely be carried out) He said, “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God, in order to keep your tradition!” We should take a closer look at this response by our Master.

The text, found in Mark 7:6ff has a parallel in Mt 15:7ff. The two accounts are very close, though there are minor variants. Mark describes the neglect as “you leave the commandment of God, and hold fast the tradition of men” while Matthew describes it this way: “. . . you transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition.” When taken together the parallel accounts teach that “to leave” (=neglect) the commandment is, in fact, to “transgress” the commandment. The specific lesson regarding tradition is clear: if traditional *halachah* would cause the neglect of any commandment, that tradition is wrong.

The issue at hand in this text is that of making a vow. Vows raised many *halachic* questions for the Sages of the 1st century. For example, if one has made a vow regarding *korban* (things dedicated to the Temple, cf. Lev 27:14ff), can he break the vow if, in the meantime, he encounters real financial need (say, in the support of his parents)? The specific question of this dispute could be stated this way: can one break a vow to HaShem in order to fulfill the commandment to honor one's parents?

We might imagine that the school of Shammai, strict as it was on all matters pertaining to the maintenance of vows, took the view that Yeshua condemns. Yet before the close of the 1st century, Eliezer ben Hyrkanos makes an interesting ruling regarding helping someone who has made a vow get out of its obligations for the sake of his mother or father:

R. Eliezer says, They may open for a man with the honor due to his father and his mother. But the Sages prohibit it. R. Zadok said, instead of finding a way out for him by reason of honoring his father and his mother, let them open a way for him because of the honor due to God. If this be so there could be no vows. But the Sages concede to R. Eliezer that in a matter between one and his father and his mother that they may find a way out for him by reason of the honor due to his father and his mother. (m.*Nedarim* 9:1)

Thus, the issue of how one should resolve what appears to be conflicting *mitzvot* (in this case, keeping one's vow while at the same time honoring one's parents) ultimately comes down on the side of love—one ought to be given a way out of one's oath in order to properly care for, and thus honor, one's parents. But the fact that this argument is contained in the Mishnah shows that it was an issue of debate during the time of Yeshua, and that ultimately the Sages agreed with Eliezer who himself took the position of Yeshua on this matter, namely, that the *mitzvah* of love toward one's parents took precedence over the fulfillment of a vow.

Thus, Yeshua's words of disgust with the traditions of the elders as recorded in the Mark and Matthew texts should be understood within the 1st century *halachic* debate and not as a blanket statement against all traditions. This understanding helps resolve the apparent conflict between Yeshua's statement and His own practice of many traditions. In short, Yeshua's strong words against the traditions of the elders was in reference to those instances where adherence to the strict understanding of the Torah kept a person from fulfilling commandments to honor parents or love one's neighbor. In Yeshua's view (Eliezer appears to agree with Him), love for one's parents or one's neighbor is the *mitzvah* which takes priority.

However, to say that “love” takes priority in *halachic* matters could surely be misconstrued in our era! This is so for two reasons: first, the Torah has been almost entirely neglected in our day, and

secondly “love” has been redefined. With the Torah out of the heart and mind of the “believing” community, requests for love will be made without the slightest regard for obeying God. What is more, “love” is defined as “meeting my needs” rather than first and foremost pleasing God in our relationships. Having said all that, in a community like Beit Hallel where we strive to uphold the Torah and to live by its precepts, we should be very concerned when our traditions take precedence over loving each other. This, I believe, is the primary message of the Gospel passage we have considered here. Yeshua does not make a sweeping statement to negate the traditions. Rather, He forcefully reminds His community (and ours) that when our *halachah* stands in the way of genuine love for each other, then we have neglected the heart of the Torah and of HaShem. What a crafty deceit from Satan himself, to encourage those who love the Torah to neglect it while being zealous to keep it!

We thus have learned an important lesson from this Gospel text as we attempt to understand the place of traditional *halachah* within the life of Torah observance. Whenever traditional *halachah* would cause us to neglect a command of Scripture, the traditional *halachah* must be rejected. Furthermore, when two commandments or precepts of the Torah come into conflict within a given situation of life, the commandment which fulfills the obligation to love one's neighbor must take priority. Of course, the best scenario is to be able to do both: follow the traditional *halachah* and love one's neighbor. But where this is impossible, both Yeshua's words and actions teach us that we must be willing to enter into self-sacrifice and and give a priority to loving our neighbor.

If while praying with tefillin on one sees one's fellowman drowning in the water, the true heart response should be to jump in and attempt his rescue. If instead one's inclination is first carefully to unwrap the tefillin and lay them aside lest they become damaged in the water, then surely the heart of God and His Torah has been missed.

Part Three

In the past two parts of this article, I have touched briefly upon the terminology used in the Apostolic Writings for the concept of “tradition” and noted a number of instances where Yeshua both followed the *halachic* traditions of His day as well as spoke out against their abuses. We concluded from these studies that for the followers of Yeshua the rule of *halachah* is this: when a tradition would contradict a commandment of Torah, the tradition is not to be followed. But where conflict arises between two valid *mitzvot* (whether of the written or oral Torah), the *mitzvah* which establishes love for one's neighbor should take the priority.

In this third part of the series on Traditions I want to focus our attention upon an important text in Acts 21. Paul has been away on his journeys to the Gentile communities, proclaiming to them the gospel of Messiah, and the need for all mankind to worship the One true God of Israel. By his own report (vv. 18-19) many of the Gentiles had responded in faith to the gospel message and this brought great joy to those who had gathered to receive Paul (v. 20). Yet Paul's presence in the city of Jerusalem had caused an immediate problem. A rumor had been spread among the observant Jewish believers (v. 20) that Paul was proclaiming the cessation of Torah observance. The language used is interesting:

“You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed, and they are all zealous for the Torah; and they have been told about you, that you are teaching all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to the customs.” (vv. 20-21)

The rumor appears to have had a two-pronged approach: that Paul 1) was teaching that the Torah had been done away with (thus the command to circumcise male children no longer needed to be followed), and 2) that the “customs” handed down from generation to generation regarding *halachic* matters (note the use of the term “walk” – “...not to *walk* according to the customs”) were no longer

valid. It should be noted at the outset that the council which was convened to receive Paul, appears to link “Moses” and the “customs” together within the same venue. That is to say, in the same manner in which James and the rest would never had considered that the written Torah had been set aside, it was equally unthinkable that the “customs” should be abandoned.

But what do James and the council of brethren mean by the term “customs”? The Greek word used here is ἔθος, *ethos*, which means “1. Habit, usage, as the “habit of some people is” (Heb 10:25), or “he went, as usual . . .” (Lk 22:39, speaking of Yeshua's normal practice of going to the Mt. of Olives); 2. Custom, law as in “the customs of the fathers” (Acts 28:17), or “the customs which Moses handed down to us” (Acts 6:14). [from *BDAG, ad loc*]

This Greek term is also found in the later books of the Lxx (Apocryphal), the following with the meaning “custom:”

2Mac 11:25 “Wherefore our mind is, that this nation shall be in rest, and we have determined to restore them their temple, that they may live according to the customs of their forefathers (κατὰ τὰ ἐπὶ τῶν προγόνων αὐτῶν ἔθη).

2Mac 13:4 “But the King of kings moved Antiochus' mind against this wicked wretch, and Lysias informed the king that htis man was the cause of all mischief, so that the king commanded to bring him unto Berea, and to put him to death, as the manner is in that place.”

4Mac 18:5-6 “And the tyrant Antiochus was both punished upon earth, and is punished now he is dead; for when he was quite unable to compel the Israelites to adopt foreign customs, and to desert the manner of life of their fathers, then, departing from Jerusalem, he made war against the Persians.”

Wis 14:16 “Thus in process of time an ungodly custom (τὸ ἀσεβὲς ἔθος) grown strong was kept as a law, and graven images were worshipped by the commandments of kings.”

In the Apostolic Writings the word “custom” (ἔθος) is found 12 times (Lk 1:9; 2:42; 22:39; Jn 19:40; Acts 6:14; 15:1; 16:21; 21:21; 25:16; 26:3; 28:17; Heb 10:25). A number of these are ambiguous as to whether written or oral Torah is in mind, but the majority are clear and may be categorized as follows:

Personal Habit or Custom	<i>Mitzvah</i> of the Written Torah	<i>Mitzvah</i> of the Oral Torah
Lk 22:39 Heb 10:25	Lk 2:42 Acts 15:1	Lk 1:9 Jn 19:40 Acts 26:3 Acts 28:17

It is obvious, then, that the word “custom” in the phrases “customs of the fathers,” “customs of Moses,” or “customs of the Jews” may refer in one instance to oral Torah, but may also refer in other instances to written Torah. For example, Lk 1:9 talks about the custom of choosing priestly duties by lot, something which is not prescribed in the written Torah, while Acts 15:1 refers to the commandment of circumcision as “the custom of Moses.” Here, then, we discover an important fact: the 1st century Jewish communities viewed the written Torah and the oral Torah as a unified body of *halachah* rather than as two distinct entities. This is not to say that everyone agreed upon *halachah*, for we all are aware of the many disputes that took place. But what this brief look at the word “custom” has shown is that in the mind of the 1st century Jewish communities, received *halachah* formed a single body of Torah, whether it was received from written or oral Torah. In fact, that a clear commandment of written Torah (such as circumcision) should be labelled as a “custom of Moses” indicates the high level of authority given to what was called a “custom.” It would appear that the method of choosing the priestly courses

by lot (Lk 1:9) was considered just as binding as the commandment to circumcise a male child on the eighth day (Ac 15:1) or travel to Jerusalem at Pesach (Lk 2:42). This helps us to understand that the “traditions” (whether derived from written or oral torah), once established as *halachah* by a given community, were considered as having Divine authority for that community.

Part Four

In the three Parts of this article, I have written on the topic of “Tradition.” I have attempted to look at the issue from a biblical as well as a historical perspective. I have tried to show the difference between a direct Torah (i.e., biblical) commandment, and traditions which have surrounded the commandments as successive communities of faith have tried both to keep and guard the *mitzvot*. In these final thoughts on the subject, I would like to summarize and suggest further applications.

The greatest danger with traditions is that all too often, in any given community of faith, the traditions developed by former generations are put on equal level with the direct commands of God. When the innovations of man (regardless of how good they might be) are given equal authority with the eternal, written word of HaShem, then in that equality the Torah is diminished. We therefore must always do the following with traditions: 1) make sure that we never equate the traditions of man with having equal or more authority than the Scriptures, and that we always judge the validity of a given tradition against the immutable words of HaShem; 2) that we discard any and all traditions which in any way denigrate or diminish Torah commands, or which are at odds with the clear teaching of God’s word; 3) that we allow those traditions to remain which are in line with Torah, and have proven themselves to be valuable in the pursuit of Torah living, whether on an individual or corporate level. Yet even in those traditions which we allow to remain, we must remember that they are just that: traditions, something encouraged but not required.

What might some of these traditions be? Consider the Erev Shabbat meal so common in Torah communities. There is, of course, nothing in the Torah which requires or even suggests that the Shabbat be initiated in this way. Yet the Erev Shabbat meal in the home has been a long standing tradition which has built family and community throughout the generations, and has helped in setting the day apart as the Torah commands. Consider as well the end of Shabbat, in the Havdalah service. Again, this is a tradition based upon the Torah commandment to sanctify the Shabbat, yet there is nothing explicitly given in the Torah which resembles the Havdalah service. Still, it is a tradition which has proven itself to be valuable, both in community building as well as in maintaining the distinction of the Shabbat. But to stress the point I made earlier, we must always remember the someone who, for one reason or another, does not follow the tradition of an Erev Shabbat meal, or a Havdalah ritual, is not breaking Torah, and we simply cannot view them as though they have.

How well we do in keeping a clear distinction between the *mitzvot* which come directly from HaShem, and those which are made over time by people and communities, can be determined by how we react when the tradition is change or not followed. A good example of this are the issues which arise in wearing *tzitzit*. The rabbinic traditions prescribe various *halachot* for wearing *tzitzit*, *halachot* which if not followed render the *mitzvah* void according to these authorities. So here is the question: if the *tzitzit* are worn, but not according to the *halachah* of this Sage or that rabbinic authority, what are we as a community going to say about it? Are we going to judge our brother or sister who, in attempting to do and keep the *mitzvot*, decides (for whatever reason) to break with the man-made *halachah* of the Mishnah and Talmuds? Here is where the real “rub” comes. If we hope to always make a distinction between God’s commands and those of tradition, then we must take a firm stance that we will not judge each other on the basis of rabbinic law, but only on the basis of the written Scriptures. Fortunately, the Tanach is specific enough when describing the *mitzvot* so that more often than not we have all the information we need to obey HaShem.

But there is another side to this whole issue of tradition as we collectively and individually pursue

Torah-living. While I agree that we must take a firm stance against judging each other on the basis of man-made *halachah*, I also think we should be very careful to appreciate long standing traditions as long as they meet the criteria mentioned above. It is difficult to admit that as Messianic Believers (for want of a better label), we are as a young child in the larger Jewish community. Surely we must appear quite arrogant when we simply set aside long standing, valid and worthy traditions for no other reason than that we just have decided we don't like them! Besides the Jewish community, what other group is there that has withstood such persecution, yet remained primarily unified both in *halachah* and culture? And what is it that has kept the Jewish community unified? The answer is obvious—traditional *halachah* which finds its roots in the Torah. The often repeated phrase, “it is not so much that Israel has kept the Sabbath, but that the Sabbath has kept Israel” is borne out in the pages of history. The man-made *halachot* of Erev Shabbat, Havdalah, Shabbat liturgy, order of services, Berkat HaMazon, Zim'rot , etc., while not found directly in the Torah, have, in many ways, been the means by which the community as a whole has remained intact. Before we throw out *halachah* that has a proven track record, and replace it with our own innovations, we should consider more deeply what value the long-standing traditions may have. Perhaps, just perhaps, the reason some traditions are so long-standing is because they work—work to create community, and to draw the community to find her identity in HaShem, in His Torah, and ultimately, in His Messiah.

Moreover, it seems to me that the warning Paul was giving the synagogue in Rome touches on this very issue. He wrote to the Romans that they should be careful not to be arrogant against the branches (11:18), and to remember that they are supported by the root. New groups are starting up every week which identify themselves as “messianic” or “Torah-pursuant” (and by other labels). Many of them are openly stating that they want nothing to do with the “whole Jewish thing,” but simply want to follow Torah as Christians. However, if we are all grafted into the same tree, and those who have come before us have given us wise methods for living, we need to seriously consider what our true motives are for abandoning these traditions. May HaShem give us wisdom as we strive to walk in all ways which are pleasing to Him.