

SHOFTIM (DEUTERONOMY 15:18-21:9)

Candles, Kings, and Impeachment

2003 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

DEDICATION:

Thirteen years ago Rabbi Seplowitz performed a Bris Milah, bringing our new son into the covenant of Abraham. This Shabbos Menachem Moshe will be called to the Torah as a Bar Mitzvah and will accept upon himself the responsibilities of a Torah Jew. This Shabbos is also the third anniversary of Torah Talk, which brings more Torah into our home every week. We are honored to sponsor this week's Torah Talk in honor of Rabbi Seplowitz and his family, and in appreciation and in honor of our son, Menachem Moshe, successfully growing in Torah from Bris to Bar Mitzvah and beyond.

Chaim Dovid and Rivka Malka Rubenstein (Baltimore).

Every Friday afternoon, my wife tells a lie. In fact, women all over the world tell the same lie. As a matter of fact, every Chanukah, I tell a similar lie!

Or, at least, it seems that way.

Every Friday, Jewish women all over the world stand in front of burning candles and give thanks to “. . . our G-d, master of the universe, who has . . . commanded us to light Shab**bos candles.”

Each night of Chanukah, I give thanks to “... our G-d, master of the universe, who has . . . commanded us to light Chanukah candles.”

I challenge you to find anywhere in the Torah where it says that we are supposed to light Shabbos candles. And Chanukah? The holiday itself didn't even come into existence until hundreds of years after the Torah was given! When did G-d give us these commandments?

In reality, the Mitzvahs of candle lighting are rabbinic in nature. The Sages of Israel instituted these practices. So why do we recite a blessing that implies that it was G-d's idea?

Before I answer the question, let's look a little more closely at Rabbinic Law.

There are 613 Biblical commandments. Some of them, for example, the prohibition against eating pork, are spelled out quite clearly in the Torah. Others, such as Kosher slaughter and fasting on Yom Kippur, are vaguely alluded to in the text. We know the details of these commandments because those details were passed down orally, from G-d to Moses, from Moses to Joshua, from Joshua to the Elders, etc.

In addition to these Biblical commandments, we have several rabbinic edicts. Many of them serve as “. . . *a fence around the Torah.*” (Mishnah Avos, 1:1) The Rabbis of the Talmud (and beyond) often saw the need to enact various decrees, usually designed to prevent violation of Torah Law.

A few examples:

Contrary to popular belief, it is Biblically permitted to wash down a hamburger with a glass of milk! The actual Biblical prohibition is against cooking meat and milk together, and eating or deriving financial benefit from meat and milk **THAT HAS BEEN COOKED TOGETHER**. If it hasn't been cooked together, it is **TECHNICALLY** permitted.

The Rabbis saw a potential for “sloppy Kashruth.” If I can put a slice of cheese on my salami sandwich, why can't I cook a cheeseburger? To avoid this type of confusion, the Rabbis extended the prohibition and applied it to uncooked mixtures as well. Therefore, today, **ALL** mixtures of meat and dairy are considered non-Kosher.

There are 39 categories of labor that are forbidden on the Sabbath. The Sages extended these laws into several sub-categories. It is forbidden to cook on the Sabbath. The Rabbis forbade placing fully cooked food into the oven to be re-heated because the confusion might lead to placing **RAW** food into the oven.

The Torah allows a man to have more than one wife. For the last thousand years or so, Ashkenazic Jewry have adhered to the ban on polygamy. (When the State of Israel was first founded, many multi-wife families emigrated from Sephardic countries. While the State “grand-fathered” those already married, it prohibited future polygamous marriages.)

It is forbidden according to Rabbinic Law for a man to be in a secluded room with a woman who is not his wife. (No explanation necessary. Right, Mr. Clinton?)

We now see the wisdom of Rabbinic Law. The rabbis wanted to teach us how to “stay out of trouble.” (Not every Rabbinic Law is to prevent Biblical violations. There are other reasons as well, beyond the scope of this article.) But why do we say that ‘. . . *G-d . . . commanded us to light Shab**bos candles?*’ It wasn't G-d, it was the Rabbis!

The answer is that Rabbinic Law is actually endorsed by the Torah. “. . . *Be careful to do whatever they will teach you. . . Do not turn away from what they tell you, to the right or to the left.*” (Deuteronomy, 17: 10-11)

The Torah is telling us that we are obligated to follow Rabbinic Law. In other words, if the Rabbis tell us to light Chanukah candles, it means that G-D EXPECTS US to light Chanukah candles! In effect, every Rabbinic Commandment is a Biblical Commandment, because one of the 613 Mitzvahs is the

requirement to listen to the Rabbis!

But what if we disagree with the Rabbis? Do we believe in “Rabbinic Infallibility?” What if the Rabbis have made a decree that we consider unnecessary? What if, for example, I decide, “You know what? I know the difference between a salami-and-cheese sandwich and a cheeseburger. I won’t get confused. I won’t accidentally violate Torah Law.”

I think we see a possible answer in the next passage. The Torah tells us the laws pertaining to a king of Israel. He is not permitted to have too many horses, too many wives, or too much silver and gold. The Torah gives reasons for two of these Mitzvahs: Wanting too many horses will cause the king to “*return the People to Egypt**. . . (*ibid, verse 16) which was the horse capital of the world. A large harem of wives would “*turn his heart astray*” (verse 17) from G-d.

The Talmud (Sanhedrin, 21a) tells us that King Solomon violated these commandments. He saw that the Torah gave reasons for these prohibitions, and rationalized that they didn’t apply to him. “The Torah says that a king shouldn’t have too many horses in order to avoid returning the People to Egypt. I’ll make sure not to lead them back to Egypt. The Torah says the problem with too many wives is that they will lead him astray. No problem! I won’t be led astray!”

The result? Many Jews returned to Egypt, and many of Solomon’s wives worshiped idols.

The Torah warns us to carefully adhere to whatever our rabbinic leaders tell us. We are not to “*turn away from what they tell you, to the right or to the left.*” What does the Torah mean by “. . . *to the right or to the left?*” Rashi explains that we should follow their guidance even if they tell us right is left and left is right!”

The Torah is telling us, “Don’t be so smart! The Creator of the World gives commandments and expects you to follow them whether you understand them or not.”

When I was about ten years old, I joined a Little League team. (This is my second baseball story in two weeks! One more strike and I’m out! :-)) I knew next to nothing about baseball. I was learning how to throw and catch in the outfield, while the coach was hitting balls to be fielded.

“Sepowitz!” yelled the coach. “Go into left field!”

Facing the coach at home plate, I turned to my left and walked straight into right field.

“No!” screamed the coach in frustration. “LEFT Field! LEFT Field! On MY left, not YOURS!”

Is there a Mitzvah you don't understand? Does the Torah's left seem right and the Torah's right seem left?

Maybe you're looking from the wrong side of the field.

Have a great Shabbos.

Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

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