

## BEWARE THE LEAVEN OF THE PHARISEES

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Traffic accidents are a real problem in Israel, especially among Israeli youth engaging in drinking and driving. Israeli authorities and various media venues are promoting a campaign warning young Israelis against this crime. Many seem unconcerned and don't heed the warning. They know others who have been killed and injured in alcohol related accidents but think "this could never happen to me." Their lack of care or concern doesn't stop them from dying. Yeshua also has issued us a warning, but many do not heed his words. They remain unconcerned, thinking, "this could never happen to me..."; and so we have the fallout – injuries to the faith and even fatalities – people denying Yeshua and falling away. Sadly, these people are lost and it may not be possible to renew them again to repentance. **“For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame.”** (Hebrews 6:4-6)

What is this serious warning? It is this: **“Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees”** (Matthew 16:5) What is the leaven? It is not the leavening agent in bread but their doctrine. (Matthew 16:12) We know that a little leaven will leaven the whole lump.” (Gal. 5:9) The apostle Paul spoke a stern warning to the Galatian congregations who had fallen into a false teaching that we may obtain righteousness through observance of the Torah (law). Paul was not anti-Torah or against circumcision. He had Timothy circumcised, lest his uncircumcised state become a stumbling block to the Jewish people he was preaching to. He also took a vow to prove that he did not tell Jewish Believers to forsake the law of Moses, or not to circumcise their children. Paul did, himself, keep the Torah. (Acts 21:20-25)

The problem was not the commandment to circumcise, but the false doctrine that one must be circumcised to be saved. Paul says that if one becomes circumcised (in order to obtain righteousness by keeping the Torah), then Messiah profits that person nothing. If righteousness could be obtained through keeping the Torah, then the Messiah died in vain. (Gal. 2:21) In Hebrew we would say, “haval al hazman”, meaning ‘a waste of time.’ People who do this have become estranged from the Messiah and by trying to be justified through Torah have fallen from grace. (Gal. 5:2-4) This little ‘leaven’, this false doctrine, contaminated entire congregations in Galatia, as it does today in some Messianic Congregations.

Today, the Orthodox Jewish Rabbinical religious leadership exists as a continuation of the office of the Pharisees and Sadducees. Our national religious leadership in Israel completely and utterly rejects Yeshua (Jesus). We must choose. Do we want to be accepted by and acceptable to men and find favor with the daati (religious Jewish community) or accepted by God? Do we want to please men or the Lord? To whom will we be faithful? Paul said this: **“For do I now persuade men, or God? Or do I seek to please men? For if I still pleased men, I would not be a bondservant of Messiah.”** (Gal. 1:10) No, we are not to purposely behave in a way that would be a stumbling block to our Jewish brethren, but we must decide if we are willing to go outside the camp and suffer His reproach, being rejected and despised by our own people for His name’s sake. **“Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people with His own blood, suffered outside the gate. Therefore let us go forth to Him, outside the camp, bearing His reproach.”** (Hebrews 13:13)

Some teach that there exists no difference between the Old (Mosaic) Covenant and the New Covenant. But there are differences. Firstly, where the New Covenant is prophesied, it clearly states, **“Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant (Brit Chadashah) with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah – NOT ACCORDING TO THE COVENANT THAT I MADE WITH THEIR FATHERS IN THE DAY THAT I TOOK THEM BY THE HAND TO LEAD THEM OUT OF THE LAND OF EGYPT, My covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them, says the Lord.”** (Jeremiah 31:31-32) Also, in the place where Yeshua is discussing the issue of divorce with his disciples, He makes it clear that Moses permitted a man to divorce his wife because of the hardness of man’s heart, but Yeshua said that divorce is not permissible except for unfaithfulness and that anyone who divorces and remarries has committed adultery. (Mark 10:11-12) (Matthew 5:32) Those who truly repent can find forgiveness and restoration, but not the rebellious who refuse to acknowledge Yeshua’s words as the truth. The book of Hebrews states that Yeshua has **“BECOME A SURETY OF A BETTER COVENANT.”** (Hebrews 7:22)

The doctrines and teachings of Orthodox Jewish rabbis should not, as followers of Yeshua, be our authority. They want to separate us from Yeshua and thereby send us to hell. This can begin innocently enough – with a sincere love for Israel and the Jewish people; then proceeding to keep the Feasts of the Lord, Shabbat., dietary laws, wearing tzitzit, head coverings, etc. None of these things are wrong; all are good. The Torah is called good and just and holy. The problem comes in with a little leaven; a little perversion of the truth. Gradually, people begin to consider themselves as more righteous, more holy, more justified before God than those who worship on Sunday and then go for bacon and eggs after the service. Oftentimes people such as are being described become more and more interested in things ‘Jewish’ ; they may suddenly discover long-lost ‘Jewish blood’ and feel that this somehow makes them more accepted, more ‘in’ with God, more special than previously as a Gentile Believer. They may choose to become circumcised and to study under Orthodox Jewish rabbis, often studying

Talmud and other rabbinic writings. Many of the verses from the Talmud are received from the Kaballah which itself came from the Babylonian religion. Just the fact that the Talmud blasphemes Yeshua on more than one occasion should be enough for us to want to avoid it; but some Messianic Believers show an unhealthy interest in Talmud, Kaballah and other rabbinical writings. We do not need to stick our hand in the fire to know that we can get burned. So, too, do we not need to study the rabbinical teachings and especially not the anti-missionary materials any more than we need to view X-rated movies or read pornographic books to discern that they are not acceptable. Anti-missionaries may tempt us to study their materials. "How can you judge unless you examine them?", they say. Let us be called stupid or ignorant; it is better than losing our salvation.

People who travel this slippery slope often end up completely denying their faith in Yeshua. We have personally seen it happen to many. Don't think it won't happen to you. A little leaven leavens the whole lump. Yeshua said, "Beware!" That should be enough for us to heed his warning and take it seriously. Do we need to learn from people who have rejected our Lord and Savior? who spit on Him? who call Him Yeshu, (which means may His name be blotted out forever and ever), instead of Yeshua (which means salvation)? What about Yeshua's words to His disciples that they should obey whatever the Pharisees and Saducees bid them to do because they sit in the seat of Moses? (Matthew 23:2-3) Does He mean that whatever they teach, even all their man-made rules, we are to obey? Certainly not! While they may teach many worthy and noble principles such as the need to love God and to love our neighbor, if they bid us to reject Yeshua are we to obey? If we are to obey everything they tell us to do, then why did Yeshua and His disciples disobey their rule about ritual hand-washing? In an ancient Hebrew manuscript of the book of Matthew, Yeshua is quoted as saying, Do NOT obey what they bid you to do... (The Hebrew Yeshua vs the Greek Jesus by Nehemia Gordon)

Yeshua expounds more upon this issue when he says, "**Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.**" (Luke 12:1) This leaven of the Pharisees, which is their doctrine that we become justified by keeping the Torah, produces the fruit of hypocrisy. Any time we begin trusting in our own righteousness rather than the righteousness imparted to us through the blood of Yeshua, we become hypocrites. We begin to care about how we look on the outside to others more than what is really going on in our hearts. We do things to be seen as righteous or holy by men. "**And when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men.**" (Matthew 6:5) Rather, Yeshua tells us to fast and pray and give tzedakah (charity) in secret; "**and your Father who sees in secret will Himself reward you openly.**" (Matthew 6:4)

Yeshua again calls them hypocrites when they challenge him and his disciples for transgressing the 'tradition of the elders'. This ritual hand washing is not a Biblical command, but a tradition issuing from the oral law or Talmud. Yeshua pins them right to the floor (as he

often has a knack for doing) when he exposes their hypocrisy. **“Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition?...Hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy about you, saying: These people draw near to me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me, and in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.”** (Matthew 15:3-8) Yeshua used strong language in referring to these religious leaders, calling them **‘blind leaders of the blind’**. If we follow them, we will both fall into a ditch. (Matthew 15:14)

It was then, as it is today, that these people make up man-made rules to circumvent and find a way around the commandments because their hearts are not close to God and their worship not sincere. For example, in the seventh year, the field is supposed to lie fallow according to the Torah, God’s word. But what a shame to let that good field go to waste every seven years, right? So a cover is constructed over the tractor so that while it is plowing the forbidden field, God apparently can’t see. Pigs are not to be kept in the Land of Israel . So platforms are constructed so that the pigs’ feet are not actually touching the ground and therefore not on the Land of Israel . We could go on and on with many examples.

Yeshua warns us against following the Pharisees, lest we also be made as much a son of hell as them. (Matthew 23:15) Strong language – blind guides, fools, whitewashed tombs...serpents...brood of vipers....” (Matthew 23:27,33) If we follow them, we may certainly look better on the outside, wearing the right costume, keeping the right customs, saying the right ‘brachot’ (blessings), but we may still harbor sin and uncleanness inside. **“Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.”** (Matthew 23:28)

It is sad to see this in our own people whom we love – Yisrael, chosen people of God. But we must be careful. Many Messianics give great honor to the teachings of the rabbis – whom Yeshua called blind guides, fools, and hypocrites. Beware of giving honor to those who are the enemies of our Lord. We cannot ever be justified by Torah. We must finally decide where we stand – are we standing under the blood of the Lamb, finding grace and salvation in Him alone?

(Thanks to Daniel Yahav, a Sabra (native-born Israeli) and Messianic Jewish leader of Peniel congregation in Tiberias, Israel for this timely warning. )



*An ultra-Orthodox man checks a myrtle branch for blemishes at a market in Jerusalem's Mea Shearim neighbourhood October 9, 2011. Reuters*