

Torah Observant “SHOMER MITZVOT”

שׁוֹמֵר מִצְוֹת

A Series on Practical Messianic Living and Apologetics (halakhah)
By Torah Teacher Ariel ben-Lyman HaNaviy

A Short Midrash on Acts 21

(Note: all quotations are taken from the Complete Jewish Bible, translation by David H. Stern, Jewish New Testament Publications, Inc., unless otherwise noted)

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In this continuing “mini-series” on practical Messianic living, I want to address an issue, which I believe some non-Jewish believers might have questions on. Many of you might be wondering how us Messianic Jews feel about the application of Torah, now that we have come to trust in the only name “**given among men whereby we must be saved**” (Acts 4:12, KJV). A common sample question might sound something like, “If Yeshua fulfilled the final requirement of the Law, why does Rav Sha’ul (Apostle Paul) keep a Nazarite vow in the book of Acts?” Since Sha’ul was a Messianic Jewish Rabbi, as well as a Pharisee, it would do us some good to address the situation here. A good example of how we modern Messianic Jews are supposed to believe concerning Torah and Messiah should emerge from the following story found in Acts chapter 21. Actually, the chapter in question, is a great hermeneutic key (foundational truth of the Torah, able to “unlock” the answers to many other similar situations), in helping to discover the attitudes of the Messianic Jews of the first century, and consequently the attitudes of many of Messianic Jews today.

Before I take a look at the chapter, I want you to know that this particular incident took place historically **after** the letter to the Church at Galatia! That’s right! As “anti-Torah” as Galatians may seem at times, it is absolutely “Torah-positive”. Sure, the main villains of the piece known variously as “Judaizers/Legalizers/Influencers”, quite possibly are in fact Gentile converts bent on destroying the grace of our Lord, Yeshua, by supposing that other Gentiles must convert to Judaism in order to be considered “righteous” in the sight of HaShem, i.e., to be saved. But you must understand that Messianic Jews are not “Judaizers”.

Let’s talk about Sha’ul’s actions in Acts 21.

When we arrived at Jerusalem, the brothers received us warmly. The next day Paul and the rest of us went to see James, and all the elders were present. Paul greeted them and reported in detail what God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. When they heard this, they praised God. Then they said to Paul: "You see, brother, how many

thousands of Jews have believed, and all of them are zealous for the law. They have been informed that you teach all the Jews who live among the Gentiles to turn away from Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or live according to our customs. What shall we do? They will certainly hear that you have come, so do what we tell you. There are four men with us who have made a vow. Take these men, join in their purification rites and pay their expenses, so that they can have their heads shaved. Then everybody will know there is no truth in these reports about you, but that you yourself are living in obedience to the law.” (21:17-24, NIV)

As I mentioned above, I believe that the issue in Acts 21 is one of hermeneutic principle: what is the definition of **“turn away from Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or live according to our customs”** (v. 21b). If we answer that question, then we, by context, can understand why Sha’ul is fulfilling a (possible) Nazarite vow in accordance with Numbers chapter 6. Surprisingly, as we shall see, part of the answer is given right the text of Acts.

In verse 24 of this chapter, the brothers in Yerushalayim (Jerusalem) instruct Sha’ul to “prove” his status as Torah-Observant Jew or **“*Shomer Mitzvot*”**, as it is known in Jewish circles. This (apparent) important point that they want him to make will either credit or discredit him in light of the false accusations being made against him (v. 21a). The “moment of truth” is at hand! Is Sha’ul a genuine follower of Judaism? Did he apostatize from Moshe (Moses)? Is he a sectarian, following after and teaching something contrary to the Torah and the traditions?

When Sha’ul became a Messianic Jew on his Damascus Road experience, he no longer interpreted Judaism as only a non-Messianic Jew would. His encounter with the risen Yeshua and subsequent filling of the *Ruach HaKodesh* produced in him a new and correct understanding of what HaShem was asking of the Jewish people when He gave them His Torah in the first place.

Sha’ul now was free, as are all believers who follow after the God of Isra’el, through His Messiah, Yeshua, to, not only pursue but to teach Torah Observance in fulfillment of what Yeshua accomplished through His sacrifice.

Circumcision, keeping the Feasts, and offering sacrifices—even sin offerings (see the difficult Millennial passage in Ezekiel Chapter 43) can and should be interpreted, by us Jews, in light of *B’rit Chadashah* truth (New Covenant)! These practices should not be misunderstood to be the actual messianic fulfillment in and of themselves, rather, in many instances, they can be translated as “shadows” of the messianic fulfillment (Col. 2:16). Understanding this hermeneutic principle about Sha’ul (and many other Messianic Jews), and applying it from Acts chapter 9 onward, helps to clear up many misgivings that people (Jewish and Gentile, believer and non) have about this life-long

Torah-Observant Rabbi from Tarsus. As mentioned earlier, this principle is especially helpful in understanding the letters to the churches in Galatia and Ephesus.

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