

Spiritual Insight For The Week

with Rabbi Bentzion Kravitz

He Screamed, "You're Not a Jew Anymore!"



A number of years ago, I went to the Hollywood Bowl to hear violinist Itzhak Perlman. Walking from the parking lot to my seat, I heard someone nearby scream, "You're not a Jew anymore!"

I looked around and discovered the recipient of the verbal attack. It was a young woman in a "Jews for Jesus" t-shirt distributing missionary literature. Harsh comments and aggressive confrontations can be painful and

counterproductive. I prefer to speak kindly and encourage Jews who have converted to other religions to reconsider their decision and to explore the spiritual richness of Judaism

Regardless of the approach, is there any truth to the statement that a Jew who accepts Jesus is no longer a Jew? Don't our sages state, "*Even though [the Jewish people] have sinned, they are still called 'Israel'*" (Talmud Sanhedrin 44a)? If a Jew is born Jewish, can he or she lose this status?

The answer to this question is found in the Torah portions *Behar-Bechukosai* (Leviticus 25:1-27:34), which are occasionally read together. The Torah refers to the Jewish people as God's children, stating, "*Israel is My son, My firstborn*" (Exodus 4:22), and as His servants, as it says, "*To Me the Children of Israel are servants*" (Leviticus 25:55).

Children and servants have different privileges and responsibilities. For example, rebellious children can never sever their biological relationship with their parents. Similarly, a Jew always retains the child-to-father relationship with God. However, if a Jew swears allegiance to a different master [through idolatrous beliefs], he or she loses the status of God's servant.

When Elijah the prophet said, "*How long will you waver between two opinions?*" (I Kings 18:21), he was telling Jewish idolaters that they could not call themselves Jews while worshiping a false God.

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Deep down, Jews do not want to deny their Jewishness. This explains the long history of Jews choosing martyrdom over forced conversion to Christianity. Missionaries needed a way to overcome this "obstacle to conversion." To make their Christian message less offensive and more acceptable, the founder of Jews for Jesus instructed his missionaries to "avoid mentioning that Jesus is God" when they initially share the Gospel with Jews.

Furthermore, despite rejecting rabbinic Judaism, Jews for Jesus and "messianic Jews" hypocritically adopt the practice of Jewish "rabbinic" rituals to create the illusion that they are still Jewish. Even more serious is their acceptance of idolatrous beliefs such as the Trinity and bodily incarnation of God, which they rationalize through mistranslations and fabricated texts. It is significant that these Christian beliefs were not accepted by the original followers of Jesus and are unanimously rejected by all denominations of Judaism.

Although the bond between the Jewish people and God can be temporarily broken, the bond is eternal. In our Torah reading, there is a description of the punitive consequences the Jewish people will experience if they abandon their covenant with God. Then, in one of the Torah's most moving statements, God declares, *"Despite all this, I will not despise them nor reject them to annihilate them, to break My covenant with them"* (Leviticus 26:44).

The prophet Jeremiah reiterates God's promise to not break His covenant with the words, *"I will make a new covenant with the House of Israel ... It will not be like the covenant I made with their fathers, when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, a covenant which they broke, though I remained a husband to them"* (Jeremiah 31:31-32).

Christians falsely claim the "New Covenant" made the old covenant *"obsolete"* (Hebrews 8:13). A careful reading of the text makes it clear that the covenant will be called "new" because it will be enhanced so that not only will God keep His promise never to break it, but even the Jewish people will no longer break it. This will be possible because in the future, the inclination to rebel against God will be removed, and we will serve God wholeheartedly (Ezekiel 36:26-27).

Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's statements powerfully confirm the belief that God's covenant with the Jews is eternal. This principle bothered the apostle Paul so much that he intentionally mistranslated Jeremiah's words, to give the impression that God had rejected the Jews. Paul changed Jeremiah's words, *"I will remain a husband to them,"* to *"I turned away from [or rejected] them"* (Hebrews 8:9). This false narrative contradicts and denies Jeremiah's beautiful metaphor of God as a faithful husband to his wife [the Jews].

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This anti-Semitic trope promoted centuries of hatred toward the Jewish people and misled many Jews into the arms of Christian missionaries.

The separation caused by accepting idolatry can be rectified by returning to the true God through sincere repentance, as it says, *"Return unto me, and I will return unto you"* (Malachi 3:7) and *"I will cleanse you from all your idols"* (Ezekiel 36:25).

As descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Jews have an eternal connection [Torah and mitzvot] to God and can trust in God's promise, *"I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you"* (Genesis 17:7).

Shabbat Shalom,

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