

Spiritual Insight For The Week

with Rabbi Bentzion Kravitz

I Turned Down a Ticket to Heaven



While attending college, a fellow student offered me a ticket to heaven. All I had to do was “believe in Jesus,” and if not, I would go to hell.

I turned down his offer and explained that Judaism requires that we believe in God and follow the commandments. King Solomon affirms this principle when he says the bottom

line of Judaism is to “*Be in awe of God and keep His commandments for that is the whole person*” (Ecclesiastes 12:13).

Despite Solomon’s powerful words, this zealous Christian student insisted that getting to heaven comes through faith alone and not “works” or deeds. To prove his point, he quoted a verse found in this week’s Torah portion, *Lech Lecha* (Genesis 12:1–17:27).

The verse says Abraham, then known as Avram, “*believed in the Lord, and he accounted it to him as righteousness [צדקה–tzedakah]*” (Genesis 15:6). Therefore, the verse might appear to say it was Avraham’s belief [faith] alone that made him righteous before God.

However, as with all verses, to understand this passage we must read it in context and in its original language. In context, God tells Avraham, who was childless, that he will be blessed with children despite his old age. Furthermore, his “*descendants will be as numerous as the stars in the heaven*” (Genesis 15:5).

This passage must be read in context and in its original language.

In response to God’s promise, Avraham does not ask God for proof. Instead, he believes God’s promise, and this pure expression of faith is considered an act of righteousness.

Interestingly, our sages point out that the word “*righteousness*” [צדקה–tzedakah] also means “*charity*.” Therefore, this verse can be read to mean that Avraham accounted [considered] God’s promise of children to be an act of charity. This approach highlights Avraham’s humility and gratitude.

continued...

Either way, this verse does not say that faith is the only way to be righteous before God. As a matter of fact, when the Torah reiterates God's promise of descendants to Abraham, it says it was *"because he obeyed My [God's] voice and observed God's commandments, statutes, and laws"* (Genesis 26:5).

The Torah provides another proof that deeds are *"accounted as righteousness."*

In the book of Psalms, King David recalls the story of Pinchas, who zealously stops a plague [recorded in Numbers 25:7-9] that threatens to destroy the Jewish people.

Using the exact words found in Genesis 15:6, King David says, *"Pinchas arose and executed judgment, and the plague was halted, and it was **accounted to him as righteousness**"* (Psalms 106:30-31).

In this situation, the act [deed] of executing judgment is considered an act of righteousness.

Both faith and deeds play a part in being righteous in God's eyes.

Both faith and deeds play a part in being righteous in God's eyes, as the Torah says, *"And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God ask of you but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all His ways, to love Him, and to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to observe the Lord's commandments and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good?"* (Deuteronomy 10:12-13).

Missionaries, like the student I encountered, not only ignore what the Torah teaches about faith and actions, but they also contradict the New Testament's statement that *"faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead"* (James 2:17).

May this Shabbos provide countless opportunities to experience and develop a personal and spiritual relationship with God, through our faith in His absolute oneness and by following His commandments.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Bentzion Kravitz

© 2022 Jews for Judaism