

## THE MISTAKE OF THE CHUMRA

A chumra (also “khumra”) is a prohibition or obligation in Jewish practice that exceeds the bare requirements of Jewish law. The rationale for a chumra comes from Deuteronomy 22:8, which states that when one builds a house, he must build a fence around the roof in order to avoid guilt should someone fall off the roof. This has been interpreted by many as a requirement to “build a fence around the Torah” in order to protect the commandment (the law). A chumra, therefore, is the creation of a fence meant to distance the Jew in order to prevent transgression of a commandment.

A rabbi writes, “A Jew, properly defined, is a member of the Sinai Covenant with its 613 Commandments established between the One True God and the descendants of Abraham and Sarah through the Teacher Moses, as recorded in the Torah. The Most Sacred Name was revealed to our people in order to enhance the intimacy of our Covenant (Devarim 6:3). The Beloved and the beloved are in a most unique relationship often referenced as a ‘husband and wife.’”

In order to protect those 613 laws the Jews have instituted an incredible amount of “oral laws” in an effort to protect them from transgression. This is what is deemed as “building a fence around the Torah.” Eve, some say, built a fence when she added “neither shall you touch it” to God’s commandment prohibiting the eating of the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.

To understand how this “fence building” can result in a myriad of “fences” is illustrated where Rabbi Hershel Schachter highlights the fact that when it comes to blowing the shofar on Rosh Hashanah, “we are concerned about all opinions and thus have to blow 100 blasts. There is uncertainty regarding what a terua is supposed to sound like. To play it safe, we have to satisfy all opinions. This is a universally accepted chumra. The Torah mandates blowing 9 blasts of the shofar and we blow 100 blasts.”

Rabbi Abbahu instituted in Caesarea the following order of sounding of the shofar: First a tekia, a simple uninterrupted sound; next three shevarim, broken sounds; followed by a terua, a series of short blasts; and, finally, another tekia. The Gemara asks: Whichever way you look at it, this is difficult. If, according to the opinion of Rabbi Abbahu, the sound the Torah calls a terua is a whimpering, i.e., short, consecutive sounds, one should perform tekia-terua-tekia set. And if he holds that a terua is moaning, i.e., longer, broken sounds, he should sound a set as follows: Tekia, followed by three shevarim, and then another tekia. Why include both a terua and a shevarim? The Gemara answers: Rabbi Abbahu was uncertain whether a terua means moaning or whimpering, and he therefore instituted that both types of sound should be included, to ensure that one fulfills his obligation (Babylonian Talmud, Rosh Hashanah, 34a; translation and commentary by Sefaria.org).

It is understandable why there has been such a vast accumulation of “fences” when we grasp the motive for their erection — which is to diligently safeguard the commandments from negligence, and if one is serious about obedience to those laws, then he is cautious in his ways. The bare commandments often leave much to be asked, as to their completeness, and therefore the oral law attempts to cover all the bases surrounding those laws. This, of course, leads to volumes of rabbinic interpretations of those 613 laws. The dairy and meat prohibition of Deuteronomy 14:21 alone ends up in nearly endless case situations where hundreds of legal “fences” are erected all about the commandments’ landscape.

While this fence building can be explored at great length in both scope and legality, there is one particular aspect of this fence building which has led to a momentous mistake by the fence builders. This failure came about because of their fear and reverence for the Name of God. To prevent the Name from being taken lightly or used in vain resulted in creating an impersonal God which meant that any real intimate relationship was simply out of the question. Why? Because the preventive fences removed the Personal God to a position where He, in actuality, no longer had a Name and could not be approached as a knowable God or of a God of intimacy!

Another rabbi says, “The Giver of the Eternal Covenant has revealed a Personal Name. That Name is utterly sacred and is not to be spoken nor written lightly. Which is to say, without specific intention and purpose. Those who desire HaShem's

blessings will honor His Sacred Name because they honor Him. HaShem and His Name are echad (One). He is exalted throughout all existence, and throughout all of time and space!”

“It is true that in early biblical history the Sacred Name was spoken more freely, however by the Second Temple Period (530 BCE to 70 CE) uttering the Name became much less common as our elders began to grasp its utter holiness more completely. Eventually only the High Priest spoke the Sacred Name and that only once a year as he stood before HaShem in the Holy Place begging for the forgiveness of our people. Judaism is not static, it’s an ever evolving Path. As time passes our sages realize ever more clearly just how sacred the Name is and how important it is to honor it. They also saw how easily the Name might be unintentionally ‘taken lightly’ and sought to prevent this serious error. With the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE its utterance was banned in order to honor and preserve its sanctity more completely.”

“In addition, according to the vast majority of Rabbinic authorities the correct pronunciation of the Sacred Name has been lost. Some blame this method of protection, pointing out that without uttering the Name we forgot how to do so properly!”

And therein lies the problem. The fence builders’ attempt to not desecrate the Name resulted in a loss of the Name altogether! They strove to prevent misuse of the Name with

such great precautions that they actually lost the ability to address God as a personal God and forced Him into exile! It is impossible to have any intimate relationship if one of the individuals is unknown to the other. Names are the first knowable in any beginning relationship. True worship must be intimate and to be intimate the object of worship must be personal and to be personal there must be knowledge of a Name — a Name which can be uttered by the worshipper and the fence builders, by removing the Name, lacked this ability.

It is of great importance that we understand the vital focus in the Old and New Testament on the Name. While the Old Testament never reveals the Name it does, however, point emphatically to the importance of the Name. Scriptures such as found in Isaiah 53 declare with such profundity the essence and power of the Name. The New Testament reveals the importance of the Name in numerous settings and that Name is Jesus Christ!

The real sacredness of the Name of Jesus Christ is in its utterance by individuals who worship Him in Spirit and Truth! Even though His Name can be uttered in curses and blasphemy by those who do not know Him and some who simply despise Him — yet His Name is to be known and glorified in personal relationships with His people. Eventually, at the Name of Jesus every knee shall bow and every tongue shall confess that Jesus is Lord!

We do not vainly try to commune with an impersonal God where we possess no knowledge of His Name — we are not of those who Jesus said “Ye worship ye know not what...” but we not only know Him but we actually took on His Name in baptism (Acts 2:38). His Name is above every name! His Name was meant to be on the lips of His people — in prayer, in worship, in thanksgiving, in praise! He came to redeem us and to do so came with a redemptive Name — Jesus Christ! Emmanuel — God with us ... please notice the word “with” — not afar off, not remote, and certainly not unknown!

The mistake of the fence builders was to lose intimacy with God because they forgot His Name. May God help us to cling ever more dearly to the Name of Jesus Christ!

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