

15 Then came to Yeshua some Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem and asked,
²Why do your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders by not washing their hands before they eat bread?

commentary

15:1 Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem – As mentioned in previous chapters, the main opposing Pharisaic movement that both Yeshua and Yohanan the Immerser faced came from the Judean region, and more specifically from Jerusalem. These people were the Khaverim, the hallakhists of Judea, whose purity laws were just as meticulous as the high priest's himself (cf. *Mishna Hagiga 2:7*). The use of the term "perushim" (i.e., those who set themselves apart), refers here to the fact that by means of their ritualistic purity laws they distanced themselves from the common Israeli. The original intent of the Hassidim haRishonim with these purity observances was to sanctify their souls from wicked character traits. Some of their disciples would follow them as a tradition, being meticulous with the details of these practices, but would miss the spirit behind the intent. Their way to perceive these matters of purity clashed with the outlook of the Galilean Hassidim, who in some accounts are portrayed disregarding them and not willing to accept them as Biblical obligations, hence the dissenting opinions between these two groups. Notice when Khaverim recorded incidents of the Hassidim, they sometimes omitted their names. Instead, they would refer to "certain Hassid" (cf. *Shabbat 15a, Bava Qama 50b, 80a...etc*). More serious was the discussion among the sages of whether Honi haMeaggel and Hanina ben Dosa's manner of praying was heresy or not (*Taanit 23a; Berakhot 34b*). In spite of this mild rivalry, the sages still admired them and described them in a positive light, comparing them at times with Biblical prophets like Eliyahu haNavi (cf. *Berakhot 34b; Taanit 23a, 25b; Bereshit Rabbah 7*).

15:2 the tradition of the elders – Notice how the question is worded: "Why do your disciples transgress... etc." They were blaming his disciples, not Yeshua himself, who probably did wash his hands in front of them. Mark is more specific in explaining it was "some of his disciples;" i.e., not all of them (*Mark 7:2*). Hand washing, known in Hebrew as netilat yadaim, is commanded in the Torah to the priests (1) before starting their service (cf. *Exodus 30:18-21*), and (2) before touching terumah (*Lev. 22:7*). Terumah refers to the donations and tithes that the people gave to the priests. By doing so, the gift became consecrated to the Temple and, therefore, belonged to God (*ibid. 22:15*). Terumah was usually grain, oil and wine, of which only grain (in the form of bread) was directly touched with the hands. With the time, the practice was expanded not only to the terumah, but also to the qorbanot, i.e., the sacrifices (*Shabbat 14b-15a*). Even if the priest was already clean, he had to perform the ritual in obedience to the commandment and in reverence to the Creator. The Torah also instructs different forms of water rinsing and immersions to the Israelites who have been in contact with impurity before entering the Temple (cf. *Mishna Yadaim*). The Hassidim haRishonim (the early pious Pharisees) acquired this extra measure of holiness, by following on their own accord purity laws that went beyond the letter of the Torah, emulating the strict regulations of the high priest himself, not wanting to be in "defilement" even when eating their own bread, after visiting a cemetery or after going to the bathroom. Their later disciples, the Khaverim, wanted the netilat yadaim to be performed by the entire nation, priests and Israelites alike. Biblically speaking, being in a state of impurity only meant a person could not touch the terumah or enter the Temple. It was not a sin by any means, and it is perfectly permitted to eat ritually impure foods. Do not confuse impure with forbidden, though (cf. *Mishne Torah, Tumat Okhalin 16:12*). Since the Temple was in Judea, its inhabitants probably went often, even daily, to study Torah, to pray and to offer sacrifices, whereas most Galileans only visited the Temple during the high holidays, which means they could live in a state of impurity almost the entire year with no consequences whatsoever (cf. *ibid. 16:11*). This alone made a huge difference in the way the two groups observed the laws of purity. The general agreement is that they are only required when entering the Temple and touching the terumah, as it is written "If he does not purify himself, he defiles the

³Yeshua replied, and said to them, And why do you transgress the command of God for the sake of your tradition? ⁴For God said, Honor your father and mother and Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death. ⁵But you say, Whoever says to his father or mother, Whatever it is that you may be benefitted from me is now a qorban, they are not to honor their father and mother with it.

—relevant quotes—

“Why was impurity imposed on un-rinsed hands? It is because a man’s hands are active (and apt to touch all types of dirty things inadvertently) and then when he touches the consecrated food, it will be rendered inedible.” (*Shabbat 14a*)

—commentary—

Sanctuary of God” (*Num. 10:13; cf. Mishne Torah, Tumat Okhalin 16:10*). But they reasoned: Aren’t we all a temple too? As per the legal Talmudic reason that the sages established the netilat yadaim as binding around the year 66 C.E., it was to “familiarize the priests” (*Hullin 106a*). Later books offer pious and esoteric rationalizations which are merely hashkafa (non-binding opinions), but the main hallakhic reason remains the same: to ensure the priests will wash their hands before touching terumah, especially when the Temple is rebuilt (*cf. Magen Avraham O.C. 158; Rashba*).

15:3 Yeshua replied and said to them – It is very common among the scholars of the Gemara to answer a question with another question. It was often more effective than offering a plain answer.

15:3 Why do you transgress the command of God – Later rabbis rationalized the imposition of netilat yadaim under the command “to obey the sages,” whereas others loosely derived it from the fact that a man with discharges is considered impure as long as he does not wash his hands (*cf. Leviticus 15:11; Hullin 106a*). Regardless, these Pharisees were accusing Yeshua’s disciples of breaking a tradition of the elders. He accuses them of something worse: of breaking, not a tradition, but a direct command. Following the *qal vaKhome*r methodology, he defends what he perceives as a light issue by bringing up a heavier problem.

15:4 Honor your father and your mother – This is from Exodus 20:12. “Anyone who curses their father or mother... etc” can be found in Exodus 21:17 and Leviticus 20:9.

15:5 Whatever you may be benefitted from me is now a qorban – The Mishna records an incident which took place in Beit Horon, near Jerusalem. It is written that “it once happened in Beit Horon that a man wanted his father to participate in his son’s wedding, but because of a vow his father could not derive benefit from anything of his son. The son then gave all the possessions of the ceremony – including the courtyard and the food – to his friend [thus making him the owner of everything] with the intention that his father could participate in the banquet, but his friend decided to consecrate it all to Heaven and the son lost it all, because, the sages reasoned, If what you offer as a gift cannot be consecrated, then it was not a gift in the first place” (*cf. Nedarim 5:6*). Who initiated the vow is not specified in the Mishna – it could have been either the father or the son – and commentaries explore both possibilities. Yeshua comes from the position that it was in fact the son who initiated the vow, as the surrounding paragraphs of the Mishna deal with this issue.

15:5 They are not to honor their father – The Mishna debates the technicalities of whether offering our possessions to a third party was permitted or not, but Yeshua straightforwardly attacks the root of the problem: making a vow in which a father could not derive benefit from his own son. Yeshua says such a vow goes against the essence of the written Torah. The position of the sages is that a person must honor their vows no matter what, as it is written: “He must do everything that came out of his mouth” (*Num. 30:3*). If a man says that certain object is forbidden to him because it is consecrated as a qorban, then he must follow his word (*Mishna Nedarim 1:1*). But why in the world make such a wicked vow in the first place, denying his possession to his parents? The Mishna answers such a person has made a wicked vow,

⁶Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition. ⁷You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: ⁸These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. ⁹Their fear of me is vain; it is taught as a precept of men. ¹⁰And he called the crowd and said to them, Listen and understand.

commentary

because the upright people generally do not make vows (*ibid.* 1:1). The son of the story “would not have made such a vow had he considered honoring his parents” (*Gemara Nedarim 64b*). When such a person wants to dissolve the vow, the Sanhedrin could ask him: “Did you know that by doing such a vow you would dishonor your father and your mother?” (*Mishna Nedarim. 9:1*). The *Gemara Nedarim (64a-b)* has many opinions tackling the issue of dissolving the evil vow, so the general agreement is that the vow was evil in the first place. Rabbi Tzaddoq would say that any person that realizes their vow was against God’s honor, their vow becomes invalid. Yeshua’s point is clear: Allowing the existence of such a vow goes against Torah.

15:6 you nullify the word of God – The idea that Yeshua is trying to convey is quite simple and consistent throughout the entire book: The commands of the written Torah take precedence over any tradition. If a tradition does not contradict Torah or if it becomes hallakha, it must be observed, as he says: “You should have done the latter without neglecting the former” (*Matt. 23:23*), and again, “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moshe’s seat, therefore everything they tell you to do, you do and observe.” However, when someone breaks the essence of the written Torah, such behavior must be rejected. This specific tradition was at odds with the Decalogue itself.

15:9 it is taught as a precept of men – This is from Isaiah 29:13. The word “precept” is mitzva מצוה. In order to have a proper perspective and avoid falling into anachronistic conclusions, we must see the whole picture in context: The hallakha we now have is the product of hundreds of years of discussions and debates among the sages, not only between the schools of Hillel and Shammai, but between the other schools of thought as well. Even among the modern commentators there are still disputes, how much more so in the first century, when basically every school followed rules that were specific of their own rabbi! In the case of the netilat yadaim, there are opinions recorded by the Talmudic scholars of the first, second and even third centuries, so it is quite unlikely that in Yeshua’s days, contrary to popular opinion, it was a hallakhically binding law, let alone as it is today contemplated by the Orthodox. Rather, some groups were purity observant on their own accord, some groups were not, and some others were trying to impose it on everyone else, and all of them coexisted. Also, the purity traditions observed by these khaverim were more external (hygienic, if you wish) than, for example, the same rituals performed by the kabbalists and the Hassidim haRishonim, who performed them as part of their search for spirituality.^a Certainly the sages reasoned our home table is like an altar – and we should therefore perform netilat yadaim – but this concept was established after the Temple fell as they could no longer offer sacrifices, as it says, “Now that the Temple is not standing, a person’s table effects atonement” (*Menakhot 97a*). Yeshua’s perspective is prior to all that and stems from mussar (Jewish ethics). Like a good Hassid, he is not as worried about external defilement as he is about the spiritual impurity that separates us from God. His point of view is still one that added to the debate and contributed to the creation of our modern hallakha. The legalistic and chronological nuances of this story prove this was not a mere pious legend that the Nazarenes passed down to each other; it is most likely an accurate historical account of Yeshua’s life.

^a A similar point of view is offered by the Jewish scholar Hyam Maccoby in *Jesus the Pharisee*. He argues that the netilat yadaim presented in the Gospels was hygienic, not the later hallakhically established practice. Yeshua, like all the Hassidim, would reject the notion that hygienic practices are relevant to ritual purity.

¹¹What goes into the mouth does not defile a man, but what comes out of their mouth, that is what defiles a man. ¹²Then the disciples came to him and asked, Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this?

commentary

15:11 what comes out of their mouth, that is what defiles a man – Yeshua is talking about inner, spiritual defilement, like the prophet Haggai does when he says: “When someone carries consecrated meat... If a person defiled by a corpse touches [it]... does it become impure? The priests answered, Yes, it becomes impure. Then Haggai said: So it is with this people and this nation in my sight, declares Hashem. Whatever they do and whatever they offer is impure” (*Haggai 2:11-14*). It is written: “All human’s toil is for their mouth” (*Eccl. 6:7*). This has been explained to mean that a person’s religious practices are not enough to counterbalance the evil which comes out of their mouths, and that they should rather seek silence (cf. *Hullin 89a*).

15:12 The Pharisees were offended – According to Rabbi Soloveitchik, they were offended because they understood that he was disregarding the laws of kashrut and allowing his disciples to eat forbidden animals. Soloveitchik follows this reasoning because he wants to deal with a common misconception of the Christians, but that is not why the Pharisees were offended. The story deals with ritual purity and traditions of men which overrule the Torah; it does not revolve around kashrut at all. They were offended because of their religious lifestyles: holding themselves apart from the common folks avoiding all sources of impurity in order to live in sanctity, but Yeshua challenged their worldview by claiming their protection from ritual impurity meant nothing as long as spiritual impurity came out of their mouths. It has been stated, “It is not the dead per se what makes you impure, nor the water that makes you pure; rather, it is a decree that the Blessed Holy One has decreed” (*Bamidbar Rabbah 19:8*). If God decrees that something renders you ritually pure or impure, it is God’s word that caused such status; neither food, nor water nor corpses are intrinsically pure or impure. Therefore, a man can only be spiritually “defiled” by committing a sin.

relevant quotes

“When you go into any region – among the sons of Israel – and enter their villages, if they welcome you, eat what they set before you and heal the sick among them, for what goes into your mouth will not defile you, but rather what comes out of your mouth, this is what defiles a man” (*Gospel of Thomas #14b*)

“The Yehudi of Peshisha, Rabbi Yaaqov Yitzhaq, once told his disciple Rabbi Simha Bunim to go on a journey. Bunim did not ask any questions but left the town with a number of other Hassidim. They came to a village and stopped at an inn. The innkeeper was so pleased with his pious guests that he invited them to have fleishik (meat) for dinner. Rabbi Bunim sat down in the main room, while the others went in and out and asked all sorts of questions... whether the animal was unblemished, what the butcher was like, and just how careful the meat had been salted. Suddenly they were interrupted by a beggar: Hasidim! You are so careful about the purity of what you put into your mouths, but you don’t worry half as much about the purity of what comes out of your mouths. Rabbi Bunim was about to reply, but the beggar had already disappeared – for this is Eliyahu’s habit. Then the rabbi understood why his teacher had sent him on this journey.” (*Sipurei Hassidim, Rabbi Zvin p.95*)^b

^b An English version is found in *Tales of the Hasidim by Martin Buber, Later Masters*, pg. 229.

¹³He replied, Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be pulled up by the roots. ¹⁴Leave them; they are blind guides. If the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit. ¹⁵Then Keifa answered and said, Master, explain the parable to us. ¹⁶He responded, Are you too without understanding yet? ¹⁷Don't you know that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then it is purged out of the body? ¹⁸But that which comes out of the mouth comes from the heart, and this is what defiles a man.

textual variants

15:15 Keifa – In some manuscripts “Shimon Keifa.” Shimon was his birth name. Keifa was the nickname that Yeshua gave him later. Keifa, meaning ‘the stone’, is known in Greek as Petros. The book of Mattai usually uses Keifa as the spokesman for the twelve disciples.

commentary

15:13 Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be pulled up – Any teaching that goes against the spirit of the written Torah will eventually be cancelled.

15:14 Leave them; they are blind guides – The Talmud says that “Certain Galilean taught to Rabbi Hisda: When a shepherd is angry with his flock, he renders the leading goat blind” (*Bava Qama 52a*). Similarly, when the Creator is angry with Israel, he appoints leaders that cannot see, and both the leaders and their followers fall into a pit. It appears to me that this “certain Galilean” knew the sayings of Yeshua. Blind guides do not only happen in Judaism; there are leaders all around the world teaching things from their traditions that are contrary to the written Torah, and these are the leaders Yeshua opposes to.

15:17 and then is purged out of the body – The version in Mark says “Don't you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can defile him? Because it does not go to his heart but into his stomach, and then it goes out of his body thus purging all foods” (*Mark 7:18*). Both versions are the same. However, Rabbi Soloveitchik is concerned about Christians (and Christian Bibles for that matter) mistranslating the last sentence in Mark. Some versions interpret here that “By saying this, he made all foods clean – i.e., apt for consumption.” Such mistranslation has no basis in any manuscript, neither Greek nor Aramaic, misses the parallel verse in Mattai, and is purely a misinterpretation of what the surrounding text is saying. As said above, the context is about ritual purity and has nothing to do with kashrut. In addition to that, Yeshua has just argued that no tradition can annul the written Torah. Claiming that all foods are apt for consumption is a direct violation of the Torah and no Jewish sect – past, present or future – has ever allowed such anti-Biblical indulgency. Years after this incident, Keifa himself still declared that he had never eaten anything impure or forbidden (*Acts 10:14*). Christians, however, misinterpret once again this passage. Keifa has a vision and sees all types of unclean animals, then he is told to eat. Christians take the vision literally and interpret here that the laws of kashrut are done away with. But Keifa did not begin to eat dogs and pigs after the vision; he meditated on its meaning and concluded the vision symbolized the association with gentiles (*Acts 10:17, 28*). The body takes care of eliminating the bacteria and anything that is unnecessary; such physical process is natural and does not render anybody either pure or impure, because physical food is not intrinsically pure or impure and does not touch the soul. Rather, if one person has the craving for treif and eats food that the Bible does not allow him to eat, such craving was in his heart in the first place and that evil desire is what rendered him morally impure.

15:18 But that which comes out of the mouth comes from the heart – “The heart discerns, the tongue shapes, the mouth articulates, the esophagus lets all types of food in and out” (*Berakhot 61a*). “The heart is deceitful above all things” (*Jer. 17:9*). All sin we commit was first conceived in the heart; that is, from within ourselves.

¹⁹Because out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. ²⁰These are what defile a person; but eating with unwashed hands does not defile man.

commentary

15:19 Because out of the heart come evil thoughts – Evil thoughts are the primary reason for all other sins, as the sages say, “An evil heart is the worst of all evil traits because it encompasses all the other evil traits” (*Avot 2:9*). Hence, it is taught that “the thought of sinning is worse than the sin itself” (*Yoma 29a*). “Anger is like idolatry” (*Shabbat 105b*), and “lustful thoughts exclude a person from the presence of the Almighty” (*Nidda 13b*). The command “You must not covet” (*Exodus 20:17*) implies that the mere desire in one’s heart to take what belongs to someone else is in itself a sin – even if you refrain from stealing it. “Deceiving people, even pagans, is Biblically forbidden” (*Hullin 94a*). Defilement comes from within, as it is written, “When the serpent [the evil inclination] came upon Hava, he infused her with defilement, and it was passed on to all Israel, but when Israel stood at Mount Sinai [to receive the Torah and rectify their ways] the defilement went away” (*Avoda Zara 22b*).

15:20 but eating with unwashed hands does not defile man – How the Galilean Hassidim disregarded the hygienic laws of the Khaverim is explained in the Talmud of Jerusalem, where the Khaverim ruled that liquids which were left in the open should be thrown away as they might have been contaminated with venom from snakes, but the Hassidim not only disregarded this law, they claimed it was a lack of faith in Divine Providence (*Yerushalmi Taanit 23a*). As for the netilat yadaim, Shimon the humble entered the holy place without washing his hands because, according to him, he had a greater degree of holiness than the high priest due to his ascetic life (*Tosefta Kelim Qama 1:6*), reason by which the rabbis eventually excommunicated him (*Mishna Eduyot 5:6*). Was, then, Yeshua’s opinion heresy as well? Certainly not, because he did not neglect the Biblical obligation of being purified before entering the Sanctuary, but rather offered an opinion against washing one’s hands before eating bread. We certainly have so many different opinions in the Talmud of a similar nature, such as the indulgent opinions of Rav and Avina who said “one can wash their hands in the morning and take care it should apply to the meals of the whole day” (*Hullin 106b-107a*). Notice that whether the “Rav” mentioned here is Yehuda haNasi or his disciple, they both lived in the second century, after the Temple had fallen. Rabbi Yitzhaq bar Ashian, who also lived after the fall of the Temple, was of the unique opinion that the mayim rishonim (washing before eating bread) was a meritorious act – in his words: a mitzva – not an obligation (*Hullin 105a*). This interpretation is elucidated by the Tosafists, who substituted the word mitzva מצוה (meaning: ‘meritorious act’ in this context) with rashut רשות (meaning: ‘optional’). Thus, their version says: “Hand washing before bread is optional, after meals is obligatory” (*Tosefta Berakhot 5:14*). Notice also that, although washing after meals (known as mayim akharonim) is emphasized in the Talmud as more stringent than netilat yadaim itself, several communities from Ashkenazi origin have abandoned this practice altogether in modern days (cf. *Rosh, Berakhot 8:6; Shu”t Hisorerut teshuva vol.1, 63*). All these discussions took place among the sages and scholars way after the fall of the Temple, so we can only consider Yeshua’s opinion as valid as any other, since it predates both the Talmudic discussions and the modern hallakhic ruling of netilat yadaim.

²¹Leaving that place, Yeshua withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. ²²Behold, a Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, Master, son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is grievously distressed by a demon. ²³Yeshua did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, Send her away, since she keeps crying out after us. ²⁴He answered, I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.

commentary

15:21 the region of Tyre and Sidon – Notice how Yeshua spoke about these two pagan cities in chapter 11, saying, “if the miracles that were performed [in Bethsaida] had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes” (*Matt. 11:21-22*). He was not interested in preaching in those cities, as he instructed his disciples “Do not go into any way of the pagans and do not enter the cities of the Samaritans” (*Matt. 10:5*). His decision to travel to the north was merely in an attempt to escape popularity (cf. *Mark 7:24*), but Divine Providence guided his steps.

15:22 Behold, a Canaanite woman... came to him – The gospel of Mark says she was a Greek Syrophenician. The term Canaanite is used here as a generic term for the Syrian pagans of Phoenicia. Greek meant non-Israelite, i.e., a gentile. Yeshua’s fame reached that far, as people from Tyre and Sidon travelled long distances to listen to him (cf. *Luke 6:17*). It is because of his popularity that the woman recognized him and called him “son of David.”

15:23 Yeshua did not answer a word – Not only kept silent, but also left the place, because his disciples said, “she keeps crying out after us.” Yeshua was consistent in his instruction not to associate with pagans. But she persevered in her crying, thus demonstrating her faith in that God does wonders through the tzaddiq. The son of David, the soul of Mashiakh, represents redemption, freedom, salvation, deliverance. “Even if a person fell very far, God forbid, and finds himself in the lowest pit of Gehenna... he still has great hope by virtue of the truly great tzaddiq... They must keep on pleading to return... until God looks upon them from heaven and answers them” (cf. *Liqutei Moharan 2:78*).

15:24 I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel – As per the author of Mattai, Yeshua’s message and mission was only for the sons of Israel; what we call today “the Jews.” What people call “missionize” – i.e., to actively seek pagans and convert them to the knowledge of God – did not happen during Yeshua’s mission. His mission was to bring all the sons of Israel from every tribe to full repentance, so that Israel will be one and the name of Hashem will be one, and the kingdom of heaven will be manifested on earth. It is a missions of Messiah’s soul to restore the people of Israel, as it is written: “I will restore Israel to its pasture” (*Jer. 50:19*). The Vilna Gaon applies to Mashiakh ben Yosef the verse (*Isaiah 35:10*): “The ransomed of Hashem will return; i.e. will do teshuva” (*Qol haTor 1:1:3*). It is written that an expected Mashiakh will “compel all the sons of Israel to walk in the Torah and strengthen its breaches” (*Rambam, Hilkhos Melakhim 11:4*). Strengthening the breaches of the Torah refers to correcting and fixing those observances of the Torah which are done in an erroneous manner, like Yeshua teaches to his brethren the Pharisees, things such as observing mitzvot without the proper kavana, or following traditions that contradict the written Torah. The reason that Yeshua’s teachings were disseminated among the gentiles after his death was because Israel did not repent in his days, and its main purpose was to cause zeal on Israel, as the Vilna Gaon teaches, “The sanctification of God’s name in the eyes of the gentiles will affect even the sinners of Israel, so that they will repent from their evil ways. When they will see that other nations recognize the power that God has given to his people, then they will feel shame and return to God” (*Qol haTor 4:intro*). Notice when Yeshua says this, he is responding to his students demand to send the woman away, not to her, and immediately afterwards he engages in a conversation with her, so what did he mean? Was this Canaanite woman perhaps from the lost Northern tribes and her plea to a son of David was a recognition of allegiance to the tribe of Judah? Did he perceive an Israelite soul trapped within her? Whatever the case was, she is still described as a gentile who found grace, just like the Roman soldier from early chapters.

²⁵The woman came and knelt before him, saying, Master, help me! ²⁶Yeshua replied, It is not proper to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs. ²⁷And she said, Even so, my master; yet the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table. ²⁸Then Yeshua said to her, Woman, your faith is great! Let it be to you as you desire. And her daughter was healed at that very hour.

commentary

15:26 to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs – Rabbi Soloveitchik puts it this way: “The children refers to Israel, as it is written (*Deut. 14:1*), You are children of Hashem your God. The bread means his [Torah] teachings, as Yeshua himself says somewhere else: Beware of the leaven of the Perushim” (*Soloveitchik on Mattai 15:26*). By ‘dogs’ he may mean sinners (*Psalms 22:17*), fools (*Prov. 26:11*) or straightforwardly pagans (cf. *Rashi on Exod. 22:30 [31]*).^c This interpretation on the surface poses a difficulty in the simple meaning, because the woman is asking for her daughter's healing, i.e., for a miracle, not for a Torah class, so Yeshua's response that the teachings of Israel are not for everybody appears to be almost out of place. A second opinion is that Yeshua's imagery of bread in this passage refers to charity, not to Torah. As we will see, the two opinions are correct and interconnected; after all, he certainly uses bread systematically as a symbol for Torah everywhere else. Concerning charity, our sages speak of a concept known as “the bread of shame,” which can be described as a gift that a person receives gratuitously, without having done anything to earn it, not even a little. Dogs are scavengers and their ethical values are not as complex as ours, so they are fine eating “bread of shame,” but for humans, an earned gift is more desirable than the inner shame of a reward we do not deserve (cf. *Bava Metzieh 38a*). So in the plain meaning Yeshua would be saying, “these miracles belong to Israel who observes Torah, not to the pagans who desecrate Torah.” In a deeper level, what type of charitable bread is considered a miraculous medicine? Only the spiritual bread, the Torah. The sages taught that studying Torah can be a remedy for every illness, as it makes a person cleave to Hashem and causes worldly pain to leave (cf. *Berakhot 8a; Eiruvim 54a*). Additionally, when done with proper kavana, engaging in Torah study is an atonement for a person's sins (*Menakhot 110a*). It is thus written: “It is a tree of life for those who grasp it” (*Proverb. 3:18*).

15:27 yet the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table – The Peshitta has it: “Yet the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table and live.” The crumbs are the lower levels of Torah understanding, and so the table is the house of study. Dogs may not eat from the banquet table, but they will eat anything that falls from their master, so it is imperative to choose wisely which master to loyally follow, as the apocrypha says, “They went forth, and the young man's dog with them” (cf. *Tovia 5:16*). A person that sits at the feet of a tzaddiq will eat from the spiritual crumbs of wisdom that he utters and they will live. When she says “my daughter,” in Hebrew Bati בַּתִּי, she metaphorically means her house (בַּיִת), the kingdom, the sefirah of Malkhut. Come and see: This physical world is grievously distressed by the forces of the Other Side, and there seems no way to heal it. Yeshua responds to the Mother of this world that only Israel does God's will, whereas the rest of the world has no will to follow the Torah. It is, therefore, not proper to give them the children's bread. But when a person, no matter that person's background, decides to sit at the feet of a tzaddiq to learn Torah and do teshuva, at that moment they will eat from the tree of life and no longer be under the forces of the Other Side.

15:28 Let it be to you as you desire – According to the ratzon רָצוֹן in your heart and according to the intensity of your emunah, so it will be done to you. Emunah literally means fidelity, fidelity to Hashem, and fidelity to the truth of your desire (cf. *Prov. 23:7*). “Whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be so” (*Mark 11:24*). The depths of this concept cannot be tackled here, as it belongs to the teachings of sefer Yetzirah. Yeshua's teachings on this matter are encoded in the gospel of Thomas.

^c For a broader understanding of why he compares her to a dog, read commentary on Mattai 7:6.

²⁹Yeshua left there and went along the Sea of Galilee. Then he went up on the mountain and sat down. ³⁰Great crowds came to him, bringing the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute and many others, and laid them at his feet; and he healed them. ³¹The multitudes were amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled made well, the lame walking and the blind seeing. And they praised the God of Israel. ³²Yeshua called his disciples to him and said, I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. I do not want to send them away hungry, or they may collapse on the way. ³³His disciples answered, Where could we get enough bread in this remote place to feed such a crowd?

—commentary—

15:29 went up on a mountain and sat down – This portion repeats events from previous chapters, albeit differently described. It may be that they happened more than once, or it may be that two different versions of the same oral tradition ended up being compiled, since people passed down these stories orally and the details would vary with the course of time. Whenever oral traditions are written down more than once, differences always appear, no matter whether they are from the Nazarene texts, the midrash or the Talmud. Even the Torah itself shows differences in the two places where the Decalogue is given. This was intended by Divine Providence and was properly explained in Oral Torah. Differences serve to decipher and derive more Torah teachings from them.

15:30 the blind, the crippled, the mute – See Mattai 4 (4:23-24) and 11 (11:5).

15:32 They have already been with me for three days and have nothing to eat – This might be an alternative version of the miracle in which Yeshua feeds the five thousand (*Matt. 14:13-21*). This can be deduced by the fact that the disciples react in the two stories in the same manner, “Where could we get enough bread?” as if they had no recollection of the previous miracle. This author, however, emphatically makes Yeshua recognize both miracles in the next chapter (*Matt. 16:9-10*). Mark also records the two stories separately, although some scholars argue Mark’s second story may have been an interpolation.^d In truth, the approaches of the two stories are distinct enough to derive a different spiritual message from them, and so they deserve to be treated as independent narratives. If Yeshua multiplied the bread twice, he would be following after the line of the biggest prophets of old, as this is one of the miracles the prophet Elisha is known for (cf. *2Kings 4:42-44*). This has been explained above; that the sages often compared the Galilean Hassidim to the Biblical prophets. It is told that the Hassid Hanina ben Dosa knew with exact precision the fortune of a girl who had fallen into a deep cistern, and he announced the exact moment when she had come out of it. The sages then asked him: Are you a prophet, since you have exact knowledge of what is happening far away? And he responded, I am neither prophet nor the son of a prophet (*Yevamot 121a*).

—relevant quotes—

“A man came from Baal Shalisha and brought to the man of God bread of the first fruits, twenty loaves of barley bread and sheaves of fresh grain in their shells. He said, Give to the people [i.e., to these students] and let them eat. But his servant asked: How am I to set this [bread] before one hundred men? And he said, Give the people and let them eat, for this is what Hashem has said: They will eat and have some left over. He placed it before them, and they ate and left over, according to the word of Hashem” (*2Kings 4:42-44*)

^d cf. Bruno Bauer.

³⁴Yeshua said to them, How many loaves do you have? They replied, Seven, and a few small fish. ³⁵He then directed the multitudes to sit down on the ground ³⁶and took the seven loaves and the fish. When he had given thanks, he broke them and gave them to the disciples, and they in turn to the people. ³⁷They all ate and were satisfied. Afterward the disciples picked up seven basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. ³⁸The number of those who ate was four thousand men, besides women and children. ³⁹After Yeshua had sent the crowd away, he got into the boat and went to the vicinity of Magadan.

commentary

15:34 Seven, and a few small fish – This time it is seven loaves of bread and a few small fish, as opposed to the five loaves and the two fish of the other miracle. The number of the crowds is four thousand instead of the previous five thousand. And the leftover baskets are seven instead of twelve.

15:36 When he had given thanks – This refers to the grace before eating bread. It is worth noting that despite the fact that this chapter shows Yeshua arguing against certain traditions of the Perushim, it also shows him adhering to this element of the Oral Torah, because the Torah commands to say a blessing after being satisfied (*Deut. 8:10*), but the grace before meals was established by the rabbis (*Berakhot 35a*).

15:37 picked up seven basketfuls of broken pieces – There is a reason this passage comes after the conversation with the Canaanite woman. Yeshua told the woman it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs. Those words had to do, on the one hand, with the bread of shame and on the other hand with Torah. So the passage begins with Yeshua healing the multitudes from all types of illnesses; mirroring the charitable miracle the gentile woman was asking for. Then he pities them and commands his disciples to feed them bread. On this occasion the loaves of bread and the number of leftover baskets is the same: seven. The specific number of small fish is not mentioned here because it is irrelevant. The small fish represent the tzaddiqim, the sons of Israel who are a light to the world, if only a little, and who are to make the masses to "praise the God of Israel" by giving them their bread; this is the Torah. The seven loaves are the teachings of the tzaddiqim. The masses represent the people all around the world. They are four thousand as a symbolism of the four corners of the world and the four kabbalistic worlds: Atzilut, Beriah, Yetzirah and Assiyah. Four to the 'elef' power represents the four expressions for redemption (*Exodus 6:6-8*): (1) "I will take you out" (2) "I will save you" (3) "I will redeem you" (4) "I will take you to me as a nation." While the first three appear to be one-sided promises, the last one requires the people to take part in the action of becoming God's nation, which is done by observing the Torah (cf. *Zohar hadash, Yitro*). The giving of the Torah happened exactly forty-nine days after Israel left Egypt. Forty-nine is seven times seven. In this teaching both the children of Israel and the dogs who eat the leftovers are equally satisfied: Seven loaves from the children, and seven leftover baskets which are for the "dogs," so to speak. Seven times seven equals forty-nine. In conclusion, the previous miracle enumerated twelve baskets of food, since twelve alludes to the children of Israel. This second miracle is a symbol of redemption and includes both the sons of Israel and those souls among the nations with "great faith" who adhere to the tzaddiq by claiming: Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you (*Zech. 8:23*). If a human wills it so, he will find food for his soul and be satiated, regardless of his background, hometown or skin color, because God loves his creation and does not show partiality. Even so, the lights of Israel, called small fish, need to multiply so that the light to the nations will be brighter. Amen.