

א"ר חייא בר בא אותי עזבו אוותרה שמא את תורתי שמרו שאילו אותי עזבו
ותורתי שמרו השאור שבה היה מקרבן אצלי

[if] They have abandoned Me. I will cede! [for] Perhaps they would [still] observe My Torah for if they abandoned Me but My Torah they observe, its essence will bring them back close to me. (Hagigah 1:7 6b).

God may be content with the mere observance of the Torah (i.e. His commandments) and may even merit the Jewish People His protection and good will. However, the relationship that God ultimately expects from the Jewish People is predicated upon accepting Him Himself and not just on observing His commandments.

“Watching” (שמרו) the Torah or “observing” God’s commandments, even without pious and devout intentions has the unique property of bringing one to accept God.

An alternative tradition of this teaching is found in *Pesiqta de-Rav Kahana*:

ר' חונא ר' ירמיה בשם ר' חייא בר אבא כת' "ואותי עזבו ואת תורתי לא שמרו" (ירמיה טז:יא), שמא תורתי שמרו?
הלוואי אתי עזבו ותורתי שמרו, שאילו אתי עזבו ותורתי שמרו מתוך שהיו מתעסקין בה השאור שבה היה מחזירן אצלי
(פסיקתא, איכה 254)

The additional phrase “because they would occupy themselves with it” appears to be explaining the preceding term “watching” (שמרו). “Occupy” appears to mean “studying and interpreting” and pinpoints the aforementioned property.

A close comparison of the two traditions reveals some theological differences. Firstly, while in the former God says “if only”, in the latter He says: “I will yield”. Secondly, while the former states “return to me”, the latter states “bring close to me”. Thirdly, while the former only speaks of the observance of the Torah, the latter depicts an active study of the Torah.

The version of the *Pesiqta de-Rav Kahana* expresses and apparently perceives God’s relationship with His people as more personal and optimistic than in the Talmud Yerushalmi.