

WHEREFORE *MITZVOT*, THE DIVINE COMMANDMENTS?

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The compendium of *mitzvot* in the Torah, the Divine commandments, devolved on the people of Israel along with the faith in the One and incorporeal God, and love and fear of Him. This is the core of the Jewish creed. Wherein is its significance? The Hebrew Bible presents a scheme of moral education involving a dynamic interaction between God and Man through the medium of *mitzvot*. The scheme not only defines the desired goal but also proposes the means to reach it. God sets the standards and fixes the norms as regulative principles for everyday living. The purpose is for Israel to become a holy people.

The *mitzvot* – the bridge between Man and God – are not arbitrary demands made upon Israel exclusively for God's own glory, however. According to Maimonides, their rationale is for the benefit and improvement of Man, even to refine and purify him, adds Nahmanides.¹ The Bible recognizes Man as he really is; a highly intelligent creature, but beset by conflicting inclinations and passions, prone to override his best intentions. The *mitzvot* are designed to curb the violence in human nature through incessant exercise of moral discipline, and to harness both the good and evil inclinations toward service to Man and to God.

Many verses in the Torah express this teleology of *mitzvot*. Of them, two in Deuteronomy summarize their intent and method:

And now, O Israel, hearken unto the statutes and unto the ordinances, which I teach you, to do them; that ye may live, and go in and possess the land which the LORD, the God of your fathers giveth you (4:1).

To keep for thy good the commandments of the Lord, and His statutes, which I command thee this day . . . (10:13).

What follows in this overview may be read as a commentary on these verses.

TAXONOMY OF *MITZVOT*

It is nothing short of genius for Judaism to select as its central credo the *Hear O Israel* passage (Deut. 6:4-9), to set upon its believers the yoke of the One Kingdom of Heaven, and to mandate that we teach the credo to our children. However, avowal of love and loyalty to God is empty without concrete acts. We demonstrate our love for Him by accepting the yoke of His *mitzvot*. Rabbinic tradition has classified three kinds of *mitzvot*:

1. There are obligations of Man toward God and obligations toward his fellowman. The two tablets of the Decalogue are the prime example of such a division. The first contains such commandments as *Thou shalt have no other gods before Me*, while the other deals with injunctions against murder, stealing, adultery, and so on. Tradition enumerates 613 *mitzvot*: 365 of them are negative – *thou shalt not*; 248 are positive – expressed by different forms of *thou shalt*.

2. In the two verses quoted above, three types of *mitzvot* are mentioned: *commandments, statutes, and ordinances* – all designed "for thy good." The philosopher Saadia Gaon differentiates between them as rational and revelational *mitzvot*; the first are those that Man could arrive at by his own intellect, while the second are those beyond the limit of man's intelligence.

The Talmud in T. Yoma 67b discusses a similar division expressed in Leviticus 18:4: *Mine ordinances [mishpatim] shall you do, and My statutes [hukim] shall you keep, to walk therein: I am the Lord, your God*. Says the Talmud:

These ordinances which, if they were not written [in Scripture], should by right have been written, and they are idolatry, immorality, bloodshed, robbery *And my statutes* . . . are commandments to which Satan objects, such as *shaatnez* [the mixing of linen and wool], *halitzah* [refusing a levirate marriage] And if you might think [the latter] are vain things, therefore Scripture adds *I am the Lord. I the Lord have made it a statute*.

Rashi, the great exegete, comments that ostensibly meta-rational statutes [*hukim*] are mocked by the nations, like the prohibition of eating swine's flesh, to which R' Elazar ben Azariah once rejoined, "One is not to say that the meat of swine is hateful or distasteful. It is probably quite tasty, but what am I to do since it is forbidden to us."² Statutes are proclaimed as Divine decrees, which Man neither understands nor has the right to question.

3. Underlying adherence to and performance of commandments, statutes, and ordinances is an ethical imperative. The ethical attributes of God are pronounced in Exodus 34:6: [He is] *merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth* Maimonides points to the Divine command that heads the litany of ethical commandments in Leviticus 19:1 (*And ye shall be holy unto Me for I the Lord am Holy*) as the one from which all the rest flow.³ God's nature implies the fullness of His ethical attributes and it is Man's obligation to imitate these attributes through *mitzvot*. The ethical dimension is so important that R' Simlai states⁴ that the 613 *mitzvot* were reduced by David to 11 in Psalm 15, then by Isaiah to 6 (33:15,16), and by Micah to 3 (*It has been told thee, O man, what is good, and what the Lord requires of thee: only to do justly and to have mercy and to walk with they God* [6:8]). Finally, they are reduced to one by Amos, *Seek Me and live* (5:4). Some say also by Habakkuk, *But the righteous shall live by his faith* (2:4).

4. That there is an obvious gradation of sin is indicated by the severity of the forms of punishment – death, whipping, monetary compensation, and the specific type of sacrifice offered in the Temple. Rabbinic tradition knows of only three cardinal sins which a Jew must be prepared to give up his life rather than commit: murder, idol-worship, and incest. Finally, for sins committed against one's fellowman, in contrast to those committed against God, the only atonement is to earn forgiveness from the injured person.

REMINDERS AND SIGNS

A special category of statutes serves as outward reminders and signs of profound verities and historical experiences. To exemplify, I shall focus on five of them, noting that observance of these *mitzvot* have importance equal to the values they symbolize. Three of them concern the Jewish male, because he traditionally spends so much of his active time in a competitive world. The others two concern both men and women.

1. *Tzitzit* – tassels or fringes (originally with a cord of blue entwined) that are attached to the corners of those garments that have four distinct corners. These are intended *to recall all the commandments of the Lord and observe them* (Num.15:39).

In order to perform this commandment as a constant reminder of God's presence in daily life, Jewish men since antiquity have not left it to a chance

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selection of a four-cornered garment to fulfill this commandment, but purposely wear such a garment every day of the week, including Shabbats and holidays.

Obviously, the Torah believes in the efficacy of symbols to promote inner commitment. This is a belief shared by the non-Jewish world. For example, a nation's flag is more than an adorned piece of cloth: a pledge of allegiance to the flag means remembrance, respect, even reverence, for the values that the nation wants to instill in its adherents.

2. *T'fillin* – The Jewish male from age 13 and above is commanded four times in the Torah (Ex. 13:10, 11:16; Deut. 6:4-9, 11:13-20) to bind a small box on the arm and another on the forehead, containing biblical passages in which the worshipper is bidden to love the Lord, Who is One, a God of justice and of history. *Impress these words upon your heart* [the command reads], *bind them as a sign on your arm and let them serve as a symbol on your forehead* (Deut.11:18). Realistically, only on weekdays is the Jewish male bidden to put on the *t'fillin*, aptly translated as *phylacteries*, a term derived from the Greek word actually meaning "reminder" or "guard"; Shabbat and holidays are themselves reminders of his relationship to the Lord.

3. *Milah* – circumcision – is a different kind of sign, for it involves the very flesh. It recalls the everlasting covenant between God and Abraham that binds all male descendants of Abraham. The terms of the covenant are as follows: God promises Abraham that he will become patriarch of a nation of multitudes and will be given the land of Canaan as an everlasting possession. Abraham, on his part and his descendants forever, are to walk in God's ways and be loyal to the Torah. Thus the reading of the statute: [The milah] *shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you. At the age of eight days every male among you throughout the generations shall be circumcised* (Gen. 17:1-4).

4. *Mezuzah* – All Jewish homes, it is commanded (Deut. 6:4-9, 11:13-20), must display the *mezuzah* – a small parchment attached to the doorpost. The parchment is inscribed with appropriate verses as a visible reminder, like *tzitzit* and *t'fillin*, to all loyal Israelites – men and women – of God's omnipresence, unity, omnipotence, and providence in daily life.

5. *Shabbat* – the Sabbath day -- a time-fixed commandment that occupies a special position in the Jewish calendar. Israel is commanded to keep Shabbat *throughout the generations as a covenant for all time; it shall be a sign for*

all time between Me and the people of Israel. The Jew must acknowledge Him as Creator of the universe and, above all, emulate Him on every seventh day when He ceased from the work of Creation (Ex. 31:16-17). Additionally, Israel is bidden on this day to remember the Exodus from Egypt (Deut.5-6). Thus, Shabbat is both the sign of an eternal covenant and acknowledgment of God as Creator of time and history.

THREE OBJECTIVES OF *MITZVOT*

1. *A Blessing to Man.* God is in no need of Man fulfilling *mitzvot*. However, as a God Who cares for Man, He is not capricious. His *mitzvot* are meant to be of benefit to Man. There are many statements in the Torah which clearly indicate the blessings that will be granted to Israel, blessings like *prolong your days in the land that you will possess* (Deut. 5:30), *prosperity in all your undertakings* (30:9), and *life and good* (30:16), if the people will *keep for [their own] good the commandments of the Lord* (10:13). Yet, the highest reward is simply the joy of doing the Divinely-proclaimed deed for its own sake.

2. *Holiness.* In Numbers 15:40, the children of Israel are enjoined to *observe all My commandments and be holy to your God*. The object is to achieve holiness, and *mitzvot* are given as the corridor to that saintly condition. Therein lies the uniqueness of Torah doctrine. Coming close to God is not achieved by seclusion, asceticism, mortifying one's flesh, or even by meditating on God, as other religions recommend, but by fulfilling *mitzvot*. As we have seen, the ancient Sages of Israel, speculating on the meaning of being holy unto God, came to the conclusion that this goal can be reached by *imitatio dei*, imitating the ethical ways of God. As He is merciful and kind and slow to anger, so shall His children of Israel be merciful and kind and slow to anger. The Jew who fulfills these ethical lessons does so not only because of the noble promptings of his heart, but also because it is a Divine imperative. Conversely, a breach of this most rational-ethical law is considered an affront to God.

Thus, from a practical standpoint, holiness was to permeate the daily life of the Jew, even in his most prosaic activities – washing of hands before eating, being sensitive to the needs of animals, conducting oneself ethically in busi-

ness. *Mitzvot* assume the role of the angels in Jacob's ladder, going up and down, connecting earth and heaven.

3. *The Forbidden and the Permitted*. The third objective is psychological: *Observe [the mitzvot] so that you do not follow your heart and eyes in your lustful urge* (Num. 16:32). Scripture is well aware that the Lord saw that *the wickedness of man was great in the earth and that every imagination in thoughts of his heart are only evil continually* (Gen. 6:5), but Scripture also assumes that Man can control his instinctual drives. Thus it offers him the *mitzvot* – the *thou shalt*s and *shall not*s – designed to regulate, control, and even to channel these instincts.

This dichotomy is reflected in the very first direct command in the Torah, when God directs Adam: *'Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat, but of the tree of knowledge of good and evil you may not eat'* (Gen. 2:16). Unfortunately, the history of mankind is over-laden with attention to the "thou shalt not" of this command, so it must be pointed out that Man is encouraged to partake freely of all the trees of the garden, with all the symbolic meaning implied therein. After the Flood, man is now permitted to partake of meat, but is forbidden to consume *flesh with blood in it* (9:4). Eventually this prohibition was expanded into the complex areas of permissible or forbidden animals and the laws of *kashrut*.

In the area of sexual relationship, perhaps the most sensitive and powerful instinctual drive of man, the dividing line between hedonism and asceticism is sharply drawn. Biblical legislation puts strict brakes on certain sexual alliances as abominations. On the other hand, from the moment God gave Eve to Adam, the Bible regards the sexual union of proper partners at suitable times as a desired value. Indeed, *be fruitful and multiply* (Gen. 1:22) was the first blessing – and commandment – conferred upon man.

The Hebrew Bible does not glorify poverty. Unashamedly, it talks about the wealth of the Patriarchs and of King Solomon. Yet, it is simultaneously acutely aware of the dangers of the desire for power through acquisition. It is not surprising, therefore, that a host of *mitzvot* seem to establish fences around unrestricted wealth. For example, properties acquired during the 50-year cycle of the Jubilee are to be returned to the original owner in the Jubilee year, and debts are to be wiped out.

When the farmer reaps his plenty, corners of the field and gleanings must be left to the poor, together with tithes at certain years. Every seventh year is to be observed as a Shabbat-year (the *shmitta*); the land is to be left fallow. Even the stringent *mitzvot* dealing with observance of Shabbat seem to suggest that on at least one day a week, man's relentless striving to acquire and dominate is put aside.

The rationale for all these statutes goes back to the acceptance of God's rule in His world. '*The earth is mine*,' proclaimed the Lord (Lev. 25:23), reducing Man to the status of caretaker, denying him absolute possession regardless of all his labor.

MORAL EDUCATION

In the credo of Israel, the *Shema*, educating one's children in the *mitzvot* is a sublime commandment, a holy obligation. However, in the light of Man's inhumanity to his fellowman in the long, troubled history of mankind, the question can be reasonably posed whether Man can be educated to act morally. All religions and secular humanism have ethical pretensions, but seemingly none has been successful. Humanism, from Socrates and Plato to Kant's Categorical Imperative, have a serious defect in their beautiful edifices of ethics, because they were based on the erroneous assumption that intellectual contemplation of goodness will lead to the performance of the "right" act. To take a mundane, but indicative, example: All the warnings regarding the deleterious effects of smoking do not seem to deter the addicted from smoking. However, and this is a crucial point, the observant Jewish addict will desist from smoking on Shabbat simply because a commandment prohibits lighting up.

The tautology of Ben Azzai's famous statement, "Run to do even a slight precept . . . for one good deed draws another good deed in its train . . . for the reward of a good deed is a good deed, and the wages of sin is sin" (*Pirke Avot* [*Ethics of the Fathers*] 4:2) assumes that the fulfillment of *mitzvot* is the differential. It is a course of beneficence and joy for the man who observes them and of the glorification of God Who commanded them.

NOTES

1. cf. *Sefer HaHinuch*, No. 545.
2. *Sifra Kedoshim* 9.

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3. Rambam, *Sefer haMitzvot, Shoresh* 4.

4. *T.B. Makkoth* 24a.
