

## The purpose of the 613 commandments

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Abstract: "In antiquity, the majority of Jews believed that the commandments -- *mitzvot* -- were divinely authorized. They were not just commandments but divine commandments. Interestingly enough, despite the divine origin of the *mitzvot*, Jews have always sought to identify additional reasons for the commandments."

The focus of my teaching tonight is the purpose of the 613 commandments.

The source of this count is the Talmud. According to Rabbi Simlai there are 248 positive commandments and 365 negative commandments. Many of these commandments, however, are inoperative. For example, more than 70 commandments involve the ancient system of animal sacrifice, the priesthood, and the ancient temple in Jerusalem. No one could observe all 613 commandments even if he or she wanted to.

In antiquity, the majority of Jews believed that the commandments --called *mitzvot* in Hebrew-- were divinely authorized. They were not just commandments but divine commandments. Interestingly enough, despite the divine origin of the *mitzvot*, Jews have always sought to identify additional reasons for the commandments.

The Torah itself provides four primary rationales for observing the commandments: 1) Because God said so, 2) God will reward obedience and punish disobedience, 3) The commandments possess wisdom, and 4) The commandments lead to holiness. Several centuries later, the rabbis who gave us rabbinic Judaism adduced four very different explanations. They taught that 1) The commandments serve to refine and purify humanity, 2) The commandments keep the world going, 3) The commandments keep the Jews separate and distinctive, and 4) The commandments possess aesthetic value.

Let's take a look at one of the most well-known texts on these rabbinic teachings. We read in a text called *Midrash Tanhuma (shemini 15b)*, "What does God care whether a man kills an animal in the proper way and eats it, or whether he strangles the animal and eats it? Will the one way benefit him or the other injure him? Or what does God care whether a man eats non-kosher or kosher animals? ...so you learn that the commandments were given only to refine God's creatures..." In this message, what is the connotation of refining or purifying? To me, it suggests self-control, self-discipline. In other words, the *mitzvot* possess no intrinsic meaning. The content of the commandments are arbitrary. Their value lies in the self-discipline and self-control one develops in obeying them.

In the middle ages, the approach toward the commandments of Moses Maimonides, the brilliant 12<sup>th</sup> century Jewish philosopher, could not have been more different. In the Guide for the Perplexed, one of Maimonides' most famous books, he wrote that the overall purpose of the *mitzvot* is the welfare of the body and the welfare of the soul. Let's take a look at a seminal passage in the Guide for the Perplexed.

Maimonides writes (in section three, chapter 28), “The reason for a commandment, whether positive or negative, is clear, and its usefulness evident, if it directly tends to remove injustice, or to teach good conduct that furthers the well-being of society, or to impart a truth which ought to be believed either on its own merit or as being indispensable for facilitating the removal of injustice or the teaching of good morals.”

For Maimonides, every single commandment possesses its own intrinsic ethical meaning. As human beings, we may or may not get it, it may be that only God understands the reason, but rest assured, teaches Maimonides, there is a good reason for every commandment.

So what can we learn from this brief exploration into *ta'amei hamitzvot*, the reasons for the commandments?

First of all, we see how different our assumptions are from those of our ancestors. They almost universally believed that the commandments came from God. We liberal Jews, for the most part, assume the commandments are of human origin.

Secondly, the ancients believed that all the commandments were of equal weight. For example, the commandment “you shall not murder” was no more important than “you shall not wear clothing mixed with wool and linen.” In contrast, we modern liberal Jews make a strong distinction between the ethical commandments and the ritual/ceremonial ones. And, in general, we weigh the former much higher than the latter. We believe it is crucial to be moral, upstanding human beings. But unlike our ancestors, we tend not to believe that observing Shabbat or keeping kosher are imperatives.

Nevertheless, our ancestors’ ardor for discovering new reasons for the commandments can inspire us to do the same. For example, while not all 613 commandments may derive from God, it is still possible to hear the voice of God, to sense the presence in God, in some of them. In other words, the commandments may not come directly from God, but nevertheless some of them help us to reach God. And while our rationales for the commandments may not be theological – just do it because God said so – other rationales of a historical or ethical nature do exist.

For example, an increasing number of liberal Jews today are rethinking their position toward keeping kosher. Not because they believe God literally commanded the dietary laws, but because they see in *kashrut* a vehicle to tame the “killer” instinct within human nature by not eating blood, to promote human self-control by placing restrictions on what one can and cannot eat, and to demonstrate concern for the taking of animal life through humane procedures of slaughter.

So what *mitzvot* do you observe or not observe? Why? And why not? If the purpose of the entire 613 commandments is “To promote compassion, lovingkindness, and peace,” shouldn’t we – in good conscience -- take a new and deeper look toward embracing more of them? In short, what does the concept of “mitzvah” mean to you?