

# What's the Purpose of Judaism's 613 Commandments?

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*Even though we concede that not all 613 commandments derive from God, it is still possible to hear the voice of God, to sense the presence of God, in many of them. Not all the commandments come directly from God. Nevertheless, some of them help us to reach God. Some of the commandments may not be from God, but they help us get to God.*

With the setting of the sun tonight, we concluded the festival of Shavuot, the festival that celebrates the giving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai.

At festival services last night, we read the Ten Commandments to celebrate the Torah's very special place in our lives as a source of wisdom and moral guidance. On Shavuot, we give honor to the Torah's ideals and principles, its commandments and mitzvot that enrich the meaning of our lives.

It seems most appropriate on this first Shabbat after Shavuot that we reflect on the purpose of the 613 commandments. The source of this count is the Talmud. According to Rabbi Simlai there are 248 positive commandments (you shall do commandments ) and 365 negative commandments (you shall not do commandments).

However, the good news is that many of these commandments are inoperative. For example, more than 70 commandments involve the ancient system of animal sacrifice, the priesthood, and the ancient temple in Jerusalem. Knowing that no one could observe all 613 commandments even if one wanted to, we can all breathe a little easier.

In antiquity, the majority of Jews believed that the commandments were divinely authorized. They were not just good deeds but divine commandments. In modernity, we assume the commandments are of mostly human origin. 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 modernity, we make a strong distinction between the ethical commandments and the ritual/ceremonial ones. 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 or putting up a Sukkah are very important.

What is most interesting is that despite our ancestors' belief in the divine origin of the mitzvot, they always sought to identify additional reasons for the commandments. It was not enough that the commandments came from God. They wanted to know more. 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 contributed additional explanations. So let's take a look at one of the most well-known rabbinic texts on the purpose of the commandments. We read in a text called *Midrash tanhuma (shemini)*, "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..." According to this rabbinic text what is the purpose of the commandments? The purpose of the commandments is to cultivate self-control and self-discipline. The purpose of the commandments is to teach us how to be the true masters of ourselves.

In the Middle Ages, the brilliant 12<sup>th</sup> century Jewish philosopher Moses Maimonides proposed a different approach. Let's take a look at a seminal passage in The Guide for the Perplexed. Maimonides writes (in section three, chapter 28), "The reason of a commandment, whether positive or negative, is clear, and its usefulness evidence, 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."

What does Maimonides teach us about the commandments? The purposes of the commandments are to make a better and more just world, to teach people how to become better human beings. And in another work Maimonides writes, "The purpose of the laws of the Torah...is to bring mercy, lovingkindness, and peace upon the world."

The rabbis and Maimonides provided new reasons for the commandments for the inquiring minds of their time. We need to discover new reasons for the commandments for our time. Here's one way to go about it.

Even though we concede that not all 613 commandments may derive from God, it is still possible to hear the voice of God, to sense the presence of God, in many of them. Not all the commandments may come directly from God. Nevertheless, some of them help us to reach God. The commandments may not be from God, but they help us get to God. Take the act of lighting Shabbat candles. The purpose of kindling light out there is to help us find the light in here. The purpose of lighting Shabbat candles is to find the godly place within ourselves, to find that place within which is filled with love and light for everyone and everything.

Classic Reform Judaism taught that the ritual or ceremonial commandments were outdated, empty practices, without any redeeming value. Today, contemporary Reform

Judaism teaches that the ceremonial and ritual commandments should not be so quickly or summarily dismissed. Reform Judaism today teaches that the ceremonial and ritual commandments can be very meaningful. Like filling old bottles with new wine, it all depends on what new meaning you see in them.

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.

These are just a few examples of why it would do us all good to rethink the place of the commandments in our lives. After all, what could be wrong with using the commandments to nurture self-control and self-discipline? What could be wrong with using the mitzvot to become better people and to make a better and more just world?

There are no words more challenging than “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” No words so life-enhancing as “You shall rest.” No words more compelling than “Let my people go.” There is no vision more hopeful than “They shall beat their swords into plowshares.” And no summons more demanding than “Justice, justice you shall pursue.” These words have outlived monuments and empires. We want them to live through us until the end of time. We owe it to our ancestors to keep Torah alive. We owe it to the world to keep Torah alive; for these are messages that the world needs to hear. We owe it to God to continue as a people, to share God’s dream, to bear witness to God’s sovereignty, and to live these words of Torah.