

Rosh HaShanah: It's a Mitzvah

...**what** is a *mitzvah*, **how** is a *mitzvah*, and **why** is a *mitzvah*?

MITZVAH - the word in all its forms – noun, verb, past present and future tense - appears over 800 times in the Bible.

The root - **tz.v.h** – is translated “command”, so in English we call a *mitzvah* a “commandment”. This is not a foreign concept: we know all about commandments: Ten Commandments, 613 Commandments, “thou shalt” and “thou shalt not”.

The opposite of a *mitzvah* is an **averah**. *Averah* refers to the act of “crossing over”, transgressing a fixed boundary, not doing, or disregarding a limit. During this time of year our traditional prayers are full of the awareness of how one *mitzvah* can change the course of your life – and how one *averah* can do so, as well.

I. What is a *mitzvah*? Torah and *halakha* say it's a commandment, a law, an obligation: a requirement

a. *mitzvah* is the basic building block of Jewish life.

1. there are two fundamental **connections** made by doing a *mitzvah*:
mitzvah she-beyn adam l'adam and *mitzvah she-beyn adam laMakom*
 (“*mitzvah* concerning human and human, *mitzvah* concerning a human being and God”)
2. there are two basic **categories** of *mitzvah*:
d'Oraita (stated in Torah) and *d'Rabbanan* (derived by the Rabbis of the Talmud)
3. there are two basic **ways to do** a *mitzvah*:
mitzvah l'shem shamayim; *mitzvah lo l'shmah ba l'shmah*
 (“for the sake of heaven”, and “with an ulterior motive but may yet be redeemed”)
4. there are two **paths** to choose from, and each one has its own momentum:
mitzvah goreret mitzvah, *averah goreret averah*
 (“one *mitzvah* draws another after it, one sin brings another in its wake”)
5. there is **one** traditional attitude toward the *mitzvot*: don't delay

A traditional teaching: When Yitro heard about the Exodus, he immediately went to meet Moses in the wilderness. If he had taken the time to consider his decision, he might have hesitated to take his family through the hardships of the desert, and that would have caused him not to join the Israelites in accepting the Torah. From this we learn that when the opportunity arises to fulfill a *mitzvah*, we should do so without (too much) deliberation.

6. It is impossible to know which *mitzvah* is most important in any given situation. There are *mitzvot* which are so vitally important that this life cannot fully contain their reward (BT *Kiddushim* 39b, p. 36 in *mahzor*). “These are the deeds...”

b. Jewish culture says a *mitzvah* has transformative power, keeps away the evil eye, and goes a long way toward tilting the High Holy Days scale in the right direction...

In Yiddish, they're called *mitzves*, and “tradition says that there are 613 of them: 248 “thou shalt” and 365 “thou shalt nots”, one for every day of the year. The Jewish calendar follows the moon instead of the sun, though, and has only 354 days – a single Jewish year isn't long enough to hold all the things we're not supposed to do.

These *mitzves* are the foundations of every aspect of Jewish life; in a very real sense, they *are* Judaism. You can be as monotheistic as you like, without the *mitzves* you're still not Jewish. It's the *mitzves* that forbid pork, enjoin circumcision, and keep us out of the Knights of Columbus; they are the root of Jewish difference, of everything that makes Jews Jewish. According to Rashi, whose commentaries on the Bible and Talmud are an integral part of traditional methods of study, ‘the whole point of the Torah is its *mitzvot*.’ What the chosen people have been chosen for is the obligation of fulfilling *mitzves* that are incumbent on nobody else. The Jews have been chosen not to: *not* to have that BLT; *not* to sit on Santa's knee; *not* to catch the Saturday matinee or blend in with the people around them....

Mitzves are like any other rules, though; they have to be fleshed out, explained, applied. The Bible jumps from one commandment to the next without slowing down for details. It tells you what, but never how. Imagine a *mitzvah* that reads ‘thou shalt not park illegally.’ First we need to define parking and specify the kinds of vehicles to which such a law applies: Can I leave my bicycle on the sidewalk? My motorcycle? What about my Maserati? We must define the terms *legal* and *illegal* with respect to parking: why is parking on Main Street sinful at 8.59am but virtuous at 9.00? Why is parking on certain streets always evil, while notions of permitted and forbidden reverse themselves on certain others on the sixteenth of every month? Does this reversal of permitted and forbidden apply equally to ham sandwiches and gefilte fish, and if so, when?”

- Michael Wex, *Born to Kvetch* 8-9

Mitzvot lighten the misery of the human condition. In our prayers for these Days of Awe we repeat the ancient teaching of the *Unetaneh Tokef*, asserting that while we will all die, *teshuvah*, *tefilah*, and *tzedakah* “have the power to transform the harshness of our destiny.” (*Lev Shalem* p.144)

c. Not a philosophical question but a religious act. In the modern Western world, we live a uniquely modern conundrum: “they're not called the Ten Suggestions”

1. autonomy vs heteronomy: modern philosophical subject
2. commandment implies commander: what commands you?
3. *mitzvot* force us past ourselves and into the world: if nothing outside the self can compel the self, how can a community of others ever be meaningful?

II. **How is a *mitzvah*?**

A. a *mitzvah* orients you, literally, toward the Jewish north

God looked into the Torah and created the world. We look into the Torah and maintain the world. (Zohar)

1. **social philosophy:**

Often enough we, moved by apprehension about what we might lose to the group, ask “what are my rights in this situation?”

When one confronts a social issue and asks instead “what are my obligations?” an entire new realm of meaning may open up. An entirely new perspective is possible when, instead of asking “what’s in it for me?” we consider “what am I called upon to do?”

This is the orientation of the Jew who moves through life looking for the *mitzvah* of the moment. One asks, “how can a *mitzvah* perspective help me respond to this situation?”

The *mitzvah* perspective is always available; you just have to know how to look for the *mitzvah* potential of a moment.

Identify the *mitzvah* and you have something useful to offer, a way to respond positively.

Example: Someone in our community, someone you know but not all that well, suffers a death in the family (G-d forbid). You don’t have to wonder what to say or do – Judaism commands a range of *mitzvot* which allow you to respond to the situation: attend the funeral or *shiva* minyan, bring food to the mourners, make a *tzedakah* contribution in memory of the dead. There are even *mitzvot* that guide your conversations with those in mourning.

It’s a fantastically detailed, supportive framework.

You don’t have to wonder what to do.

Just ask: what are the *mitzvot* which obligate me at this moment?

2. **religious commitment:**

do it whether or not you feel like it – *hukkim umishpatim*

a. If you only do the ones you like, or understand, then you are not worshipping God, but yourself. (Yishayahu Leibowitz)

b. and don’t wait until your intention, your *kavvanah*, is clear to you:

sheh-mitokh lo l’shmah ba l’shmah (Bavli, Pesachim 50b) Even if you are doing a *mitzvah* with an ulterior motive, do it anyway. Maybe over time you will come to appreciate the *mitzvah* for its own sake.

c. don't try to rank them by priority. Of all the categories you can think up - ritual, ethical, social – all are deemed equally important. All are in the Torah, after all, or derived from Torah.

B. mystical implications

1. a spark of redemption in every little thing and
2. you have a particular *mitzvah* that you are supposed to do, and no one else can do it. You need to find your *mitzvah*.

C. How do a *mitzvah*? “With all your heart....” at all times and in all situations. Judaism offers you a daily framework as minute as you want it to be (you never have to ask “what is there to do?”). You only have to ask “what is the *mitzvah* that I can fulfill in these moments?” It has been observed that every moment of your day falls into the category of some *mitzvah* in one Jewish ethical commentary or another. There is even a commandment not to get caught up in the minutiae of the commandments!

Of the Levites it is written, “The divine service was upon them, and they raised it up upon their shoulders” (Numbers 7.9). Midrash associates this verse with the singing of the Levites, but what does singing have to do with raising things upon one’s shoulder? ... the Zohar says “it was the Ark on their backs that enabled them to sing”. ...the fact that they carry the Ark on their shoulders also gives them the power to raise their voices in song. This is true of every person who serves in God. True service fills a person with light and joy....True worship consists of Torah and *mitzvot*; these of their own accord fill a person’s mouth with song and exultation. This is itself testimony; this is its own witness. One who serves comes to understand that to do *mitzvot* is to be connected to the Source of Life, and this causes us to rejoice and sing. First, *mitzvot* need to be done as deeds, and then the mouth can sing.

(Gerer Rebbe)

III. **why a *mitzvah*?**modern relevance

- a. because you are needed. To raise up the fallen, to heal the sick, to have hope.

It really is within human power to renew each thing. The renewal is there within everything, since God “renews each day, constantly, the work of Creation.” “Constantly” means in each moment. Nothing exists without the divine life-force, and the point in each thing that comes from God never grows old, since God’s words are constantly alive and flowing.

However, “darkness covers the earth”. [Is.60.2] The outward shell hides the flowing point.....but it is within our power to light up that point within the darkness.... You do this by means of the *mitzvot*, since “the *mitzvah* is a candle”...when you do a *mitzvah*, you are shining light upon that hidden spark of God’s presence, and making it stronger in the world.

Gerer Rebbe, *Ki Tavo*, adapted a bit

...mitzvot you are probably already doing without knowing they're mitzvot

1. *bal tashkhit*

*chase away the mother bird: you may not wipe out a species

*waste of any kind: "any act of breaking vessels, tearing clothing, demolishing a building, blocking a spring, or wasting food by spoiling it." (Maimonides *Hilkhot Melakhim* 6.10).

*It's also a mitzvah to preserve the life of a tree. When a healthy productive tree is chopped down, "the sound resounds around the world, but is not heard." (*Pirke d'Rabi Eliezer* 33).

*clearly, recycling, reducing, and re-using are ways to fulfill the *mitzvah* of *bal tashkhit*.

2. *mitzvot* prohibiting pollution

*industries must be kept away from inhabited areas. The ancient leather industry was to be 50 cubits from the city, as were lime kilns for firing pottery. (*Bava Batra* 2.9 and *Tosefta Bava Batra* 1.10)

*water pollution: "if ones hands and feet are soiled with mire or feces, it is forbidden to wash in a public well or pit of water." (*Tosefta Bava Metzia* 11.31)

*the giant garbage islands that float on the oceans of our planet, dumping sewage into rivers and lakes, endangering water sources by drilling for oil or gas – all of these are forbidden.

3. *mitzvot* requiring interdependence (gleaning, taxes)

*Torah commands that owners of fields, vineyards, and fruit trees may not reap from them more than once; whatever is left after the first harvest is the property of the poor, not the field's owner.

*In ancient Israel the first tithe – one tenth – of one's harvest went to the government for the maintenance of public services; the next tenth went to the religious establishment, and every few years a third tenth went for a poverty tax.

*giving *tzedakah* for good causes, supporting the social safety net for our own poor and disadvantaged, voting to tax ourselves for the social welfare of all, as Multnomah County did a few years ago – this is fulfilling the *mitzvot* that require us to love each other as we love ourselves.

Exodus 19.8: "All the people answered as one, saying, everything that God has commanded we will do". But no one can do all the *mitzvot*; there are *mitzvot* for priests, others for Levites, and still others for owners of property, and for farmers. That is why the Israelites "answered as one" – we are partners in the observance of all the *mitzvot*, and not individuals.

b. why not "just be a good person", why "do a *mitzvah*"?

Why should a Jew observe the particular forms of living prescribed by Torah and tradition? Do they add up to a rational message – hygiene, diet, ethics?

"Any reason we may advance for submitting to a commandment merely points to one of its aspects, omitting more than describing. To say that the precepts have meaning is less accurate than to say that they are sources of emergent meaning."

(Heschel, "No Time for Neutrality", *Moral Grandeur* p. 77)

There's no meaning that can fully explain or justify all the *mitzvot*. Except, perhaps, for the message that is borne in the doing of them:

c. why? for mindfulness

for remaining hopefully aware: "Judaism urges the Jew to become attentive to the presence of the Infinite. It opens our eyes to the abundant possibilities of creating the good, to the redemptive powers inherent in the *mitzvot*." (Heschel p. 77)

for doing rather than believing it's enough to feel: "The Jewish form of religious experience is always in acts, in carrying out a command, in our instilling a spiritual quality into the things we are doing.... Israel's reply to Moses – 'we will do and we will hear' – was interpreted to mean: *In doing* we perceive....Our acts are waves that flow toward the shore of God. In Jewish doing, the action sings, and regularly of fulfillment is the rhythm by which we utter our tunes....We do not imitate; we respond. To our souls the fulfillment of a *mitzvah* is a way of entering into relationship with the Ultimate. (Heschel p. 78-79)

The reward for a *mitzvah* is a *mitzvah* (*Pirke Avot* 4.2). Therefore, the Torah states that if you tithe one time, then you will merit tithing many times. When one plants the seed of a *mitzvah* in holiness, it is planted for eternity.

Conclusion: what's a *mitzvah*?

In the Midrash: "a candle of God is the soul of man" (Prov.20.27).

The blessed Holy One said, "Let My candle be in your hand and yours in Mine."

...."come, and light the way before Me."

And what is the candle of God? That of Torah, as it is written, "For a *mitzvah* is a candle and Torah is light." (Prov.6.23). What is "a *mitzvah* is a candle"? Whoever does a *mitzvah* is like one who lights a candle before the blessed Holy One and gives life to his soul which is called a candle – "a candle of God is the soul of man".

...All our limbs are there for the sake of doing *mitzvot*.

The Talmud offers two meanings for "you shall do them" (Numbers 15.39). One is that whoever fulfills a *mitzvah* is considered by God as one who had made [invented] it. The other is "as though he had made himself."

The two interpretations are really one: it is the remaking (*tikkun*) of the individual that takes place through doing *mitzvot*, forming you into one dedicated to God. You are then sent into the world only to do the will of the Creator. You yourself have become a *mitzvah*. That is the meaning of "*asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav*" – "who makes us holy through *mitzvot*", "*v'tzivanu*" – "and made us into *mitzvot*"!

(Gerer Rebbe)

We really do not know the worth of our observance of mitzvot. We will not know until we are judged at the appropriate time...that is why the verse says "we will not know how we shall serve until we get there". (Ex.10.26)

What does it mean here, "judged at the appropriate time"?

it means that at the appropriate time, we will understand the meaning of what we have done: the what, the how, and the why.

When we pray that our deeds be acceptable, and that we be judged with mercy, we are asking that it may be remembered that we did our best.

By each of us, by all of us, and by God,

let the work of our hands be enduring, as the Psalmist pleads.

Let the work of our hands be *mitzvot*.