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# THE MITZVOT

## & WHY THEY ARE DETAILED

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The mitzvot (generally translated as commandments) were given by God to the Jewish people as the comprehensive framework within which to live a Jewish life, and enable each person to build a personal, meaningful relationship with God. The mitzvot are the means by which we can emulate God, develop and refine our character, strengthen Jewish belief, and infuse every action with purpose.

The goal of this class is to understand:

- ~ Why did God give us mitzvot?
- ~ What is the nature of the mitzvot?
- ~ Why are mitzvot so detailed?

### Class outline:

Section I. Why Did God Give us Mitzvot?

Part A. Forging a Relationship with God

Part B. Emulating God

Part C. Character Development

Part D. Mitzvot Strengthen Jewish Belief

Part E. The Reward for Performing Mitzvot

Section II. What is the Nature of the Mitzvot?

Part A. Reasons for the Mitzvot

Part B. Categories of the Mitzvot

Part C. *Eydut*, *Chukim* and *Mishpatim*

Section III. Why are Mitzvot so Detailed?

## SECTION I. WHY DID GOD GIVE US MITZVOT?

### PART A. FORGING A RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

1. **Rabbi Osher Chaim Levene, Set in Stone, p.31, Targum – Each mitzvah we fulfill intrinsically connects us with God.**

Judaism is not as much a religion as it is a relationship. It is only through mitzvah observance that man can build a deep, enduring, and meaningful relationship with God...

That a mitzvah is the very process of forging the bond [with God] is contained within the very word מצוה, “commandment,” closely related to the word צוותא, meaning a connection or a binding.

### PART B. EMULATING GOD

Each person is created in the image of God. When we perform a mitzvah, we emulate the attributes of God.

1. **Bereishit (Genesis) 1:27 – Man is created in “the image of God.”**

And God created man, in the image of  
God He created him ...

וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא  
אֹתוֹ....

2. **Devarim (Deuteronomy) 28: 9 – God calls on man to walk in his ways.**

... And you shall walk in His ways.

וְהִלַּכְתָּ בְּדַרְכָיו

3. **Talmud Yerushalmi (Jerusalem Talmud), Pe'ah 3:1 – Man lives up to his Godly image when he emulates God's character traits as described in the Torah. This is called “walking in God's ways.”**

Just like He is merciful and kind so should you  
be merciful and kind.

מה הוא רחום וחנון אף את תהא רחום וחנון

4. **Talmud Bavli (Babylonian Talmud), Sotah 5a – One also emulates God by performing acts of loving kindness to others.**

Just as He clothed the naked, so should you  
clothe the naked;

מה הוא מלביש ערומים...

אף אתה הלבש ערומים...

God visited the sick, so should you visit the sick;

הקדוש ברוך הוא ביקר חולים...

אף אתה בקר חולים...

God comforted the mourners, so should you  
comfort mourners;

הקדוש ברוך הוא ניחם אבלים...

אף אתה נחם אבלים

God buried the dead, so should you bury the  
dead.

הקדוש ברוך הוא קבר מתים...

אף אתה קבור מתים

## PART C. CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

Each mitzvah we fulfill refines our character, actualizes our potential, and completes the Creation of the world.

### 1. Rambam (Maimonides), end of Hilchot Temurah (The Laws of Temurah) – The mitzvot are God's instructions and advice for living and improving our character.

And all these matters [the mitzvot] are to [help us to] overcome our negative inclinations and to correct our traits; and most laws of the Torah are instruction from the Great Adviser [to help us] to correct our character traits and straighten our ways.

וכל אלו הדברים כדי לכוף את יצרו ולתקן דעותיו ורוב דיני התורה אינן אלא עצות מרחוק מגדול העצה לתקן הדעות וליישר כל המעשים

### 2. Sefer HaChinuch, Mitzvah 16 – Outward actions have the power to shape one's inner character. The mitzvot are those actions which will guarantee the improvement of one's character.

A person is influenced by his actions, and his heart and thoughts follow the acts he does whether they are good or bad. Even one who is a completely wicked person, who constantly thinks of doing bad deeds, if he is inspired for the better and puts time into fulfilling Torah and mitzvot, even if it is not for the sake of Heaven, he will turn to the good and he will overcome his Evil Inclination through the power of these actions, since the heart follows the actions a person does. Similarly, even if one is a completely righteous person who desires Torah and mitzvot but always involves himself in bad deeds ... after a certain amount of time he will become a wicked person, for we know, and it is true, that every man is affected by his actions.

כי האדם נפעל כפי פעולותיו, ולבו וכל מחשבותיו תמיד אחר מעשיו שהוא עושה בהם, אם טוב ואם רע, ואפילו רשע גמור בלבבו וכל יצר מחשבות לבו רק רע כל היום, אם יערה רוחו וישים השתדלותו ועסקו בהתמדה בתורה ובמצוות, ואפילו שלא לשם שמים, מיד ינטה אל הטוב, ובכח מעשיו ימית היצר הרע, כי אחרי הפעולות נמשכים הלבבות. ואפילו אם יהיה אדם צדיק גמור ולבבו ישר ותמים, חפץ בתורה ובמצוות, אם אולי יעסק תמיד בדברים של דופי... ישוב לזמן מן הזמנים מצדקת לבו להיות רשע גמור, כי ידוע הדבר ואמת שכל אדם נפעל כפי פעולותיו

### 3. Bereishit Rabbah 44:1 – The mitzvot were given to refine humanity.

What does it matter to God if an animal is slaughtered by cutting its neck through the spine or the throat?

[The answer is:] “The commandments were given only in order to refine humanity.”

וכי מה איכפת ליה להקב"ה למי ששוחט מן הצואר או מי ששוחט מן העורף הוי

לא נתנו המצוות אלא לצרף בהם את הבריות

### 4. Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, Alei Shur, Vol. II, p. 71 – Each person has a unique mission in this world. The performance of mitzvot helps a person reach that destiny.

Every person should know:

I, with my abilities and attributes, my face and the treasures of my soul, am unique in the world.

וידע כל אדם

אני עם כחותי ותכונותי, פרוץ פני וסגולות נפשי, יחידי בעולם. בין כל החיים

Among all those that are alive today, there is no one like me. In generations past, there was no one like me. And until the end of time, there will never be anyone like me!

If so, certainly God sent me to the world on a special mission that no one else can fulfill!

עכשיו אין אף אחד כמוני. בדורות שעברו לא היה כמוני. ועד סוף כל הדורות לא יהיה כמוני!

ואם כך, בודאי הקב"ה שלחני לעולם בשליחות מיוחדת ששום אחר אינו יכול למלאותה!

5. **Midrash Tanchuma Tazria, Section 5 – The mitzvot perfect the creation of the world. For example, Sefer HaChinuch (# 2) describes that circumcision is a hint to man that just as one has the ability to “complete” one’s body, so too can one perfect one’s character.**

It happened that Turnusrufus the Evil (a Roman general) asked Rabbi Akiva: “Whose actions are nicer, those of God or those of people?”

He answered, “Those of people are nicer.”

He asked again, “But can a person make something as beautiful as the heaven and earth?”

Rabbi Akiva answered, “Do not bring an example from something that a person cannot do, discuss something a person can do.”

Turnusrufus said to him, “Why do you perform circumcision?”

Rabbi Akiva answered, “I knew that this was what you meant, which is why I responded that what people do is nicer than what God does.”

Rabbi Akiva brought him stalks of wheat and cakes and said, “These [stalks] are the work of God and these [cakes] are the work of people.

“Are the cakes not nicer than the stalks?”

מעשה ששאל טורנוסרופוס הרשע את ר' עקיבא איזו מעשים נאים של הקב"ה או של ב"ו

א"ל של ב"ו נאים

א"ל טורנוסרופוס הרי השמים והארץ יכול אדם לעשות כיוצא בהם

א"ל ר"ע לא תאמר לי בדבר שהוא למעלה מן הבריות שאין שולטין עליו אלא אמור דברים שהם מצויין בבני אדם.

א"ל למה אתם מולין

א"ל אני הייתי יודע שעל דבר זה אתה שואלני ולכך הקדמתי ואמרת ליך שמעשה בני אדם נאים משל הקב"ה

הביא לו ר"ע שבבלים וגלסקאות א"ל אלו מעשה הקב"ה ואלו מעשה ידי אדם

א"ל אין אלו נאים יותר מן השבלים.

**PART D. MITZVOT STRENGTHEN JEWISH BELIEF**

1. **Ramban (Nachmanides), Shemot 13:16 – The mitzvot reinforce Jewish belief in God, Divine Providence, and our appreciation of being created.**

All of these mitzvot serve as a testimony in every generation to the wonders that were performed in Egypt, so that we should not forget them. And they serve to remove the claims of those who deny belief in God. One who buys a mezuzah for one coin and puts it on his doorpost with the

וכן כל כיוצא בהן מצות רבות זכר ליציאת מצרים - והכל להיות לנו בכל הדורות עדות במופתים שלא ישתכחו, ולא יהיה פתחון פה לכופר להכחיש אמונת האלהים כי הקונה מזוזה בזו אחד וקבעה בפתחו ונתכוון בענינה כבר הודה בחדוש העולם ובידיעת התורה...

proper intention acknowledges the fact that God renews the world, that he recognizes God and His Providence, that he believes in prophecy, and demonstrates that He believes in all of the Torah.

Therefore, our Sages taught that “One should be careful with a mitzvah that people treat lightly just as he is careful with a mitzvah that people treat seriously,” as all mitzvot are precious and coveted. This is because every time a person fulfills any mitzvah he acknowledges God. And the purpose of all the mitzvot is for us to believe in God and to thank Him for creating us.

הבורא והשגחתו, וגם בנבואה, והאמין בכל פנות ולפיכך אמרו (אבות פ"ב מ"א) הוי זהיר במצוה קלה כבחמורה שכולן חמודות וחיבות מאד, שבכל שעה אדם מודה בהן לאלהיו, וכוונת כל המצות שנאמין באלהינו ונודה אליו שהוא בראנו.

## 2. Devarim 6:24 – Mitzvot develop an awe and appreciation of God.

God commanded us to perform all these statutes in order that we should fear the Lord, our God; to benefit us for all time, to keep us alive like this day.

ויצונו ה', לעשות את-כל-החקים האלה, ליראה, את-ה' אלהינו--לטוב לנו כל-הימים, לחיתנו כהיום הזה

## PART E. THE REWARD FOR PERFORMING MITZVOT

### 1. Talmud Bavli, Makkot 23b – Mitzvot themselves are our source of merit.

Rebbi Chanania ben Akashia said, “God wanted the Jewish people to have merit, therefore he gave them many mitzvot, as is said, ‘God desired for the sake of His righteousness to magnify Torah and make it glorious.’”

רבי חנניא בן עקשיא אומר, רצה הקדוש ברוך הוא לזכות את ישראל, לפיכך הרבה להם תורה ומצוות, שנאמר ה' חפץ למען צדקו יגדיל תורה ויאדיר.

### 2. Rabbi Chaim Volozhin, Nefesh HaChaim, Sha'ar 1, Ch. 12 – Each person creates his ultimate reward in the World to Come.

The reward of the World to Come is [a result] of the actions of the person himself. After the soul separates from the body, it rises to delight and be satiated in the flashes of light, and powers, and holy worlds that were added and expanded by its good deeds ...

The truth is that the World to Come is the creation of a person himself; he expands and prepares his own portion in the World to Come.

וזהו ענין שכר העה"ב שהוא מעשי ידי האדם עצמו. שאחר פרידת נפשו מהגוף. הוא העולה להתעדן ולהשביע נפשו בצחצחות האורות והכחות והעולמות הקדושים שנתוספו ונתרבו ממעשיו הטובים. ...

אבל האמת שהעה"ב הוא הוא מעשה ידי האדם עצמו שהרחיב והוסיף והתקין חלק לעצמו במעשיו....

## SECTION II. WHAT IS THE NATURE OF THE MITZVOT?

### PART A. REASONS FOR THE MITZVOT

1. **Rabbi Chaim Volozhin, Nefesh HaChaim 1:22 – The ultimate explanation for each mitzvah is beyond our comprehension.**

A complete explanation of the mitzvot has not yet been revealed to any person in the world, not even to Moshe Rabbeinu (Moses)...

The Holy Torah emanates from Above, above all understanding. How could [this understanding] be given over to the grasp of human beings?

כי טעמי מצוות עד תכליתם לא נתגלו עדיין לשום אדם בעולם אף למשרע"ה.... כי התורה"ק אצולה מלמעלה ראש מעל כל ההשגות. ואיך אפשר שיהא הדבר מסור להשגת האדם ...

2. **Rambam, Hilchot Temurah (The Laws of Temurah) 4:13 – We strive to understand the reasons for each mitzvah.**

Even though all the laws of the Torah are [Divine] decrees ... it is still fitting that a person contemplate them, and give reasons for them as much as he can; and the early Sages said that King Solomon understood most of the reasons of all the laws of the Torah.

אע"פ שכל חוקי התורה גזירות הם כמו שביארנו בסוף מעילה ראוי להתבונן בהן וכל מה שאתה יכול ליתן לו טעם תן לו טעם הרי אמרו חכמים הראשונים שהמלך שלמה הבין רוב הטעמים של כל חוקי התורה...

### PART B. CATEGORIES OF THE MITZVOT

1. **The basic division of the commandments.**

The commandments can be divided into two basic categories: 1) between individuals and God (בן אדם למקום) and 2) between individuals themselves (בן אדם לחברו).

Examples of mitzvot between individuals and God: Prayer, keeping kosher, and the Sabbath.

Examples of mitzvot between individuals and others: *Tzedakah*, visiting the sick, and bringing joy to a bride and groom.

2. **Positive and Negative Commandments**

The commandments can also be differentiated between 1) positive commandments (מצוות עשה) which are proactive actions and 2) negative commandments (מצוות לא תעשה) when one refrains from an action.

Examples of positive commandments: Eating matzah on Pesach, returning a lost object, and honoring parents.

Examples of negative commandments: Not standing by idly when one can save a life, not causing unnecessary pain to animals, and avoiding derogatory speech (*Lashon Hara*).

### 3. Torah Mitzvot and Rabbinic Mitzvot (See Morasha class on this topic)

The commandments can be further differentiated between 1) commandments from the Torah itself (מצווה דאורייתא) and 2) rabbinic laws (מצווה דרבנן).

Examples of Torah commandments: In addition to those mitzvot cited above, integrity in business transactions.

Examples of Rabbinic commandments: Lighting a menorah on Chanukah, reading the Megillah on Purim.

## PART C. EYDUT, CHUKIM AND MISHPATIM

### 1. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, Horeb – Some commandments are classified under unifying themes.

*Eydut, chukim and mishpatim.*

עדות, חוקים ומשפטים

*Eydut* are those commandments which intrinsically testify to our covenant with God, such as the Jewish festivals, Shabbat, circumcision, tefillin and mezuzah.

### 2. Shemot 20: 7 – Sabbath is an example of *eydut*.

Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.

זָכוֹר אֶת-יוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת לְקַדְּשׁוֹ

*Chukim* are statutes to which we attempt to ascribe reasons for their institution, but their ultimate understanding is beyond our comprehension, such as the Red Heifer, *niddah* and kashrut.

### 3. Bamidbar (Numbers) 19:2 – *Parah HaAdumah* – Red Heifer.

This is the ordinance of the Torah which God has commanded, saying, “Speak to the people of Israel, that they bring you a completely red heifer, which has no blemish, and upon which a yoke has not rested.”

זֹאת חֻקַּת הַתּוֹרָה אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה' לֵאמֹר דַּבֵּר אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּקְחוּ אֵלֶיךָ פָּרָה אֲדָמָה תְּמִימָה אֲשֶׁר אֵין בָּהּ מוֹם אֲשֶׁר לֹא עָלָה עָלֶיהָ עֹל

*Mishpatim* are the civil laws necessary for the proper functioning of society, such as not killing, not stealing, and paying wages promptly.

### 4. Vayikra (Leviticus) 19:11 – Prohibition of stealing.

Do not steal ...

לֹא תִגְנוֹבוּ

## SECTION III. WHY ARE MITZVOT SO DETAILED?

### 1. Chofetz Chaim, Introduction to Shmirat HaLashon – The 613 mitzvot correspond to human anatomy and spirituality.

It is known that every person has 248 spiritual limbs and 365 spiritual sinews, and on them are “clothed” the physical 248 limbs and 365 physical sinews, as it is said, “With skin and flesh you have clothed me, and with bones and sinews you have covered me” (Iyov/Job 10:11). The verse mentions skin, flesh, bones, and sinews and refers only to “covering” and “clothing.”

Who is being clothed, if not the soul inside, that is the core of the person? And each and every limb of the soul is clothed from above with a corresponding “bodily” limb, like clothing on a body.

And corresponding to this, God gave us 248 positive commandments and 365 negative commandments, and they are also divided up according to limbs, for there are commandments relating to the hands and to the feet and to other limbs ...

And when a person in this world fulfills a commandment with a certain limb, in the future light will rest on that limb ...

Subsequently, when a person fulfills the 248 positive commandments, he is the complete person, holy to God in all of his limbs ... And if a person is careful not to transgress the negative commandments in the Torah, he brings the light of holiness down onto the “sinews” of his soul.

ידוע הוא דכל אדם יש לו רמ"ח איברים ושם"ה גידים רוחניים, ועליהם מלבשים הרמ"ח איברים ושם"ה גידים גשמיים, כמו שנאמר (איוב י' י"א), "עור וקשר תלבישני ובעצמות וגידים תשככני", הרי שהזכיר הכתוב עור וקשר וגידים ועצמות ולא קראו, רק בשם לבוש וסךך כמו שנאמר, "תלבישני" "תשככני",

ואת מי תלביש, אם לא לנפש אשר בקרבו, שהיא היא עצם האדם, ועל כל איבר ואיבר של הנפש מלבש מלמעלה איבר הגוף המכנה כנגד איבר ההוא, כמו הכנה על הגוף.

וכנגד זה נתן לנו הקדוש ברוך הוא רמ"ח מצוות עשה ושם"ה לא תעשה, והם מחלקים גם כן על האיברים, דיש מצוה שתלויה ביד ויש מצוה שתלויה ברגל וכן שאר כל איברים ...

וכשאדם מקים בעולם הזה איזה מצוה באיזה איבר, שורה לעתיד לבוא אור ה' על אותו איבר,

... נמצא דכשהאדם מקים הרמ"ח עשיו, אז הוא האדם השלם המקדש לה' בכל איבריו...

וכשהאדם זהיר מלעבר על תלאוין שבתורה, הוא ממשוך אור הקדשה על גדי נפשו

### 2. Aish.com – Analogy of mitzvot and the Internet: just as details are crucial in the physical world, so too in the spiritual world.

Would anyone be so nitpicky as to differentiate between “yahoocom” and “yahoo.com?” Isn't it a bit ridiculous that you didn't get my email just because of a little dot?

No, it's not ridiculous. Because the dot is not just a dot. It represents something. That dot has meaning far beyond the pixels on the screen that form it. To me it may seem insignificant, but that is simply due to my lack of knowledge of the ways of the web.

