



The Ziegler School
of Rabbinic Studies

בית המדרש ע"ש זיגלר

Walking with Mitzvot

Edited By
Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson
and Rabbi Patricia Fenton

דרכיה דרכי נעם

In Memory of Harold Held and Louise Held,
of blessed memory

The Held Foundation
Melissa and Michael Bordy
Joseph and Lacine Held
Robert and Lisa Held



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and the Women's League for Conservative Judaism.





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Dear Colleague,

We are delighted to enclose your copy of *Walking with Mitzvot*, the fifth book in the series created for adult learners by the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies.

Walking with Mitzvot is a series of ten learning units that make up a complete adult education course. These materials expose participants to some of the very best thinkers of Conservative Judaism, and their scholarship, passion and faith. They stimulate thought and discussion, and promote learning, while offering an impressive sampling of texts from our rich tradition, presented in the original and in English translation.

The book includes a series of session suggestions to guide you in mastering the material and presenting it to your adult learners. You may select which sessions to run and which texts to use for each session, so that you may customize the course in line with the needs and goals of your own community. Many of the texts are appropriate for multiple sessions. All texts may be copied and distributed to participants, and you may download PDF versions without charge from www.walkingwith.org.

We would like to express our profound thanks for the generous support of the Held Foundation, which has sponsored this project in memory of Harold Held and Louise Held. We are grateful to the members of the foundation: Melissa and Michael Bordy, Joseph and Lacine Held, and Robert and Lisa Held.

It is our hope and prayer that the study of this book will help our people dive deeply into our tradition in our quest to be ourselves, and that in this way we will enrich ourselves, our communities and our world.

B'virvat Shalom,

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WALKING WITH MITZVOT: HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

INTRODUCTION

This book, the fifth in the Ziegler Adult Learning series, is designed to provide high quality, stimulating and challenging materials that enable adults to expand their understanding of the basic concepts and tenets of Conservative Judaism by exposing them to the thinkers, texts and ideas which underpin our tradition. The audience we have in mind is the questioning congregant who might not yet be entirely familiar with Jewish sources – that is, any one of us.

The book contains ten adult education units, each dealing with some aspect of Mitzot. Within each unit you will find:

- an essay
- a set of four texts, with questions
- a fifth text for group study, with questions

To aid the facilitation of these learning sessions this volume also contains Session Suggestions and Resources for Further Study. All of the *Walking With* books, including this one, may be downloaded from the *Walking With* website: www.walkingwith.org.

RESOURCES

For each session you will need:

- the essays, which participants should be encouraged to read in advance
- copies of the texts
- Hebrew-English Bibles
- materials (paper, pens etc) for participants to record their thoughts

SUGGESTED SESSION LENGTH AND FORMAT

The suggested length of each session is 90 minutes to two hours. Any session of 90 minutes or longer will need a short break in the middle.

Below is a basic format, with approximate timings, for a 90 minute to two-hour session. Please amend our suggestions to suit you and your learners.

INTRODUCTION (5-10 MINUTES)

Begin with a brief orientation – recap and consolidate what happened in the last session. Next, elicit the main points of the essay for the current session: What issues, problems, and questions does the essay raise? This should also be an opportunity for those who have not yet read the essay to pick up the main ideas under discussion.

HAVRUTA (20-25 MINUTES)

Four havruta texts are provided per session, with questions to help guide the study. Some questions refer to previous texts – those should be left for group discussion. We recommend that you split the learners into groups corresponding to the number of texts (usually all four) you intend to cover in the session. Initially, each group focuses on just one text, which they can read and discuss together using the study questions as a guide.

GROUP WORK (25-35 MINUTES)

Bring the havruta groups together to present their ideas to the class as a whole. Start by giving everyone all of the texts, so that they can study them and jot down ideas as their colleagues report their reactions. There should be time for reactions and group discussion as well. You decide whether to do this after each text is discussed, or after all four are discussed.



WALKING WITH MITZVOT: HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

SHORT BREAK (10 MINUTES)

SECOND PART OF THE SESSION (20-30 MINUTES)

It is up to you to decide how to use this time. You may use the fifth text and its study questions, or develop your own idea, or continue a lively discussion begun before the break. We encourage you and your learners to synthesize the ideas from the various texts and questions.

CLOSEDOWN/JOURNAL (10 MINUTES)

We suggest learners use this time to journal about and/or discuss:

- What did we learn in this session?
- How does what we learned today fit in with what we've learned in previous sessions?
- How does what we learned today fit into and potentially impact our lives?

Hand out the essay for the next session.

PLEASE NOTE: We know that you are busy. If you read through the essay and have ideas about some of the questions on the texts, you will be ready to guide the session. We encourage you to incorporate materials beyond the texts we've included, and to bring in your favorite texts, as well as ideas from popular culture, such as song lyrics, films and current events.



SESSION SUGGESTIONS

GENERAL NOTES

Look over the texts we provided for all of the essays. You may decide that you want to switch the texts around and to use them where they seem most appropriate for your learning community. Use the Resources for Further Study section to find additional readings and texts on the themes of this book. We also encourage you to coordinate some of the units, perhaps Unit 5: Growing in Mitzvot and Unit 10: Living the Mitzvot Today and Tomorrow, with the activities of the Women's League Hiddur Mitzvah Project.

UNIT 1: MITZVOT: IMPERATIVES OF A LOVING HEART

We suggest you start this session with introductions, then briefly outline the course as a whole, and elicit from the participants information about why they are taking the course, and what their hopes are for the course. Take notes on their comments so that you can refer to them as you prepare for each session.

Rabbi Artson's essay challenges us to look at our relationship to God and to the mitzvot honestly. He invites us to think of mitzvot as "not like bossy impositions of power," but as the acts we do because we love God and want to please the God who loves us "with an everlasting love."

If you have extra time for this unit, you might explore Rabbi Artson's statement that "Mitzvot are the fruit on the tree of halakhah, and halakhah is the systematic effort of the rabbis to translate the Torah into action." For example, how does this relate to our assertion that the Torah is the "tree of life?"

UNIT 2: MITZVOT IN THE BIBLICAL PERIOD

Rabbi Rosen's essay focuses on the Ten Commandments. She analyzes their structure and content to show that the commandments provide "a systematic outline of the categories of thoughts and behaviors that guide one in leading a covenanted life."

If you have extra time for this unit, you might compare Rabbi Rosen's and Rabbi Artson's discussions of thought and action in relation to mitzvot. Or, you might open a conversation about Rabbi Rosen's teachings on covenant. It is common today to hear people say that all Jews are "Jews by Choice." What does it mean to be a Jew by Choice? If we are all Jews by choice, what does covenant mean to us today?

UNIT 3: MITZVOT IN THE RABBINIC PERIOD

Candice Levy continues the discussion of covenant and the Ten Commandments. She talks about rabbinic authority to interpret the Torah, as well as the concept of acting "lifnim mi-shurat ha-din," beyond the letter of the law.

If you have extra time for this unit, you might want to look together at Mishnah Avot 1:1, and Unit 1, Text 2, the story of the Oven of Akhnai. These are essential texts for a discussion about the rabbis' own explanation of their authority to interpret the Torah. In addition, Mishnah Avot 1:1 introduces the important concept of "a fence around the Torah."



SESSION SUGGESTIONS

UNIT 4: MITZVOT AND MODERN JEWISH THOUGHT

Dr. Eisen focuses on Mordecai Kaplan and Abraham Joshua Heschel, and their thoughts on mitzvot. He talks of his own experience with observance and its meaning: “One starts off regarding the mitzvot as a burden and then realizes that in fact they are a great gift. Rules offer a framework for meaning. Obligation turns to love.”

If you have extra time for this unit, you might ask your learners to consider some of these questions:

- Does adapting mitzvot to conditions of postmodern life affect the authority of the commandments?
- Dr. Eisen says the message of Deuteronomy is that God has promised a new kind of life to Israel, “life with a capital *L*.” Does this resonate with you? Do faith and observance take your life from life with a small *l* to life with a capital *L*? What else in your life gives you this feeling?
- Are mitzvot “a way through life’s wilderness” for you as an individual, and for the Jewish people as a whole?
- The rabbis say that “the reward for a mitzvah is a mitzvah.” How does the selection from Heschel’s *Between God and Man* in Text 1 relate to this maxim?
- Look at the selection from Kaplan’s *Judaism as a Civilization* in the text for group study. Think of rituals that work in the way that Kaplan describes, and of some that don’t. What about these rituals make them work or not work to foster connection between the individual and the group? For a ritual that doesn’t work for you, can you reimagine it in a way that it would work, that it would approach the status of “religious poetry in action” that Kaplan desires?

UNIT 5: GROWING IN MITZVOT

As Rabbi Ederberg shows, Growing in Mitzvot is personal and communal, private and public. For each of us, some mitzvot come easily, some are a struggle, and some may be rejected. As we change in our observance of mitzvot, we impact those around us.

If you have extra time for this unit, you might introduce the other stories about would be converts and their meetings with Shammai and Hillel found on Bavli Shabbat 31a. What can we learn from these stories about growing in mitzvot and how to behave while we are on life’s path?

This essay goes well with Rabbi Dorff’s essay in Unit 10: Living the Mitzvot Today and Tomorrow. Look over the texts for both units when deciding what to focus on in your session. If you feel that it is appropriate, you might decide to allocate much of your time to havrutah and/or group discussion of personal and communal experiences with taking on mitzvot.



SESSION SUGGESTIONS

UNIT 6: MITZVOT AND THE SPIRIT

Rabbi Smolkin uses the first paragraph of the Shema to illustrate his view of mitzvot as “the Jewish pathways to connect with God and with people,” and as “conduits between our hearts and the Holy One.”

In addition to the texts and questions provided, this unit is a good opportunity to invite people to share their experiences with and feelings about the Shema. Like Rabbi Artson, Rabbi Smolkin talks about the love between people and God. You might talk about this with your group, and ask: How can love be commanded? What does this say about both love and commandedness?

In the section “Express Them,” Rabbi Smolkin lists some practical applications of the mitzvot. You can have your learners look up the verses he lists, and discuss how they apply to the situations he brings up. Encourage them to share personal experiences.

In the section “Bind Them,” Rabbi Smolkin says: “Our actions form the garments of our soul. A life filled with mitzvot will fashion a particularly gorgeous garment.” Have your group discuss what this means, and to think about people they know whose souls seem particularly gorgeously garbed.

UNIT 7: THE INTERSECTION OF GENDER AND MITZVOT

Dr. Cohen asserts that “The goal of the mitzvot as codified and explicated in the halakhic system is to create a certain type of person...On the most basic level, the mitzvot ‘construct’ people as masculine and feminine.” The chances are that your group will have a lot to say about this topic, both as it relates to Judaism in general and as it relates to them as individuals. In today’s Jewish world, to what extent do the mitzvot still serve to construct us in a gendered way?

Most of the texts we have provided focus on rabbinic attitudes about marriage. Text 4 looks at rabbinic statements on homosexuality. Text 5 presents the rabbinic betrothal formula, which is still used in Jewish marriages today. Conversation about any one of the texts might fill your course time, but these two texts in particular may raise issues of concern to your learners today.

For different views and further discussion of many of the texts Dr. Cohen discusses, see Judith Hauptman’s *Rereading the Rabbis: A Woman’s Voice*, and the other books listed in Resources for Further Study.

UNIT 8: MITZVOT HA-TELUYOT BA’ARETZ

Rabbi Pitkowsky’s essay challenges us to look at a special category of mitzvot: those that can only be observed within the Land of Israel. He discusses leket, shikhehah, peah and the sabbatical year in particular. Rabbi Pitkowsky looks at how these mitzvot advance the cause of social justice, and the challenges and opportunities they present to Israel today.

The texts and questions we provided are designed to stimulate discussion of these mitzvot, what they mean, and how they might apply even outside of the Land of Israel. How can mitzvot that are meant to be observed in one place only, inform and enrich our lived experience of Judaism even outside of that one special place? This unit may be another opportunity to coordinate with your Sisterhood’s Hiddur Mitzvah activities, and perhaps to present a joint session about making these mitzvot meaningful in our lives today.



SESSION SUGGESTIONS

UNIT 9: THE INTERSECTION OF PHILOSOPHY AND MITZVOT

Rabbi Cosgrove traces the development of “Yes, but” Judaism – a Judaism that wishes to say “yes” to full participation in secular society, “but” to remain loyal and committed to a distinctly Jewish tradition. He asks: “Are Jews today really expected to believe that in the performance of mitzvot, we are somehow acting on God’s expressed will – responding to a truth that is exclusive to us?”

Like Rabbi Artson, Rabbi Cosgrove insists that we look honestly at ourselves and our relationship to Judaism and the mitzvot. Encourage your group to focus on Rabbi Cosgrove’s challenge to us to “role-model, cultivate and maintain compelling models of individual and communal observance for the contemporary Jew.” If he is correct in asserting that “In a world of personal autonomy, people will choose to live Jewish lives (or not), based on whether they see their own personal and communal aspirations embodied in their faith and practice,” how can we help Judaism to flourish?

Rabbi Cosgrove suggests that you begin your text studies with Text 5, the selection from Thomas Paine’s *Age of Reason*, and then go back to Texts 1-4. Invite your learners to think about how Paine’s words influence their understanding of the other texts, as well as Rabbi Cosgrove’s challenge to us.

UNIT 10: LIVING THE MITZVOT TODAY AND TOMORROW

Rabbi Dorff introduces the mechanism of determining Jewish law and practice in the Conservative Movement today. His list of questions that have been addressed by the Committee on Jewish Laws and Standards is a goldmine of discussion topics for your group.

In addition to the texts and questions we have provided, you can search the Jewish Law section of the Rabbinical Assembly website for teshuvot to bring to your learners. You might ask your learners to compare and contrast Rabbi Dorff’s comments on commandedness with those of Rabbi Artson in Unit 1 and Dr. Eisen in Unit 4. In the section *Making Mitzvot Significant in Your Life*, Rabbi Dorff provides seven categories of mitzvot with suggestions on how to incorporate them into one’s life. This section goes especially well with Unit 5: Growing in Mitzvot, and may serve as an opportunity to coordinate with your Sisterhood’s Hiddur Mitzvah activities. The *Jewish choices, Jewish voices* series edited by Rabbi Dorff is another rich source of topics and texts for discussion. See Resources for Further Study.

As a way of concluding your learning time together as a group, you might try one of these activities:

- Ask each participant to turn to his/her neighbor and say: “God loves you.” How does this feel? Think about mitzvot and love as discussed by Rabbi Artson, Dr. Eisen, Rabbi Smolkin and Rabbi Dorff. How does each see the mitzvot as part of God’s love? After the time learning together as a group, how do you see the mitzvot as part of your relationship to God?
- Look back at the notes you took in the first session about why people signed up for the course and what their hopes were for their learning experience. Read a few comments and invite discussion of how the course impacted your learners’ thinking and behavior. If you feel comfortable and time permits, share some of your personal responses to teaching the course and engaging with the essays and texts.



CONTRIBUTORS

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RABBI ELLIOT COSGROVE, PH.D. was ordained at the Jewish Theological Seminary in 1999, and earned his Ph.D. at the University of Chicago Divinity School. His dissertation on Rabbi Louis Jacobs, a leading Anglo-Jewish theologian of the 20th century, reflects his passion for the intersection of Jewish scholarship and faith. Rabbi Cosgrove is the author of *In the Beginning* and the editor of *Jewish Theology in Our Time: A New Generation Explores the Foundations and Future of Jewish Belief*.

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RABBI GESA S. EDERBERG is the rabbi of the Oranienburger Strasse Synagogue in Berlin, Germany, and the coordinator of the supplementary schools for Berlin's 11,000 member Jewish community. A graduate of the Schechter Rabbinical Seminary in Jerusalem, she was the founding director of Masorti Germany, the umbrella organization of Conservative Judaism in Germany. Her books include *German for Jewish Immigrants*, which integrates basic Judaism and German language lessons.

ARNOLD M. EISEN, PH.D. is the seventh chancellor of The Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. An award-winning writer and advocate for the Jewish community, the chancellor's publications include *Rethinking Modern Judaism: Ritual, Commandment, Community* and *Taking Hold of Torah: Jewish Commitment and Community in America*, a personal essay. His Mitzvah Initiative involves 75 congregations in reflection upon "commandment, commandedness, and the Commander," while his blog "Conservative Judaism: A Community Conversation" features weekly essays on Conservative Judaism with responses by movement and lay leaders.

CANDICE LEVY is pursuing a PhD in Rabbinic Literature at UCLA. She earned her BA at Yeshiva University's Stern College for Women, and an MA in Rabbinic Studies at the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies at the American Jewish University. She is a member of the faculty of the Ziegler School where she teaches Midrash.



CONTRIBUTORS

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RABBI MOSHE SMOLKIN is the rabbi of Ohavay Zion Synagogue in Lexington, Kentucky. He interned at Mishkon Tephilo in Venice, California for two years, and was ordained by the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies at the American Jewish University in 2009. Since moving to Kentucky, he has become an avid fan of the University of Kentucky Wildcats, an essential trait for all Lexington residents.



RESOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY

GENERAL

Judith R. Baskin and Kenneth Seeskin, editors. *The Cambridge Guide to Jewish History, Religion, and Culture*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

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Websites

United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism: <http://www.uscj.org/index1.htm>

Rabbinical Assembly: <http://www.rabbinicalassembly.org>

Podcasts, Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies: http://web.mac.com/aaaron12/Aaron_Alexander/Welcome.html

Podcasts, Jewish Theological Seminary of America: http://www.jtsa.edu/Conservative_Judaism/JTS_Podcasts.xml

My Jewish Learning: www.myjewishlearning.com

UNIT 1 – MITZVOT: IMPERATIVES OF A LOVING HEART

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UNIT 4 – MITZVOT AND MODERN JEWISH THOUGHT

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UNIT 7 – THE INTERSECTION OF GENDER AND MITZVOT

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UNIT 8 – MITZVOT HA-TELUYOT BA'ARETZ

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UNIT 9 – THE INTERSECTION OF PHILOSOPHY AND MTZVOT

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