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Walking with Mitzvot

Edited By
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דרכיה דרכי נעם

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MITZVOT: IMPERATIVES OF A LOVING HEART

RABBI BRADLEY SHAVIT ARTSON, D.H.L.

MITZVOT AND AGGADAH

It is customary to introduce the subject of mitzvot, the sacred deeds of Jewish observance, by noting that in Judaism the deed is central whereas the theology remains secondary. Perhaps unique among the world's religions, Judaism stresses expression through a detailed regimen of behavior that shapes every aspect of our waking lives (and even specifies permissible body postures while asleep!). How and what we eat, the frequency and content of prayer, business practice and communal policy, life cycle and special moments in the calendar, criminal and tort law – all these and more are defined, debated and implemented as the very paradigm of Jewish spirituality. Vast rabbinic tractates seek precision when it comes to the path (halakhah) of mandated and prohibited behavior, yet leave the tellings (aggadah) of our thoughts, stories and values raucous and diverse.

Many scholars have introduced Jewish observance in exactly that way – commandments are primary and important, thoughts are secondary, hence mythical and unconstrained. But our complicating challenge is that many mitzvot do pertain precisely to the realm of thought – proper belief, the very concept of idolatry, morality and ethical ideals. The specific form the mitzvot take are often pruned from the rich loam of aggadah from which the halakhah grows – practices meant to recall and live the creation, the exodus from Egypt, understandings of an afterlife, or to reflect Kabbalistic theologies of God's diverse manifestations permeating the world.

Rather than crowing a false triumphalism or a choosing sides in an unwinnable conflict – as though thought and deed could ever be completely separated – a fuller understanding of Judaism as a way of life invites us to recognize the dynamic, almost biological way that thought and deed interrelate in a confluence more rich than either would separately provide. Thought expresses itself in action, behavior refines and clarifies our belief, and an unending feedback loop keeps these two partners of Jewish vitality dancing with each other – each expressing and modifying itself in response to the pull of the other.

In fact, rather than distilling thought from action as two separate entities, it might be more accurate to recognize them as phases of an embracing process, or as fluctuating emphases that reflect the short term focus of the viewer at the moment. Just as light has wave-like properties for one looking for light waves, and particle-like properties for one seeking light particles, so too mitzvot well up from the fecund swirl of thought actions and of action thoughts, or what Max Kadushin felicitously termed “value concepts.”

That living quality of Judaism is precisely the source of its vitality and longevity. Rather than a system of distilled ideas or a code of behavioral ideals, Jewish observance is living Jews living Judaism. Just as a vital organism uses its mind to situate itself in the world, to assess danger and opportunity, Jewish thought situates us in the cosmos, offering thought experiments that suggest deeper connections to the divine, to each other. Seeking Jews discipline their minds to **think** Torah. As the cosmos is always dynamic and changing, so our thoughts must also stay dynamic and flexible to integrate the best of our experience with the most expansive integrations of tomorrow. And just as thought discovers itself by tracking the actions in which it becomes visible, Jewish thought requires the implementation of mitzvot to actualize its potential to inspire lives of goodness and holiness. Responding Jews mold their actions to **do** Torah.

So our first recognition is that there cannot be Judaism without mitzvot, any more than there can be a brain without a body. And let there be no further question of divorcing Jewish practice from Jewish thinking – a body without a brain is a monstrosity. How we understand the mitzvot in general and each mitzvah in particular will have a tremendous impact in our dedication to a life of commandments and to the particular commandments our communities will value, teach, and do.

MITZVOT AND HALAKHAH

So it is true that mitzvot emerge as manifestations of Jewish thinking, as ways that Jews express Torah consciousness in the details of behavior. And it is further the case that many brilliant sages have productively used the mitzvot as elements to fashion a systematic expression of Jewish symbolic thought. The ancient rabbis read the sacrificial system of Leviticus



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as a metaphor for the inner work of repentance and rectification of wrong-doing. Maimonides expounded the biblical and rabbinic discussion of the skin disease tzara'at as a metaphor for slander and gossip (itself a category of mitzvot known as l'shon ha-ra), and Franz Rosenzweig painted a picture of Judaism's mitzvot of the calendar and its holy days as an elaborate metaphor for the way Judaism sanctifies the present rather than aspires for a salvation in the end of days. These thinkers and others did not deny the tangible, behavioral aspect of the mitzvot, but they used them as opportunities to delve deeper, into a level of metaphor and symbol where the mitzvot display particularly rich meanings.

Yet for all its resonances as a concrete manifestation and an evocative set of building blocks for Jewish thought, there is a special relationship between mitzvot – the sacred deeds – and halakhah, literally the “walking” that Jews do with their bodies. Mitzvot are not random behaviors, nor are they abstractions set into deed. Mitzvot are the fruit on the tree of halakhah, and halakhah is the systematic effort of the rabbis to translate the Torah into action.

You might have noted that I have avoided translating most of the Hebrew expressions until this point. To render them into English would be to prejudge the outcome of what they mean to us. But I cannot postpone the reckoning any further. Halakhah comes from the Hebrew root H.L.KH, meaning, to walk. The true meaning of the word Halakhah, then, is the walking we do as Jews. That walking is not static, it is not abstract principles imposed for the sake of conformity. Walking is an activity that engages our entire body. And it is somewhat different for each walking community or individual. In much of Western parlance, translating Halakhah as law has meant accepting a negative valence (law vs. love, for instance), a notion of imposed authority opposed to freedom, a uniformity that stultifies individuality and diversity.

Halakhah is none of those things. To the contrary, a study of the history of the Halakhah shows that it reflects an ongoing effort to translate God's love and justice into the fabric of Jewish living, invites the possibility to transcend our own self-centered focus and orient our lives to embrace service and integration, while offering a palette of practice which allows each individual to paint a life of color and clarity.

The Hebrew word corresponding to law is “din.” There are particular laws (dinim) and there are specific topics of law (dinei mamonot, for instance, are laws of finance). According to rabbinic teaching, one can – indeed should – strive to act beyond the limit of the law (lifnim mishurat ha-din). While it is also true that halakhot (plural) are indeed collections or lists of laws and that a halakhah can be a particular rule, the Halakhah refers not to any particular law, but to the system with which such rules are generated. The Halakhah is often compared to a tree – living, luxuriant, and supple. Surely the popular notion of law as rules is not quite what we are after here.

So why not just speak of mitzvot without reference to halakhah at all? There are indeed thoughtful and sensitive contemporary Jewish thinkers who advocate just that, and they speak of the wisdom of each particular mitzvah as sufficient to justify engagement. Some offer this halakhah-neutral approach to mitzvot as a teaching tool – take your first steps without worrying about the final goal. Otherwise, that final goal can feel so overwhelming one would never take the first step. Others advocate a halakhah-neutral life of mitzvot as less constraining, less demanding. However worthy as those goals might be, on the whole Conservative/Masorti Judaism resists such an amputation. Our sense of Judaism as a living organism requires a way for its component parts to connect in dynamic integration; the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. That integrated whole is precisely what the Halakhah offers us. Without a systemic commitment to contextualize mitzvot in the developing conversation of the rabbis across the generations, each mitzvah flourishes (or withers) in isolation and there is no sense of growth, direction, or advance. “One's reach must exceed one's grasp, else what's a heaven for?”¹ As long as we are alive, we grow, flourish, change. Holding on to halakhah as a system precludes turning any particular rule into an idol, prevents freezing the life out of the living covenant between God and the Jewish people. Halakhah as a system is how the Torah continues to integrate contemporary perspectives, converses with science, heeds the voice of conscience. Mitzvot without the Halakhah are ends in themselves, perfect like a snowflake – and equally static and brittle and isolated. Jewish life deserves more, and worthy Jewish living requires it.

¹ Robert Browning (1812-1889), British Poet.



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HONESTLY – CAN WE ADMIT THAT WE BELIEVE?

The Halakhah is the ancient tree – strong, broad branched, gnarled roots extending deep in the dark, rich soil. And each branch represents a developing Jewish community – the more recent the branch, the more recent the community. Each leaf, let us say, is a particular mitzvah, attached to its branch and drawing the nourishment of sunlight for the benefit of the tree as a whole, while also receiving nourishment from the vast system of roots and the sturdy trunk. One way to understand a mitzvah is as a leaf, transitory, beautiful, and linked to the entire tree and every other leaf while still reflecting its own particularity.

Perhaps another approach might be to look at the word itself. In Hebrew, the word “mitzvah” means “command” (although “commandment” sounds classier!). For most contemporary Orthodox Jews, that translation accurately carries their living nexus of belief and practice – God is King, issuing verbal orders that we are rewarded for observing and punished for violating. My hunch is that for many Jews in ages past, that articulation would have felt right.

My hunch is also that most Conservative Jews think they are supposed to believe that nexus (King/verbal orders/reward and punishment) but don't. Many continue to try to persuade themselves that they do accept it, but this unstable brew of belief abandons them in times of need and betrays them in times of crisis. If you are one of those Jews, I want to throw you a lifeline: while the Hebrew word “mitzvah” does mean “command,” the Aramaic word (the language of the Talmud and the Kaddish prayer) means “connection” or “link.” While most Conservative/Masorti Jews don't believe in a God who verbally commands orders, most do recognize that the mitzvot connect them to the divine. Most Conservative Jews, when they light Shabbat candles, or eat a kosher meal, or contribute tzedakah or feed the hungry do celebrate that they are linking themselves to something beyond themselves – God, Jewish values, creation as a whole, holiness.

Perhaps the time has come to say out loud that we don't think it is accurate or helpful to parrot a theology we don't believe. Pretending we thought the mitzvot were commands certainly didn't succeed in motivating us to observe halakhah in an Orthodox way. Indeed, it is possible that the gap between our convictions and our language was a barrier to a greater embrace of the wonder of the mitzvot.

What if we said what we truly believe, which actually makes sense of our patterns of practice? We affirm that the mitzvot connect us to God, link us to Torah and the best of Jewish values, forge a relationship between our individual lives, families and those of the Jewish people around the world and across the ages. We affirm that the Halakhah provides a system to integrate our newest insights and advancing knowledge into the scaffold of Torah and the cathedral of deeds that Judaism erects in God's praise and for human betterment.

BACK TO COMMANDMENTS, THIS TIME THROUGH CONNECTION

Now that we've been truthful to ourselves and to God, admitting that the connection we feel is what makes the mitzvot seem beautiful, worthy and compelling, we are now in a position to revisit commandedness one more time, but on our own grounds.

Turns out that our problem may not be with commanded after all, but with what kind of commanding we mean.

Remember that King in the sky, rewarding and punishing for what we do or don't do? Well, most Jews have found that notion of God to be both untrue and demeaning– to God's love and justice, and to our human dignity (itself a Jewish value). The distorting assumption we indulged was to assume that commandment had to mean something like the orders of a despot or tyrant. God's power is coercive in that model, and our service would be a form of slavery. We are right to reject that notion.

But Judaism doesn't limit its metaphors for God to that of King. Instead, the Torah and the Rabbis call God: parent, teacher, lover, spouse, covenant partner, redeemer, fountain, and more. Think of the way the desires of a loved one are imperatives for you – not because you fear punishment, but because you seek their happiness and want to show your love. A great teacher sees a student's true potential and mirrors that possibility so the student is inspired and



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confident and able to self-surpass. A loving parent persistently believes in a child until that child believes and achieves. Frankly, the great kings of Israel (one thinks of King David in his early reign) weren't imperious tyrants from afar, either. David was the father of his people.

Mitzvot are commandments, but not the way edicts are, not like bossy impositions of power. Mitzvot are commandments the way wanting to please your parent or spouse is a commandment. The way living up to your mentor's hopes for you is an imperative. The way delighting a child you adore is something you can't evade. Mitzvot are commandments because we are loved with an everlasting love, and because we are inspired to yearn for God's intimacy and illumination. Love creates imperatives that ripple out from the core of our loving hearts. Love obligates from the inside, as caring and nurturing warm from within.

In that way – and only in that way – the mitzvot remain what they have always been: commandments of love, trusted pathways connecting the Jewish people and the God of Israel, beacons lighting lives of justice, compassion and holiness in a world too often cruel and harsh, occasions of timeless meaning linking us, one generation to the others in a grand affirmation of the possibilities made real by lives well lived.



MITZVOT: IMPERATIVES OF A LOVING HEART – TEXT 1

דברים ל:יא-יד

יא כי המצוה הזאת אשר אנכי מצוה היום, לא-נפלאה היא ממך ולא רחקה היא. יב לא בשמים הוא, לאמר מי יעלה-לנו השמימה ויקחה לנו וישמענו אותה ונעשנה. יג ולא-מעבר לים הוא, לאמר מי יעבר-לנו אל-עבר הים ויקחה לנו וישמענו אותה ונעשנה. יד כי-קרוב אליך הדבר מאד, בפיו ובלבבך לעשותו.

DEUTERONOMY 30:11-14

11 Surely this Instruction which I enjoin upon you this day is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach. **12** It is not in the heavens, that you should say, “Who among us can go up to the heavens and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?” **13** Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, “Who among us can cross to the other side of the sea and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?” **14** No, the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- The Etz Hayim Humash translates the word mitzvah as “Instruction.” What do you think about this translation? How does this translation relate to Rabbi Artson’s assertion that mitzvot connect us to God, rather than representing “verbal orders?”
- What does “it is not in the heavens” mean in this biblical passage? How does your understanding of this phrase inform your ideas about the origin of mitzvot?
- The Torah says that this “Instruction” is “in your mouth and in your heart.” How does this relate to Rabbi Artson’s comparison of mitzvot to “the desires of a loved one?”
- What is the connection between the assertion that the mitzvah, or Instruction, is “not too baffling” for us, and the final words of the passage “to observe it,” or more literally, “to do it?”



MITZVOT: IMPERATIVES OF A LOVING HEART – TEXT 2

תלמוד בבלי מסכת בבא מציעא דף נט עמוד ב
תנא: באותו היום השיב רבי אליעזר כל תשובות שבעולם ולא קיבלו הימנו.
אמר להם: אם הלכה כמותי - חרוב זה יוכיח. נעקר חרוב ממקומו מאה
אמה, ואמרי לה: ארבע מאות אמה. אמרו לו: אין מביאין ראיה מן החרוב.
חזר ואמר להם: אם הלכה כמותי - אמת המים יוכיחו. חזרו אמת המים
לאחוריהם. אמרו לו: אין מביאין ראיה מאמת המים. חזר ואמר להם:
אם הלכה כמותי - כותלי בית המדרש יוכיחו. הטו כותלי בית המדרש
ליפול. גער בהם רבי יהושע, אמר להם: אם תלמידי חכמים מנצחים זה את
זה בהלכה - אתם מה טיבכם? לא נפלו מפני כבודו של רבי יהושע, ולא זקפו
מפני כבודו של רבי אליעזר, ועדין מטין ועומדין. חזר ואמר להם: אם הלכה
כמותי - מן השמים יוכיחו. יצאתה בת קול ואמרה: מה לכם אצל רבי
אליעזר שהלכה כמותו בכל מקום! עמד רבי יהושע על רגליו ואמר: לא
בשמים היא.

BABYLONIAN TALMUD, BAVA METZIA 59b

(This selection is from the famous story of the Oven of Akhnai. Rabbi Eliezer and the Sages disagree about the halakhic status of the oven.)

...On that day, Rabbi Eliezer offered all the arguments in the world [to defend his halakhic ruling], but the Sages did not accept them. He said to them: If the halakhah agrees with me, let this carob tree prove it. The carob tree was uprooted from its place 100 amot; some say 400 amot. They said to him: We do not bring proof from a carob tree. Then he said to them: If the halakhah agrees with me, let the water canal prove it. The water in the canal flowed backwards. They said to him: We do not bring proof from a water canal. Then he said to them: If the halakhah agrees with me, let the walls of the beit midrash prove it. The walls of the beit midrash leaned, about to fall. Rabbi Yehoshua rebuked them, saying: If Sages argue with each other about halakhah, what does it have to do with you? The walls didn't fall, out of respect for Rabbi Yehoshua, and they didn't stand straight, out of respect for Rabbi Eliezer, and they are still leaning. Then Rabbi Eliezer said to them: If the halakhah agrees with me, let the heavens prove it. A heavenly voice came out and said: What have you got against Rabbi Eliezer? The halakhah agrees with him in all cases! Rabbi Yehoshua got up on his feet and said: "It is not in the heavens!"

STUDY QUESTIONS

- In this Talmudic story, how does the statement "It is not in the heavens" function?
- As the story continues, we see God's reaction. The Talmud tells us that God laughed and said: "My children have prevailed over me!" Who is God talking about? How do you feel about the rabbis putting these words into God's mouth?
- How does the God-human relationship suggested by this Talmudic story compare to the relationship Rabbi Artson talks about in his essay?
- If the interpretation of the Torah is in human hands, how do we know the proper way to behave?



MITZVOT: IMPERATIVES OF A LOVING HEART – TEXT 3

תהילים פרק קיט: צב-צד, צז-צט
צב לוֹלִי תוֹרַתְךָ שְׁעִשְׁעִי, אֲזִ אֲבַדְתִּי בְּעֵינַי.
צג לְעוֹלָם לֹא-אֶשְׁכַּח פְּקוּדֵיךָ, כִּי בָם חִיִּיתֵנִי.
צד לָךְ-אֲנִי הוֹשִׁיעֵנִי, כִּי פְקוּדֵיךָ דָרְשָׁתִי.

צז מָה-אֶהְבֵּתִי תוֹרַתְךָ, כָּל-הַיּוֹם הִיא שִׂיחָתִי.
צח מֵאֵיבֵי תַחֲכַמְנִי מִצֹּתְךָ, כִּי לְעוֹלָם הִיא-לִי.
צט מִכָּל-מְלַמְדֵי הַשְּׂפִלְתִּי, כִּי עֲדוֹתֶיךָ שִׂיחָה לִּי.

PSALM 119:92-94, 97-99

- 92** Were not your teaching my delight
I would have perished in my affliction.
- 93** I will never neglect your precepts,
for you have preserved my life through them.
- 94** I am yours; save me!
For I have turned to your precepts.
- 97** O how I love your teaching!
It is my study all day long.
- 98** Your commandments make me wiser than my enemies;
they always stand by me.
- 99** I have gained more insight than all my teachers,
for your decrees are my study.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- In what ways are the Torah (teaching) and mitzvot a delight?
- Rabbi Artson discusses the many metaphors we have available for God. What are some metaphors the psalmist may have in mind here? How does the image of God in this psalm compare to that in our Talmudic story?
- What does this psalm say about thought and action in regard to mitzvot?
- Does the psalmist seek a divine miracle to save him, or do the Torah and its study itself protect him? How so? How do you feel about this?
- What is the plain meaning of Verse 99? Rabbinic sages interpreted it to mean “I have learned from all who taught me.” Which version do you prefer? Why?



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משלי פרק ו : כ-כג
כ נִצַּר בְּנֵי מִצְוֹת אָבִיךָ, וְאַל-תִּטַּשׁ תּוֹרַת אִמְךָ.
כא קִשְׂרָם עַל-לִבְךָ תָּמִיד, עֲנִדָם עַל-גְּרִגְרֹתֶךָ.
כב בְּהִתְהַלֵּכְךָ תִּנְחָה אִתְּךָ בְּשִׁכְבְּךָ תִּשְׁמֹר עֲלֶיךָ,
וְהַקִּיצוֹת הֵיא תִשְׁיַחֲךָ.
כג כִּי יָרַ מִצְנָה וְתוֹרָה אֹר, וְדָרְךְ חַיִּים תּוֹכְחוֹת מוֹסֵר.

PROVERBS 6:20-23

- 20** My son, keep your father's mitzvah;
Do not forsake your mother's Torah.
- 21** Tie them over your heart always;
Bind them around your throat.
- 22** When you walk it will lead you;
When you lie down it will watch over you;
And when you are awake it will talk with you.
- 23** For the mitzvah is a lamp,
And the Torah is a light,
And the way to life is the rebuke that disciplines.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- **What does this passage say about the emotional and the intellectual aspects of the mitzvot? How do you read it in light of Rabbi Artson's translation of halakhah as "walking?"**
- **The Shema also instructs us to bind mitzvot to our body. Compare our passage to Deuteronomy 6:4-9. What do we learn from this idea of binding the mitzvot to our bodies? How does this change if we look at mitzvot not as commands, but as connections and links? If we look at mitzvot as "imperatives of a loving heart?"**
- **Verse 23 calls the mitzvah a lamp and the Torah a light. What is the difference between a lamp and a light? How does this apply to the Torah and the mitzvot?**
- **How does this passage illuminate Rabbi Artson's discussion of thought actions and action thoughts? How does Rabbi Artson's understanding of mitzvot illuminate this passage?**



MITZVOT: IMPERATIVES OF A LOVING HEART – TEXT FOR GROUP STUDY

בראשית ו: ט
אֱלֹהִים תִּוְלַדְתָּ נֹחַ, נֹחַ אִישׁ צַדִּיק תָּמִים הָיָה בְּדַרְתָּיו, אֶת-הָאֱלֹהִים הִתְהַלֵּךְ-נֹחַ.

GENESIS 6:9

This is the line of Noah. – Noah was a righteous man; he was blameless in his age; Noah walked with God.

רש"י בראשית פרק ו: ט
את האלהים התהלך נח - ובאברהם הוא אומר "אשר התהלכתי לפניו"
(בראשית כד: מ). נח היה צריך סעד לתומכו, אבל אברהם היה מתחזק
ומהלך בצדקו מאליו:

RASHI (RABBI SOLOMON BEN ISAAC, 1040-1105), GENESIS 6:9

Noah walked with God. And concerning Abraham, Scripture says: "[The Lord] before whom I walk" (Genesis 24:40). Noah needed God's support to uphold him, but Abraham used to strengthen himself and he walked in his righteousness by his own efforts.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- According to the biblical passages, how do Noah and Abraham's walking differ? What does it mean to walk with God or to walk before God?
- How do Noah and Abraham differ for Rashi? What does this say to you about the relationship each has with God? Which is closer to your relationship with God? Which would you prefer?
- Rabbi Artson reminds us that the word halakhah comes from the Hebrew root meaning "to walk," and mitzvot are "the fruit on the tree of halakhah." How does this understanding affect your understanding of the Torah and Rashi here?





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