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Walking with Mitzvot

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MITZVOT IN THE BIBLICAL PERIOD

RABBI TRACEE ROSEN

INTRODUCTION

Before we can examine what it means to live a life of mitzvot, commandedness, especially as conceived during the biblical period, we must first examine the term, brit, covenant.

The establishment of covenants was a well-documented practice between tribes or peoples in the ancient Near East. The Jewish Encyclopedia defines “covenant” in part in following way:

An agreement between two contracting parties, originally sealed with blood; a bond, or a law; a permanent religious dispensation... Every covenant required some kind of religious rite in which the Deity was invoked as a witness to render it valid.¹

One of the great innovations of the Israelite religion is the idea that a divine being, The Divine Being, would actually choose to enter into a covenant with humanity.

EARLY COVENANTS

In the Bible, the first humans are given the initial orders, “Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it; and rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that creep on earth” (Genesis 1:28). God said, “See, I give you every seed-bearing plant that is upon all the earth, and every tree that has seed-bearing fruit; they shall be yours for food. And to all the animals on land, to all the birds of the sky, and to everything that creeps on earth, in which there is the breath of life, [I give] all the green plants for food” (Gen. 1:29-30). God creates the world, and instructs the living beings to carry on the work of ongoing creation through eating and propagation. No other instructions are explicitly given, and the result is disastrous. The offspring of the humans engage in murder and wanton violence over the first ten generations, so that God repents of the first creation, destroys humanity in a flood, and starts over again with Noah.

The second set of God’s instructions to humans involves the first brit or covenant that God creates with humans. This time, in addition to the repeated requirement of procreation, God also gives rules which emphasize the sanctity of life. While eating animals becomes permitted for the first time, the sacred nature of the blood makes it proscribed from human consumption. More importantly, the sacredness of human life is spelled out: “Of man, too, will I require a reckoning for human life, of every man for that of his fellow man! Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in his image did God make man” (Gen. 9:5-6). In return, God promises to exhibit restraint in God’s own taking of human life. Never again will God wipe out humanity in such a deluge. God declares the rainbow to be the sign of the covenant.

In the Abrahamic covenant, God’s message to the world is to be channeled through a specific line of people. God promises a special blessing of fertility and increase for Abraham and his descendants. In return, Abraham is required to circumcise himself and the male members of his tribe, consecrating the organ of fertility to the Divine, a sign as permanent and irrevocable for humans as the Divine side of the covenant is for God.

In both the case of Noah and Abraham, the form of the covenant is similar to covenants of protection offered by a monarch to his subjects. While there are certain expected behaviors outlined, there is no real sense of reciprocity or parity between the parties. The promises made by God are monumental, while the expectations placed on the human parties are relatively minor.

¹ <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=837&letter=C&search=covenant>



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ASERET HADIBROT, OR THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

The third major covenantal enactment is the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai. God tells Moses to tell the people: “Now then, if you will obey me faithfully and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all the peoples. Indeed, all the earth is mine, but you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:5-6). In exchange for this promise of becoming God’s kingdom of priests and a holy nation, the Israelites are now enjoined to an entire system of thoughts and behaviors, encapsulated in the text which we commonly know as the Ten Commandments, or in Hebrew, aseret hadibrot, the ten statements or ten principles.

In *Exploring Exodus: the Heritage of Biblical Israel*, scholar Nahum Sarna points out that the contents of the Ten Commandments have many parallels with the language in collections of law found in other Near Eastern civilizations. Sarna contends that the only real innovations present in the Decalogue are the demand for exclusive worship of one God, prohibitions against idolatry, and the institution of Shabbat (pgs. 137-139).²

I would argue that while the content may be similar, the list is organized in a literary structure that bespeaks a more comprehensive approach to life. Aseret hadibrot is not only a list of categories of obligations for the covenanted individual, but is actually a systemic outline of the categories of thoughts and behaviors that guide one in leading a covenanted life.

From the time of the earliest Torah commentators, it was noted that the two tablets could be divided between rules relating to the responsibilities the Israelites had to God (in the first five statements), and the responsibilities they had to each other (the second five). But each of the sets of rules is also a series which begins with the most abstract thought-behaviors, and goes through a series of increasingly tangible physical behaviors.

Observe: The first precept of the list is, “I YHWH am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage” (Exodus 20:2, Deut. 5:6). Medieval commentator Abraham Ibn Ezra contends that what we normally think of as the first commandment is actually the overriding principle which is made specific by the others. Maimonides, on the other hand, observes that this statement, which doesn’t seem to command specific behavior, in fact is the precept which requires a belief in the One God of the universe. If that’s the case, then the first commandment is a commandment of thought or belief. Its corollary then is the second statement: Do not believe in other false gods. While the second contains an additional limitation against creating physical likenesses to be worshiped, the primary focus is against belief. The third precept, not taking the name of God in vain, moves from the realm of thought and belief into the more physical realm of speech. The fourth precept of observing and honoring Shabbat, moves into the realm of action, specifically how we act within the boundaries of covenantal behavior. After all, Shabbat is the “sign” of the Sinai covenant, in the same way that the rainbow and circumcision are the signs of the earlier covenants. To observe Shabbat is to commit ourselves via our public actions to living in a positive relationship with God. Finally, while the commandment to honor our parents on the surface seems to belong more on the other side of the tablets in the human-to-human realm, it legitimately belongs on the human-to-God side, in that, as the Talmud points out: Parents are God’s partners in the act of pro/creation (Babylonian Talmud, Kiddushin 30b). In this way, as it were, parents represent the most physical embodiment possible for a disembodied God.

On the human-to-human side of the tablets, we see a parallel structure, albeit backwards. The tenth precept is a proscription against coveting, something that on its own would hardly make anyone’s top ten lists of holy or covenantal behavior, but seen within this structural context, dictates that proper behavior toward other human beings incorporates even our innermost thoughts regarding others, the people of their households and their belongings. From thought, we move to proper speech regarding one’s fellow: Do not bear false witness against your neighbor. The eighth precept leads us into the realm of action regarding property: Do not steal (this is interpreted in later rabbinic texts as meaning not to steal a life, i.e., kidnapping). The seventh precept, against adultery, deals with actions regarding the most sacred and covenantal human relationship we have, the covenant of marriage. Finally, the sixth precept deals with the most tangible, physical relationship of all, the sanctity of human life and the prohibition against taking another’s life.

² Nahum Sarna, *Exploring Exodus: The Heritage of Biblical Israel*. New York: Schocken Books, 1986.



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Why does this progression from the realm of thought to the realm of action and physicality run backwards in the second set of the list? This is actually a very common and widely recognized form of literary structure used in biblical and ancient Near Eastern writings, referred to as a chiasmic structure, in which the main, focal point in a literary unit is placed at the center of the text, and is surrounded by texts on either side which are parallel to each other, as the diagram below illustrates (following Ibn Ezra and others who hold that the first statement is the umbrella precept):

STRUCTURE OF ASERET HADIBROT - THE TEN STATEMENTS

1. I am YHWH your God		
DIMENSION	FIRST TABLET	SECOND TABLET
Life	6. Don't murder	
Other humans (FAMILY)	5. Honor parents	7. Don't commit adultery
Property	4. Observe Shabbat	8. Don't steal
Speech	3. Don't swear falsely in God's name	9. Don't bear false witness
Thought	2. Don't worship other gods	10. Don't covet

So, how does this relate to the general concept of mitzvot? In his *Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, 20th century Bible scholar Umberto Cassuto states: "Before the particulars and terms of the covenant are conveyed by the intermediary (Moses), God Himself makes a prefatory declaration that establishes the basic principles on which the covenant will be founded. The declaration sets forth: (a.) what must be the relationship of the Israelites to the Lord their God as the Chosen People; (b.) what must be their relationship to one another as human beings" (Abraham's translation, pgs. 238-239).³

Having prescribed in very general terms what it means to live the kind of life that is worthy of being in a covenanted relationship with God, the Torah then offers a number of examples of legal codes that make these ideals more specific. These are the early examples of God's mitzvot, commandments. Immediately following the revelation at Sinai is the first of these legal sections known as the "Covenant Code" (Exodus 21-23). Other codes of law are found in Leviticus 19, known as the "Holiness Code," and the bulk of Deuteronomy (Chapters 12-26). It is interesting to note that in each of these compilations, there is no distinction created between laws that we would classify as civil, criminal, ritual, or ethical. They are interspersed throughout.

While it is true that many of the laws relating to interpersonal conduct are found in law codes of surrounding civilizations, the Torah is the only one of these documents to assert that how human beings treat each other is directed by God every bit as much as the laws concerning rituals and cultic worship. Another remarkable element of biblical law is the intense concern for the weak and disempowered within the social structure. Thirty-six times, the Torah commands proper treatment of the stranger, since we were strangers ourselves in the land of Egypt. Widows, orphans, and the poor were also due an extra measure of consideration and help.

The commandment to "be holy" dictated not only the proper forms of sacrifices for various communal and personal situations, but also ritual purity, dietary laws, sexual and family relationship laws, the calendar of worship and sacred times, and the use and sabbatical of the land.

It is clear, based on admonitions of the authors of the prophetic and later texts of the Hebrew Bible, that there was not universal compliance with these laws. Prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah challenge the Jews to abandon their idolatrous

³ Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*. Translated from the Hebrew by Israel Abrahams. Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1967.



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practices, and their exhortations are reinforced by archaeological excavations in Jerusalem and elsewhere showing Israelites in possession of figurines clearly identifiable as Canaanite gods. These prophets also warn the people against too heavy a reliance on acts of piety towards God, like the bringing of sacrifices, if they were not also accompanied by acts of righteousness towards one's fellow humans (see, for example, the first chapter of Isaiah).

The nature and scope of the laws prescribed might have seemed overwhelming to those enjoined to live by them. This fear is addressed by a discourse in the latter sections of Deuteronomy: "Surely, this Instruction which I enjoin upon you this day is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach. 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?' 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?' No, the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it" (Deuteronomy 30:11-14).

Although the Jews of biblical times may as a society have been terribly flawed in their observance of mitzvot, and in their loyalty to the covenant with God, they did one very important thing right. They preserved and transmitted the record of their relationship with God in a form that for more than 2000 years Jews have been able to study, debate, and interpret.



MITZVOT IN THE BIBLICAL PERIOD – TEXT 1

שמות יט:ה-ו

ה וְעַתָּה אִם-שָׁמוּעַ תִּשְׁמָעוּ בְּקוֹלִי וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם אֶת-בְּרִיתִי, וְהָיִיתֶם לִי סִגְלָה מִכָּל-הָעַמִּים
כִּי לִי כָּל הָאָרֶץ. וְאַתֶּם תִּהְיוּ-לִי מְמַלְכֶת כְּהֹנִים וְגוֹי קְדוֹשׁ...

Exodus 19:5-6

5 And now, if you will obey me faithfully and keep my covenant you shall be my treasured possession among all the peoples. Indeed all the earth is mine **6** but you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- Rabbi Rosen discusses biblical covenants. What kind of covenant is established in this passage?
- What does it mean to be “God’s treasured possession?”
- What is the theology of this passage, and how does it compare to your own?
- According to this passage, if we do not obey God and faithfully keep the terms of this covenant, what is our status? In today’s terms, do you think that failure to keep the 10 Commandments affects the Jewish people’s status as God’s treasured possession? As a holy nation?



MITZVOT IN THE BIBLICAL PERIOD – TEXT 2

תלמוד בבלי מסכת קידושין דף ל עמוד ב
ת"ר, שלשה שותפין הן באדם: הקב"ה ואביו ואמו. בזמן שאדם מכבד את אביו
ואת אמו, אמר הקב"ה: מעלה אני עליהם כאילו דרתי ביניהם וכבדוני.

BABYLONIAN TALMUD, KIDDUSHIN 30b

Our rabbis taught in a baraita: There are three partners [in the creation] of a person: The Blessed Holy One and his father and his mother. When a person honors his father and his mother, the Blessed Holy One says: I credit this as if I had lived among them and they honored me.

תלמוד בבלי מסכת נדה דף לא עמוד א
תנו רבנן: שלשה שותפין יש באדם, הקב"ה ואביו ואמו. אביו מזריע הלובן, שממנו
עצמות וגידים וצפרנים, ומוח שבראשו, ולובן שבעין. אמו מזרעת אודם, שממנו
עור ובשר ושערות, ושחור שבעין. והקב"ה נותן בו רוח ונשמה וקלסתר פנים,
וראיית העין, ושמיעת האוזן, ודבור פה, והלוך רגלים, ובינה והשכל. וכיון שהגיע
זמנו להפטר מן העולם - הקב"ה נוטל חלקו, וחלק אביו ואמו מניח לפניהם.

BABYLONIAN TALMUD, NIDDAH 31a

Our rabbis taught in a baraita: There are three partners [in the creation] of a person: The Blessed Holy One and his father and his mother. His father contributes (lit. "seeds/sows") the white substance, from which come bones and sinews and fingernails, and the brain in his head and the white in his eye. His mother contributes (lit. "seeds/sows") the red substance, from which comes skin and flesh and hair, and the black of the eye. And The Blessed Holy One puts in him spirit and soul and beauty of features, and the eye's seeing, and the ear's hearing, and the mouth's speaking and the legs' walking, and understanding and reason. And when his time comes to leave the world, The Blessed Holy One takes back his part, and leaves his father's and mother's part before them.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- How do these texts support Rabbi Rosen's idea that "parents represent the most physical embodiment possible for a disembodied God?"
- What is the theology of these texts? How does it relate to the theology of the 10 Commandments, as you understand it?
- How do the ideas in these texts fit in with Rabbi Rosen's chart of the 10 Commandments?
- How does the God of these Talmudic texts compare to the God of the biblical covenants?



MITZVOT IN THE BIBLICAL PERIOD – TEXT 3

מיכה ו: ח

הִגִּיד לְךָ אָדָם מֵה-טוֹב, וּמֵה-יְהוָה דּוֹרֵשׁ מִמֶּנּוּ כִּי אִם-עֲשׂוֹת מִשְׁפָּט וְאַהֲבַת חֶסֶד
וְהִצַּנֵּעַ לֶכֶת עִם-אֱלֹהֶיךָ.

MICAH 6:8

He has told you, man, what is good. What does the Lord require of you? Only to do justice, and to love goodness, and to walk modestly (or: humbly) with your God.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- According to the Prophet Micah, what does God require of us? Compare these requirements with the 10 Commandments. Why aren't these in the list?
- What is the difference between walking modestly with God and walking humbly with God? What does each say about God as the commander of mitzvot?



MITZVOT IN THE BIBLICAL PERIOD – TEXT 4

דברים יא:כו-כח

כּו רָאָה אֲנֹכִי נֹתֵן לְפָנֶיךָ הַיּוֹם, בְּרָכָה וּקְלָלָה. כִּזְ אֶת-הַבְּרָכָה, אֲשֶׁר תִּשְׁמְעוּ אֶל-
מִצְוֹת יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר אֲנֹכִי מְצַוֶּה אֶתְכֶם הַיּוֹם. כח וְהִקְלָלָה אִם-לֹא תִשְׁמְעוּ
אֶל-מִצְוֹת יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם וְסָרְתֶם מִן-הַדֶּרֶךְ אֲשֶׁר אֲנֹכִי מְצַוֶּה אֶתְכֶם הַיּוֹם, לָלֶכֶת
אַחֲרֵי אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים אֲשֶׁר לֹא-יָדַעְתֶּם.

DEUTERONOMY 11:26-28

26 See, this day I set before you blessing and curse: **27** blessing, if you obey the mitzvot of the Lord your God that I command you this day; **28** and curse, if you do not obey the mitzvot of the Lord your God, but you turn away from the path that I command you this day, to walk after other gods who you have not experienced.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- What are some pros and cons of this kind of theology of blessing and curse, reward and punishment?
- What kinds of actual physical rewards and punishments does God promise us in the Bible? Think about the second paragraph of the Shema.
- How would you reimagine this passage in terms of today's Jewish life? What does the kind of covenant which lies behind this passage mean to you today?



MITZVOT IN THE BIBLICAL PERIOD – TEXT FOR GROUP STUDY

בראשית יז:יא
וְנִמְלֹתֶם אֶת בְּשָׂר עֲרֻלְתְּכֶם, וְהָיָה לְאוֹת בְּרִית בֵּינִי וּבֵינֵיכֶם.

GENESIS 17:11

You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskins, and that shall be the sign of the covenant between me and you.

בראשית רבה פרשה מב סימן ח
בשעה שאמר הקב"ה לאברהם לימול הלך ונמלך בג' אוהביו, אמר לו ענר כבר בן ק' שנה אתה ואתה הולך ומצער את עצמך, אמר לו אשכול מה את הולך ומסיים את עצמך בין שונאיך, אמר לו ממרא אלהיך שעמד לך בכבשן האש ובמלכים וברעבון והדבר הזה שאמר לך למול אין אתה שומע לו, אמר לו הקב"ה אתה נתתה לו עצה למול חייך שאיני נגלה עליו לא בפלטין של ענר, ולא בפלטין של אשכול, אלא בפלטין שלך הה"ד: וירא אליו ה' באלוני ממרא (בראשית יח:א).

MIDRASH GENESIS RABBAH 42:8

When The Blessed Holy One told Abraham to circumcise himself, he went to talk it over with his three good friends. Aner said to him: You are already 100 years old! Are you going to inflict pain on yourself?! Eshkol said to him: Are you going to make yourself identifiable to your enemies?! Mamre said: Your God, who stood by you in the fiery furnace, in your fight with the kings and in famine, who told you to circumcise yourself – you're not going to obey him? The Blessed Holy One said to Mamre: You gave Abraham advice to circumcise himself; as you live, I won't appear to him in Aner's palace and not in Eshkol's palace, only in your palace. That is why it is written: "And the Lord appeared to him at the terebinths of Mamre" (Gen. 18:1).

STUDY QUESTIONS

- Circumcision has sometimes been a contentious issue in secular politics in the United States and in other countries. The Torah tells us that it is the sign of the covenant between us and God. How do you feel about circumcision as a sign of the covenant?
- Why does Mamre feel that Abraham should circumcise himself? From Mamre's point of view, what emotion would Abraham exhibit by a willingness to do what God commanded? Is this a situation of strict reward and punishment? If not, what is the motivation to observe the mitzvah, and does this apply today?
- What kind of theology is expressed in our rabbinic midrash?





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