



The Ziegler School  
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בית המדרש ע"ש זיגלר

# Walking with Mitzvot

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דרכיה דרכי נעם

In Memory of Harold Held and Louise Held,  
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# GROWING IN MITZVOT

RABBI GESA S. EDERBERG

## ENTERING THE WORLD OF MITZVOT AS AN ADULT

A couple of years ago, a friend of mine surprised us at the Shabbat dinner table with an announcement. With a lot of enthusiasm, Rachel told us: “As of today, I have decided to be really Shomeret Mitzvot, to observe all the commandments.” She went on to explain how that afternoon, she had pre-cut the toilet paper and how she had explained to her (non-Jewish) roommates that as of today, on Friday afternoons, they needed to leave the light burning in the kitchen and that she would take the light bulb out of the refrigerator.

I still remember the excitement in her voice, and her feeling of accomplishment: “Now, I have decided to do what is right.” But alas, three weeks later, she told me that it had become all too much of a burden, that preparations for Shabbat were just too stressful, and that her roommates and her boyfriend really weren’t willing to go along. So, she decided that keeping mitzvot just wasn’t for her, and that since she couldn’t do it all, she’d rather give it up entirely.

People looking from the outside in to an observant life might just see how complicated it all is, see that there are restrictions and seemingly absurd burdens, and looking at the sheer number of 613 Mitzvot decide that “this is not for me.”

At a first glance, there seems to be a very clear vision of what “growing up Jewish” means in Jewish tradition, and a sense that this is identical with growing in mitzvot: It says in Mishnah Pirkei Avot 5:21:

At the age of five – the study of Bible; at ten – the study of Mishnah; at thirteen – responsibility for the mitzvot; at fifteen – the study of Talmud; at eighteen- marriage; at twenty – pursuit of a livelihood...

So, what if you, like the majority of today’s Jews, grew up in a non-observant family? What if you find yourself in a situation of wanting to do more things Jewish for yourself and those close to you? You might feel as if you come from the outside, as if you are standing on the threshold, and need permission and a guide in order to enter through this door to a more observant life.

The question really is: If we have grown up without growing naturally into the observance of mitzvot, is there a way leading gradually into such observance? Or is it an all-or-nothing approach? Is it legitimate to ask: Where is my personal entry point into doing more things Jewish? I know I cannot start with all 613 mitzvot, so how can I find out where to start?

Jewish tradition has taken two very different approaches on the question of how accessible “all of Judaism” should be. They are reflected in the following passage from the Babylonian Talmud:

A certain non-Jew came to Shammai and said: Make me Jewish under the condition that you can teach me the entire Torah while I am standing on one foot. Shammai pushed him away. Then he came to Hillel, and Hillel made him a Jew and told him: “What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor: that is the whole Torah while the rest is commentary; go and learn it” (Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 31a).

## TRANSFORMING ETHICAL BEHAVIOR INTO A MINDSET OF MITZVOT

Hillel’s statement clearly says: Start with ethical behavior, then explore and study it, and then intensify it Jewishly.

Jewish tradition distinguishes between two sorts of mitzvot, those ben adam la-makom, between humans and God, and those ben adam la-havero, between fellow human beings. Some call them ceremonial versus ethical mitzvot. Somewhat ironically, we usually identify the first set of mitzvot as Jewish, whereas the second set seems to be general, just human.

So, with a twinkle in the eye, we could say that the easiest way to grow in mitzvot is just to classify the things we are already doing as mitzvot! That is, I increase the number of mitzvot I am doing by just understanding more of what I do as fitting in the concept of mitzvah, by re-interpreting my general practice as Jewish. For example: I might already



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take care of the environment by using less plastic and paper, and this might have nothing to do with my religion; it might just be my civil conscience. After studying the issue of bal tashkhit, do not waste, however, I will understand that this is part of my Jewish identity also.

But there is more value in this than just the numerical one: Judaism teaches us to do things with intention (“kavannah”) and the brakhah, or blessing, we say before many mitzvot serves exactly this purpose. When we say a brakhah before performing a mitzvah, we realize and acknowledge that with our action, we intend to bring God’s presence into the world, that we are the agents to bring holiness into the commonplace – to transform an everyday action into a glimpse of God’s presence. There is a huge difference between just lighting candles because it feels nice and cosy, and lighting candles with the brakhah in order to bring in Shabbat. There is a huge difference between reading labels in the supermarket in order to eat healthier food, and reading the same labels – applying similar categories – in order to make sure that the food on the table is kosher.

There are many actions which qualify as mitzvot even though we do not have a brakhah for them: to speak carefully and not to pass on the spicy secret we just heard about somebody, to help someone discreetly, without shaming him or her in public, to buy products which have a fair trade label, and so on. So, even without saying a brakhah, it makes sense to take a moment and reflect on my kavannah, my intention, when doing these and similar acts. If we want to understand why and how these actions or omissions are related to our Jewish identity, how they qualify as mitzvot, we need to engage in one of the most basic mitzvot, that of studying our sources.

And by the way, this is a rather surprising understanding of the rabbinic saying “ve-talmud torah ke-neged kulam,” “the study of Torah is worth more than any other mitzvah.” Not only does studying (hopefully) lead to more doing of mitzvot, but through more understanding, it augments the mitzvot even without direct practical impact!

### QUESTIONING THE MITZVOT YOU GREW UP WITH

But still, on our way into the world of mitzvot, we might look at more complicated practices and get the feeling: I will never be able to do this, and even if I could do it technically, I will have lost all the meaning in the sheer amount of work.

Preparing for Passover in a traditional way is such an example, especially if you have small children in the house who are used to running around with food in their hands. You might think that you need to clear the house of hametz, to work through room after room, cleaning and tidying closets and shelves, to examine dishes, clean them and store them away (while still trying to keep up normal life and feed your family on the go) – to go over lists and buy new dishes and Passover food, and to prepare huge amounts of food for the seder. And you might feel intimidated by the evening itself with its orchestrated ritual, in which texts, food and songs intermingle in a unique way.

All this might overwhelm people, and cause them to think that in order to be an observant Jew, you have to grow up in an observant family, and in an observant community. But we do not need to look far to see that even in rabbinic times, many people grew up without the practice and the knowledge of Judaism. For example, the famous Rabbi, Hillel, found his way to study only at the age of forty.

And on the other hand, people who do grow up with the mitzvot as a natural part of their daily routine, as teenagers or adults might find themselves at a crossroads and realize that they have somehow lost them; they have grown out of unquestioningly doing as they were told and have started to ask the questions they might not have been allowed to ask as children. And when they realize, for example, that the heavens don’t fall down when they taste non-kosher food, the entire framework might break down, and keeping mitzvot might just not make sense any more.



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## PERSONALIZING MITZVOT: DIFFERENT PEOPLE DO THE SAME THING IN DIFFERENT WAYS

It is also very important to realize that different personalities require different approaches to growing in mitzvot. Let's take public prayer as our example. If you step into the synagogue as an adult for the first time, or if you have experienced Jewish education until the bar/bat mitzvah and then come back only three times a year, your needs are very different from somebody who has grown up in the synagogue, knows the liturgy by heart, has studied it as part of the bar/bat mitzvah preparation, and can sing along without even looking into the prayer book.

There are other differences as well. Depending on your disposition, you might prefer a short service to a long one, or lots of singing to fast Hebrew. You might feel attracted by the general atmosphere created by the cantor, or you might need to understand every word before being willing to really get into it. The sound of Hebrew might be what attracts you, or the tunes – whether cantorial art or congregational singing. Or you might just be looking for company in difficult times in your personal life, and you reckon that the synagogue could be the right place to find it.

Our tradition answers these different needs: Public prayer is not uniform and is not supposed to be uniform. The prayer experience is created every time anew, and it should change according to who the people in the room are and what has happened to them during the week. The tension between individual and communal prayer is well balanced in the sources. There are passages which can only be said with a minyan of ten adult Jews, when there is indeed a community assembled, and there are passages which each individual says by him- or herself. And there are moments when it is especially appropriate to add your own spontaneous thoughts and wishes to the printed liturgy.

Nobody expects you to come and immediately to be absorbed into the communal prayer. The responsibility for a meaningful prayer experience lies with the individual. The congregation comes together as a community, but this does not require uniformity from the individual members. To disengage from the communal prayer and to concentrate on your own spiritual needs while the service is running its course can therefore be a sign of maturity. Some traditional texts lend themselves perfectly as stepping stones for individual prayer. And if you find yourself arguing with a difficult passage in the liturgy, while the community sings along, you are indeed on the way of making the prayer experience your own.

## CHANGING YOUR APPROACH TO MITZVOT WHILE GROWING THROUGH DIFFERENT LIFE STAGES: THE MITZVAH OF HONORING OUR PARENTS

A common example of growing in mitzvot with changes in life's circumstances involves the mitzvah of *kibud av va-em*, honoring one's parents. Just as our relationship to parents changes while we are growing up, so too does the meaning of this mitzvah. The Hebrew word *kavod*, usually translated as honor, also means might, glory, power, radiance – it says something about my parents, about the picture of them in my mind.

A baby has no obligation to do any mitzvah, but I think a baby's attitude towards his or her parents is exactly what is meant by *kibud av va-em*, honoring one's parents. This attitude reflects a deep knowledge that my life depends on my parents, the understanding that their power defines who I am and can be, and that my entire being is immanent in our relationship. And the honor the parents receive is a baby's smile, or the wonderful smell of a baby falling asleep at the breast or in the father's arms.

And then there is the toddler, who is convinced that his/her parents' might is infinite, that they are both culpable for anything bad that happens, and can also fix it. The toddler trusts that the parents will always be there.

For the child, the feelings start to change. A child is aware that there is a world outside of the family, and that there are things which the parents can't control. Still, a child turns to his/her parents for comfort, for explanations and a



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secure base from which to explore the world. There is a modest beginning of seeing the limits of parents' power, but still the kavod of parents is an unquestioned factor in a child's life.

Much of adolescence centers around the dispute between one's growing independence and the kavod of one's parents. Balancing between the two is sometimes nearly impossible. Often, parents are grateful that there is at least shouting and fighting, which means that their children have not yet given up on them, and that somehow, they want them to have a place in their lives, even if they don't know where and how.

Becoming an adult, and maybe also a parent, involves realizing that parents are humans too, that both their strengths and their failures have shaped who we are today, that our decisions are so often based on an unspoken dialogue with them, and that now, we are responsible for ourselves. What our parents have done or failed to do belongs to the past, and the kavod we owe them becomes much more elemental and reaches beyond daily disagreements.

And then the last and often very painful turn: The need to care for aging parents, who might even forget who we are. There are difficult decisions about care and end of life issues, decisions that make us reflect back on an entire life. It can be a challenge in such situations to see our parents as they are now, to look into their faces and still find their kavod.

This transformation of one mitzvah in the course of a life is perhaps the most striking example of how important it is that we understand our growing in mitzvot as a very individual and personal task. Examining our relationship to the mitzvah of kibud av va-em, of honoring our parents, helps us to realize that what is right in one stage in life might be wrong in another stage, and what is right for one person might be wrong for his or her neighbor.



## GROWING IN MITZVOT – TEXT 1

משנה מסכת אבות פרק ה משנה כא  
...בן חמש שנים למקרא, בן עשר למשנה, בן שלש עשרה למצות, בן חמש  
עשרה לתלמוד, בן שמונה עשרה לחופה, בן עשרים לרדוף, בן שלשים לכח,  
בן ארבעים לבינה, בן חמשים לעצה, בן ששים לזקנה, בן שבעים לשיבה, בן  
שמונים לגבורה, בן תשעים לשות, בן מאה כאילו מת ועבר ובטל מן העולם.

### MISHNAH PIRKEI AVOT 5:21

At the age of 5 [one is ready for] Bible, at 10 for Mishnah, at 13 for mitzvot, at 15 for Talmud, at 18 for the marriage canopy, at 20 to pursue, at 30 for strength, at 40 for understanding, at 50 for counsel, at 60 for being an elder, at 70 for gray hair, at 80 for special strength, at 90 for stooping, at 100 it is as if he were already dead and had passed from the world.

תלמוד בבלי מסכת שבת דף לא עמוד א  
מעשה בנכרי אחד שבא לפני שמאי, אמר לו: גיירני על מנת שתלמדני כל  
התורה כולה כשאני עומד על רגל אחת. דחפו באמת הבנין שבידו. בא לפני  
הלל, גייריה. אמר לו: דעלך סני לחברך לא תעביד - זו היא כל התורה כולה,  
ואידך - פירושה הוא, זיל גמור.

### BABYLONIAN TALMUD, SHABBAT 31a

It once happened that a non-Jew came before Shammai and said to him: Convert me to Judaism on the condition that you will teach me the entire Torah while I am standing on one foot. Shammai pushed him away with the measuring stick in his hand. The non-Jew came before Hillel, and he converted him to Judaism. He said to him: That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow person. This is the entire Torah, and the rest is commentary – go and learn it!

### STUDY QUESTIONS

- Rabbi Ederberg suggests that, at first glance, the Pirkei Avot text seems to be a program for growing up Jewish. What do you think? Is it relevant today? How so?
- Consider the story of the non-Jew and his encounters with Shammai and Hillel, famous rabbinic Sages. Whose response appeals to you more? Why?
- How can we reconcile Mishnah Avot's program with the opinions of both Shammai and Hillel? What does it mean that Shammai pushed away the questioner with a measuring stick used in building?



## GROWING IN MITZVOT – TEXT 2

משנה מסכת אבות פרק ד משנה ב  
בן עזאי אומר: הוי רץ למצוה קלה כבחמורה, ובורח מן העבירה, שמצוה  
גוררת מצוה ועבירה גוררת עבירה, ששכר מצוה מצוה ושכר עבירה עבירה:

### MISHNAH PIRKEI AVOT 4:2

Ben Azzai said: Run to fulfill a light mitzvah just as you would a weighty one, and flee from transgression, for a mitzvah draws another mitzvah after it, and a transgression draws a transgression after it, for the reward of a mitzvah is a mitzvah, and the reward of a transgression is a transgression.

### STUDY QUESTIONS

- What does Ben Azzai mean when he says that a mitzvah draws another mitzvah after it and a transgression draws another transgression after it? Can you think of some examples of this in your own life?
- How is the reward for a mitzvah another mitzvah? How does this fit in with Rabbi Ederberg's thoughts on growing in mitzvot?
- God is not mentioned in this text. If you asked Ben Azzai about God's role in all of this, what do you think he would say?
- Consider this text in light of our previous texts. How does each text help you to understand the others?





## GROWING IN MITZVOT – TEXT 3

משנה מסכת פאה פרק א משנה א  
אלו דברים שאדם אוכל פירותיהן בעולם הזה והקרן קיימת לו לעולם הבא :  
כיבוד אב ואם וגמילות חסדים והבאת שלום בין אדם לחבירו, ותלמוד תורה  
: כנגד כולם :

### MISHNAH PEAH 1:1

These are things of which a person eats their fruits in this world, and the principal remains for him in the world to come: honoring one's mother and father, and deeds of lovingkindness, and making peace between a person and his fellow person, and the study of Torah is equal to them all.

### STUDY QUESTIONS

- As Rabbi Ederberg indicates, this Mishnah implies that the study of Torah is of equal importance to all of the other mitzvot. How can this be?
- What does it mean to you that the Mishnah uses the mitzvot of honoring parents, deeds of lovingkindness and making peace between people as a way to say “all the mitzvot?” What is special about these three?
- How do you feel about the idea that observing a mitzvah lets you enjoy the fruits, or interest, on the mitzvah here, while preserving the tree or the principal of the mitzvah for you in the world to come? How does this fit in with Ben Azzai's statement in Pirkei Avot?



## GROWING IN MITZVOT – TEXT 4

### LOUIS JACOBS (1920-2006), THE JEWISH RELIGION: A COMPANION: “MITZVAH”

The rabbinic ideal is to carry out the precepts joyfully. It is generally assumed that Jews have *simchah shel mitzvah*, “joy in the mitzvah,” and that even sinners in Israel are as full of *mitzvot* as a pomegranate is full of seeds (Hagigah 27a). The Jerusalem Talmud uses the term *mitzvah* to denote especially a deed of charity, the *mitzvah par excellence*. In Yiddish, a mitzvah often means any good deed, just as an *averah* is anything bad or wasteful (p.350).<sup>1</sup>

#### STUDY QUESTIONS

- How does the rabbinic ideal of observing the mitzvot joyfully apply in your life? Do some mitzvot bring you more joy than others?
- As Rabbi Jacobs says, the Jerusalem Talmud, or Yerushalmi, considers charity to be the mitzvah par excellence. Think of some reasons that this might be true. What about the three mitzvot we saw in Mishnah Peah 1:1?
- If talmud Torah, the study of Torah, is equal to all the mitzvot, why isn't it the mitzvah par excellence?
- In the life of the Jewish people, what is the significance of the fact that the word mitzvah has come to mean “any good deed?” Rabbi Ederberg talks about the idea of considering all of our good deeds to be mitzvot. What do you think? Do all good deeds carry the consequences we see in Pirkei Avot 4:2?

<sup>1</sup> Louis Jacobs, *The Jewish Religion: A Companion*. Oxford University Press, 1995.



## GROWING IN MITZVOT – TEXT FOR GROUP STUDY

תלמוד בבלי מסכת מכות דף כג עמוד ב  
דרש רבי שמלאי: שש מאות ושלוש עשרה מצות נאמרו לו למשה, שלש מאות  
וששים וחמש לאוין כמנין ימות החמה, ומאתים וארבעים ושמונה עשה כנגד  
איבריו של אדם.

### **BABYLONIAN TALMUD, MAKKOT 23b**

Rabbi Simlai expounded: 613 commandments were said to Moses, 365 negative commandments, like the number of days of the solar year, and 248 positive commandments, corresponding to a person's organs.

#### STUDY QUESTIONS

- Rabbi Simlai gives us the symbolism of days of the year and parts of the body. What does this mean to you? If you were to elaborate on Rabbi Simlai's statement, how would you do it?
- How does Rabbi Simlai's symbolic classification of the mitzvot tie in with Rabbi Ederberg's theme of growing in mitzvot? How can we use the images of the commandments and the days of the year, and the commandments and the parts of the body, to help us to grow in observance?
- Apply Rabbi Simlai's derash, or explanation, to some of our other texts. For example, Ben Azzai says that a mitzvah draws another mitzvah after it. Express that idea using Rabbi Simlai's concepts of time and embodiment.







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