

MITZVOT

Imperatives of a Loving Heart

BY RABBI BRADLEY SHAVIT ARTSON



THERE CANNOT BE Judaism without mitzvot any more than there can be a brain without a body. How we understand the mitzvot in general and each mitzvah in particular will have a tremendous impact on our dedication to a life of commandments and to the particular commandments our communities value, teach, and do.

At the same time, Jewish thought situates us in the cosmos, offering deeper connections to the divine and to each other. But let there be no question of divorcing Jewish practice from Jewish thinking—a body without a brain is a monstrosity.

Yet for all their concrete manifestations as an evocative set of building blocks for Jewish thought, there is a special relationship between mitzvot—the sacred deeds

—and halachah. Mitzvot are not random behaviors, nor are they abstractions set into deed. Mitzvot are the fruit on the tree of halachah, and halachah is the systematic effort of the rabbis to translate the Torah into action.

Halachah comes from the Hebrew root H-L-KH, meaning to walk. The true meaning of the word halachah, then, is the walking we do as Jews.

That journey is not static; it is not abstract principles imposed for the sake of conformity. Walking is an activity that engages our entire body, somewhat different for each walking community or person. In much of Western thought translating halachah as “law” expresses disdain (law vs. love, for instance), a notion of imposed authority opposed to freedom, a uniformity that stultifies individuality and diversity.

Halachah is none of those things. To the contrary, halachah reflects an ongoing translation of God’s love and justice into the fabric of Jewish living. It invites us to tran-

scend our own self-centered focus and orient our lives to embrace service and integration, while offering a palette of practice that allows each person 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 mammonot*, for instance, are laws of finance). According to rabbinic teaching, a per-

son can—indeed a person should—strive to act beyond the limit of the law (*lifnim mishurat hadin*). While it is also true that halachot are collections of laws and that a halachah can be a particular rule, the halachah refers to the dynamic organism as a whole. The halachah often is compared to a tree—living, luxuriant, and supple. The notion of law as rules is not quite what we are trying to say. It’s not an exact definition.

So why not just discuss mitzvot without reference to halachah? There are thoughtful and sensitive thinkers who speak of the wisdom of each particular mitzvah as suf-

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ficient to justify our engagement with it. Some offer this halachah-neutral approach to mitzvot as a teaching tool – take your first steps without worrying about an overwhelming final goal. Others advocate a halachah-neutral life as being less demanding and less constraining.

Conservative/Masorti Judaism resists such an amputation. Our sense of Judaism as a living organism celebrates its component parts connecting in dynamic integration; the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. That integrated whole is precisely what halachah offers us. Without the systemic conversations of the rabbis to contextualize them across the generations, each mitzvah flourishes or withers in isolation and there is no growth or advance. “Ah, but a man’s reach should exceed his grasp, Or what’s a heaven for?” As long as we are alive, we grow, flourish, change. Holding on to halachah as a system precludes turning any particular rule into an idol. It prevents freezing the life out of the living covenant between God and the Jewish people. Halachah as a system is how the Torah continues to integrate contemporary perspectives, to converse with science, and to heed the voice of conscience. Mitzvot without the halachah are ends in themselves, perfect like snowflakes – and equally static and brittle and ephemeral. Jewish life deserves more, and worthy Jewish living requires it.

The halachah is the ancient tree, strong and broad branched, its gnarled roots extending deep in the dark rich soil. 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.

Another approach is to look at the word itself. In Hebrew, *mitzvah* means command (although “commandment” sounds classier). For most contemporary Orthodox Jews, that translation accurately carries their 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 several (but not all) Jews in ages past, that understanding would have felt right.

My hunch also is that most Conservative Jews think they are supposed to believe that nexus (King/verbal orders/reward and pun-

ishment) but can’t. Many try to persuade themselves of its truth, 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: though the Hebrew word mitzvah does mean command, in Aramaic, the language of the Talmud and the Kaddish, the word has been understood to mean connection or link. While most Conservative/Masorti Jews don’t believe in a God who issues verbal commands, most do recognize that the mitzvot connect them to the divine. When they light Shabbat candles, or eat a kosher meal, or contribute tzedakah, or feed the hungry, most Conservative Jews do celebrate that they are linking themselves to something beyond themselves – God, Jewish values, creation as a whole, holiness.

The time has come to admit that it is not 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 halachah 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, what actually makes sense of our patterns of practice? We affirm that the mitzvot connect us to God and link us to Torah and to the best of Jewish values. They forge a relationship between us and the Jewish people around the world and across the ages. We affirm that the halachah provides a system that allows us 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. Once we admit that the connection we feel is what makes the mitzvot beautiful, worthy, and compelling, we are in a position to revisit commandedness on our own grounds.

It turns out that our problem may not be with being 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? Most Jews have found that notion of God to be both untrue and demeaning. The distorting assumption was that a mitzvah was the order of a despot or tyrant. God’s power is coercive in that model, and our service is a form of slavery. We are right to reject that notion.

But Judaism doesn’t limit its metaphors for God to king. The Torah and the rabbis call God parent, teacher, lover, spouse, covenant partner, redeemer, fountain, and more. Think of the way the desires of the people you love are imperatives for you, not because you fear punishment but because you seek their happiness and want to show your love.

Mitzvot are commandments, but not the way edicts are. 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 must do. Mitzvot are commandments because we are loved with an everlasting love, and because we yearn for God’s intimacy and illumination. Love creates imperatives that ripple out from the core of our hearts. Love obligates from the inside,

just as caring and nurturing warm us from within.

In that way – and only in that way – the mitzvot remain what they always have 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. 

Halachah invites us to transcend our own self-centered focus and orient our lives to embrace service and integration, while offering a palette of practice that allows each person to paint a life of color and clarity.