



Judaism A to Z!
Mitzvos -
Rituals, Good Deeds, or
A Way of Life?



Source Materials
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①
 JERUSALEM
 TALMUD
 (CHAGIGAH 1:7)

Judaism stresses action far more than faith. The Talmud attributes to God a declaration which is probably unique among religious writings: "Better that they [the Jews] abandon Me, but follow My laws" (for, the Talmud adds, by practicing Judaism's laws, the Jews will return to God, Jerusalem Talmud Haggigah 1:7).

② MISHNA (BERACHOS 34b)

מתני *דאמר *יעל ק צפור

יגיעו החמך ועל מיכ יזכר שמך מודים מודים משתקן ארתי

MISHNAH. IF ONE [IN PRAYING] SAYS 'MAY THY MERCIES EXTEND TO A BIRD'S NEST'.¹ 'BE THY NAME MENTIONED FOR WELL-DOING', OR 'WE GIVE THANKS, WE GIVE THANKS', HE IS SILENCED.¹

③ TALMUD (IBID)

על

קן צפור יגיעו החמך מ"ט פליגי בה ר"י אמר"י במערבא רבי יוסי בר אבין ורבי יוסי בר זבידא חד אמר מפני שממיל קנאה במעשה בראשית חד אמר מפני שעושה מדותיו של הקדוש ברוך הוא רחמים ואינן אלא גזרות

But what is the reason for silencing him if he says 'THY MERCIES EXTEND TO THE BIRD'S NEST'?—Two Amoraim in the West, R. Jose b. Abin and R. Jose b. Zebida, give different answers; one says it is because he creates jealousy among God's creatures,⁶ the other, because he presents the measures taken by the Holy One, blessed be He, as springing from compassion, whereas they are but decrees.⁷

⑤ EXODUS (20:8-14)

⁸ Remember the Sabbath day * to sanctify it. ⁹ Six days shall you work * and accomplish all your work; ¹⁰ but the seventh day is Sabbath to HASHEM, your God; you shall not do any work — you, your son, your daughter, your slave, your maidservant, your animal, and your convert within your gates — ¹¹ for in six days HASHEM made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and He rested on the seventh day. Therefore, HASHEM blessed the Sabbath day and sanctified it.

¹² Honor your father and your mother, * so that your days will be lengthened upon the land that HASHEM, your God, gives you.

¹³ You shall not kill; * you shall not commit adultery; * you shall not steal; * you shall not bear false witness against your fellow. *

¹⁴ You shall not covet * your fellow's house. You shall not covet your fellow's wife, his manservant, his maidservant, his ox, his donkey, nor anything that belongs to your fellow.

⑥ DEUTERONOMY (4:16-18)

¹⁶ Honor your father and your mother, as HASHEM, your God, commanded you, so that your days will be lengthened and so that it will be good for you, on the land that HASHEM, your God, gives you.

¹⁷ You shall not kill; and you shall not commit adultery; and you shall not steal; and you shall not bear vain witness against your fellow.

¹⁸ And you shall not covet your fellow's wife, you shall not desire your fellow's use, his field, his slave, his maidservant, his ox, his donkey, or anything that longs to your fellow.

④ R' SALOMO CARLEBACH (HOLY BROTHER P. 51)

"We have 613 mitzvot (commandments), 613 laws. I don't like the word 'laws' because they are not laws. The word law reminds you of police, some straight character sitting there telling you what to do. Very bad translation. 'Mitzvah' means that God gave us 613 ways to come close to Him. The ways are divided into two parts, 248 ways of reaching God by doing certain things, and 365 ways of reaching Him by not doing certain things. If there is a red light and I don't go, nothing happens, right? I just don't cross the street. However, if God's red light flashed and I stop when I have a chance to do wrong, then something happens inside me. Something happened to me; I walked a few steps higher."

זכור את יום השבת לקדשו: ששת ימים תעבד ועשית כל-מלאכתך: ויום השביעי שבת ליהוה אל-היך לא-תעשה כל-מלאכה אתה ויבנה ובתך עבדך ואמתך ובהמתך וגרך אשר בשעריך: כי ששת ימים עשה יהוה את השמים ואת הארץ את הים ואת כל-אשר-בם וינח ביום השביעי על-כֵּן ברך יהוה את יום השבת ויקדשהו: כבוד את אביך ואת אמך למען יארכו ימיה על האדמה אשר יהוה אל-היך נתן לך: לא תרצח לא תנאף לא תגנב לא תענה עד שקר: לא תחמד בית רעה לא תחמד אשת רעה לא תענה רעה ועבדו ואמתו ושורו וחסמרו וכל אשר לרעה:

כבוד את אביך ואת אמך באשר צוה יהוה אל-היך למען יארכו ימיה ולמען ייטב לך על האדמה אשר יהוה אל-היך נתן לך: לא תרצח ולא תנאף ולא תגנב ולא תענה עד שקר: ולא תחמד אשת רעה ולא תחמד בית רעה ועבדו ושורו וחסמרו וכל אשר לרעה: את-

GUIDE OF THE PERPLEXED
⑦ RAMBAM - MOREH NEVUCHIM (3:31)

There is a group of human beings who consider it a grievous thing that causes should be given for any law; what would please them most is that the intellect would not find a meaning for the commandments and prohibitions. What compels them to feel thus is a sickness that they find in their souls, a sickness to which they are unable to give utterance and of which they cannot furnish a satisfactory account. For they think that if those laws were useful in this existence and had been given to us for this or that reason, it would be as if they derived from the reflection and the understanding of some intelligent being. If, however, there is a thing for which the intellect could not find any meaning at all and that does not lead to something useful, it indubitably derives from God; for the reflection of man would not lead to such a thing. It is as if, according to these people of weak intellects, man were more perfect than his Maker; for man speaks and acts in a manner that leads to some intended end, whereas the deity does not act thus, but commands us to do things that are not useful to us and forbids us to do things that are not harmful to us. But He is far exalted above this; the contrary is the case—the whole purpose consisting in what is useful for us, as we have explained¹ on the basis of its dictum: *For our good always, that He might preserve us alive, as it is at this day.*² And it says: *Which shall hear all these statutes [huqqim] and say: Surely this great community is a wise and understanding people.*³ Thus it states explicitly that even all the statutes [huqqim]⁴ will show to all the nations that they have been given with *wisdom and understanding*. Now if there is a thing for which no reason is known and that does not either procure something useful or ward off something harmful, why should one say of one who believes in it or practices it that he is *wise and understanding* and of great worth? And why should the religious communities think it a wonder? Rather things are indubitably as we have mentioned: every commandment from among these six hundred and thirteen commandments exists either with a view to communicating a correct opinion, or to putting an end to an unhealthy opinion, or to communicating a rule of justice, or to warding off an injustice, or to endowing men with a noble moral quality, or to warning them against an evil moral quality. Thus all [the commandments] are bound up with three things: opinions, moral qualities, and political civic actions. We do not count speeches as one of these things since the speeches that the Law enjoins or forbids belong in part to the class of civic actions, and in part are meant to cause opinions, and in part are meant to cause moral qualities. Therefore we have limited ourselves here, in giving reasons for every law, to these three classes. |

⑧ RAMBAM - MISHNE TORAH (LAWS OF SHABBOS 2:3)

It is forbidden to hesitate before transgressing the Sabbath [laws] on behalf of a person who is dangerously ill,¹⁴ as [reflected in the interpretation in the phrase of Leviticus 18:5,] “which a person shall perform to live through them,” as “[to live through them] and not to die through them.”

This teaches that the judgments of the Torah do not [bring] vengeance to the world, but rather bring mercy, kindness, and peace to the world. Concerning those non-believers who say that [administering such treatment] constitutes a violation of the Sabbath and is forbidden,¹⁵ one may apply the verse [Ezekiel 20:25]: “[As punishment,] I gave them harmful laws and judgments through which they cannot live.”¹⁶

⑨ TALMUD (SANHEDRIN 21b)

ואמר ר' יצחק מפני מה לא נהגלו טעמי תורה שדרי שתי מקראות
 כתיב °לא ירבה לו נשים אמר שלמה אני ארבה ולא אסור וכתיב
 °ויהי לעת זקנת שלמה נשיו המו את לבבו וכתיב °לא ירבה לו סוסים ואמר שלמה אני ארבה ולא אשיב
 וכתיב °וחצא מרכבה ממצרים ביש ונ' ;

R. Isaac also said: Why were the reasons of [some] Biblical laws not revealed?—Because in two verses reasons were revealed, and they caused the greatest in the world [Solomon] to stumble. Thus it is written: *He shall not multiply wives to himself*,¹ whereon Solomon said, 'I will multiply wives yet not let my heart be perverted.' Yet we read: *When Solomon was old, his wives turned away his heart*.² Again it is written: *He shall not multiply to himself horses*;³ concerning which Solomon said, 'I will multiply them, but will not cause [Israel] to return [to Egypt].' Yet we read: *And a chariot came up and went out of Egypt for six [hundred shekels of silver]*.⁴

⑩ KUZARI - R' YEHUDAH HA'LEVI (3:7)

6. Al Khazari: Dost thou refer to deeds generally known?

7. The Rabbi: The social and rational laws are those generally known. The divine ones, however, which were added in order that they should exist in the people of the 'Living God' who guides them, were not known until they were explained in detail by Him. Even those social and rational laws are not quite known, and though one might know the gist of them, their scope remains unknown. We know that the giving of comfort and the feeling of gratitude are as incumbent on us as is chastening of the soul by means of fasting and meekness; we also know that deceit, immoderate intercourse with women, and cohabitation with relatives are abominable; that honouring parents is a duty, etc. The limitation of all these things to the amount of general usefulness is God's. Human reason is out of place in matters of divine action, on account of its incapacity to grasp them. Reason must rather obey, just as a sick person must obey the physician in applying his medicines and advice. Consider how little circumcision has to do with philosophy, and how small is its social influence. Yet Abraham, in spite of the hardship the very nature of this command must have seemed at his age, subjected his person and children to it, and it became the sign of the covenant, of the attachment of the Divine Influence to him, as it is written: 'And I will establish My covenant between me and thee and thy seed after them in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee . . .' (Gen. xvii. 7).

The Division of the Mitzvot According to the Halachot of the Mishneh Torah

I saw fit to divide this text into fourteen books.

The first book - I will include within it all the mitzvot that are the foundations of the faith [taught by] Moses, our teacher, of blessed memory, those which a person must know before everything - e.g., the unity of God, blessed be He, and the prohibition against worshipping false gods. I have called this book *The Book of Knowledge*.

The second book - I will include within it all the mitzvot that are constant and which were commanded to us so that we will love God and constantly remember Him - e.g., the recitation of the *Shema*, prayer, tefillin, and the priestly blessing. Circumcision is included in this category because it is a sign in our flesh to recall [God] constantly, during the times when we are not wearing tefillin, tzitzit, or the like. I have called this book *The Book of Love*.

The third book - I will include within it all the mitzvot that are associated with specific times - e.g., the Sabbath and the festivals. I have called this book *The Book of the Seasons*.

The fourth book - I will include within it all the mitzvot that involve sexual relations - e.g., marriage, divorce, *yibbum*, and *chalitza*. I have called this book *The Book of Women*.

The fifth book - I will include within it all the mitzvot that involve forbidden sexual relations and those that involve forbidden foods. [I have grouped the two] [forbidden sexual relations and forbidden foods] [together] because it is in these two matters that God has sanctified us and separated us from the [other] nations.

[The Torah mentions the concept of holiness] with regard to both these matters, stating [Leviticus 20:24, 27]: "[I am God, your Lord.] who has separated you from among the nations... and I have set you apart among the nations." [Accordingly,] I have called this book *The Book of Holiness*.

The sixth book - I will include within it all the mitzvot that one is obligated in when he forbids himself [certain things] by his statements - e.g., vows and oaths. I have called this book *The Book of Utterances*.

The seventh book - I will include within it all the mitzvot that deal with the produce of the earth - e.g., the Sabbatical and Jubilee years, the tithes, the *terumat*, and the other mitzvot which are relevant to this subject. I have called this book *The Book of Agriculture [Laws]*.

The eighth book - I will include within it all the mitzvot that involve the construction of the Temple and the communal offerings that are brought regularly. I have called this book *The Book of [the Temple and its] Service*.

The ninth book - I will include within it all the mitzvot that involve the sacrifices of individuals. I have called this book *The Book of Sacrifices*.

The tenth book - I will include within it all the mitzvot that involve ritual purity and impurity. I have called this book *The Book of Ritual Purity*.

The eleventh book - I will include within it all the mitzvot that [govern relations] between an individual and his colleague that involve damage to property or personal injury. I have called this book *The Book of Damages*.

The twelfth book - I will include within it all the mitzvot that govern sales and the acquisition [of property]. I have called this book *The Book of Acquisition [of Property]*.

The thirteenth book - I will include within it all the mitzvot that [govern relations] between an individual and his colleague and do not involve damage at the outset - e.g., the laws of watchmen, debtors, claims lodged [against one another], and [their] denial. I have called this book *The Book of Judgments*.

The fourteenth book - I will include within it all the mitzvot that are delegated to the Sanhedrin - e.g., execution [when convicted by] the court, the acceptance of testimony, and the laws pertaining to a king and the wars he [wages]. I have called this book *The Book of Judges*.

These are [the governing principles for] the division of the Halachot of this text according to the subjects [treated in] the [different] books and the division of the mitzvot according to the subjects [treated in] the halachot.

Tenth Letter

CLASSIFICATION OF THE COMMANDMENTS

MY LIGHT AND SKETCHY BRUSH-STROKES have succeeded in reconciling you to the fate of your people. Nay, more, you are happy that you belong to this people, despite its poverty and lowliness — indeed, because of it. What a glorious result of our correspondence, dear Benjamin! But, when you feel exalted by the ideal of your lofty calling, and then look upon the Law which supposedly bears within it the translation of this ideal into reality, you feel as if a yawning chasm were intervening between it and yourself. You cannot repress a sensation of uneasiness and bewilderment when you think that *this* is supposed to be the Will of God. Nor do you see therein any real task, any ideal work to which you are called, nothing but prayer and a passive, contemplative life, and, in addition, unreasonable demands and senseless practices.

Dear friend, forget whatever you have known of Judaism heretofore; listen as though you had never heard anything concerning its teachings, and you will not only be reconciled to the Law, but you will be filled with genuine love for it and willingly allow your entire life to be an expression and manifestation of this Law.

Again, I shall now give you only fundamental principles, general outlines of the component parts of the Jewish doctrinal system, hardly anything but the nomenclature of terms and concepts, and I shall leave both elucidation and demonstration for the future.

Every opinion which I shall express is the result of many years' study of the Bible, Talmud and Midrash. Every detail and every step is confirmed in the Gemarah, if this latter be but comprehended according to the true meaning of its words and if, at every point, we will put to ourselves the questions "What have I heard here?", "What is the underlying concept of this statement?", and, "What is its purpose?", "What is the object of the symbolic act?", and, "What is its natural meaning, if understood in terms of its context and in accordance with its purpose?" We must, furthermore, carefully distinguish between *de-orait/ha*¹ and *de-rabbanan*,² and seek to grasp the former by comprehending the essence and nature of the Biblical law, and the latter by making clear to ourselves the steps and means required for the practical execution and fulfillment of the law. We must take into account the unique characteristics of the original which, having been intended for oral transmission only, gives only the specific rule, adapted for immediate application, but omits the universal, the spirit, leaving that for direct individual instruction or personal effort to attain.

After all the foregoing, I ask you, what do you expect of the Torah? Obviously, you expect the revelation of a rule of conduct, of how, using the powers and faculties that are yours, you may fulfill the will of God toward the beings by whom you are surrounded; in other words, how you may practice love and justice with and toward all living things.

Add to this also the idea of the mission of Israel as a people called not only to fulfill these principles in life, but also to preserve and propagate their theoretic concepts

for its own education and that of others. Join to it, furthermore, the laws and ordinances which derive their origin naturally from the life Israel once led as a state and which, in the absence of land and state, became inapplicable, and you have the essential, binding, contents of the Torah.³

1. Toroth. The historically-revealed ideas concerning God, the world, the mission of mankind and Israel, not as mere doctrines of faith or knowledge, but as principles, to be acknowledged by heart and mind, and to be realized in daily living.

2. Mishpatim. Statements concerning justice toward creatures similar and equal to yourself, by reason of this resemblance and equality; that is, of justice toward human beings.

3. Chukkim. Statements concerning justice toward subordinate creatures by reason of the obedience due to God; that is, justice toward the earth, plants and animals, or, if they have become assimilated to your own person, then, justice toward your own property, toward your own body and soul and spirit.

4. Mitzvot. Precepts concerning love toward all living things without distinction, purely because it is the bidding of God, and in consideration of our duty as men and Israelites.

5. Edoth. Memorials or testimonies to truths essential to the concept of the mission of man and of Israel. These testimonies comprise symbolic words or acts which bear lessons of profound significance for the individual Jew, for Israel as a whole, and for mankind in general.

6. Avodah. Exaltation and sanctification of spiritual life by symbolic words or acts, to the end that our conception

of our task may be rendered clearer, and we be better fitted to fulfill our mission on earth.

Thus we have, as basic principles for these major classifications, three fundamental concepts; namely justice, love and education.

1) Justice; that is, consideration for everything as a creature of God, regard of every possession as willed by God's decree, and the viewing of every system of law and order as having been ordained by God; and the fulfillment of all the claims each has upon us.

2) Love; that is, the kindly acceptance of all living things as children of God, as brethren; the promotion of their welfare, and the endeavor to bring them to the goal set for them by God, all without motive of personal advancement, but simply in fulfillment of Divine will and command.

3) Education; that is, the training of oneself and others for such endeavors, by taking to heart these truths as principles of life, by holding them fast and preserving them for oneself and for others, and by endeavoring to reclaim them whenever the influences of worldly life have wrested them from our possession.

Let us now go through them, in detail and endeavor to comprehend each in the light of the principles upon which it is established.

⑬ 4 CATEGORIES OF JEWISH LAW

CATEGORY	PURPOSE
Reflexive Laws	To elevate the performer of the law
Laws of Ethics	To ensure moral treatment of others
Laws of Holiness	To elevate human actions from animal-like to God-like
National Laws	To identify with the Jewish nation and with its past

⑭ R' HIRSCH - 19 LETTERS

As for the Law, is it really a brake on all the joys of life, a hindrance denying the gratification of the natural human craving for pleasure? Do examine the precepts and ordinances of the Law from beginning to end and tell me what legitimate desire it forbids to gratify, what natural impulse it would destroy or extirpate.

Quite the contrary, it ennobles and sanctifies even our animal impulses and desires by applying them with prudence to the purposes designated by the Creator. Righteousness is the Law's basic character. The gratification of physical lust and passion is not, and has never been, its goal.

Therefore man's lower cravings are subordinated to a higher law and limited by the Creator's wisdom for His own infinitely wise purposes. Yet, as means for attaining ends that are proper and necessary, the Law recognizes these desires as perfectly moral, pure and human, and their gratification as just and as legitimate as the fulfillment of any other human task or mission.

(15) RAMBAN (NACHMANIDIES) LEVITICUS (19:1)

YE SHALL BE HOLY. "Abstain from the forbidden sexual relationships [mentioned in the preceding section] and from [other] sin, ⁷ because wherever you find [in the Torah] a warning to guard against immorality, you find the mention of 'holiness.'" This is Rashi's language. But in the *Torath Kohanim* I have seen it mentioned without any qualification [i.e., without any particular reference to immorality, as Rashi expressed it], saying: ⁸ "Be self-restraining." Similarly, the Rabbis taught there: ⁹ "*And ye shall sanctify yourselves, and be ye holy, for I am Holy.*" ¹⁰ Just as I am Holy, so be you holy. Just as I am Pure, so be you pure. And in my opinion, this abstinence does not refer only to restraint from acts of immorality, as the Rabbi [Rashi] wrote, but it is rather the self-control mentioned throughout the Talmud, which confers upon those who practice it the name of *P'rushim* (Pharisees), [literally: "those who are separated" from self-indulgence, as will be explained, or those who practice self-restraint]. The meaning thereof is as follows: The Torah has admonished us against immorality and forbidden foods, but permitted sexual intercourse between man and his wife, and the eating of [certain] meat and wine. If so, a man of desire could consider this to be a permission to be passionately addicted to sexual intercourse with his wife or many wives, and be among winebibbers, among gluttonous eaters of flesh, ¹¹ and speak freely all profanities, since this prohibition has not been [expressly] mentioned in the Torah, and thus he will become a sordid person within the permissible realm of the Torah! Therefore, after having listed the matters which He prohibited altogether, Scripture followed them up by a general command that we practice moderation even in matters which are permitted, [such as in the following]: One should minimize sexual intercourse, similar to that which the Rabbis have said, ¹² "So that the disciples of the Sages should not be found together with their wives as often as the hens," and he should not engage in it except as required in fulfillment of the commandment thereof. He should also sanctify himself [to self-restraint] by using wine in small amounts, just as Scripture calls a Nazirite "holy" [for abstaining from wine and strong drink], ¹³ and he should remember the evils which the Torah mentioned as following from [drinking wine] in the cases of Noah ¹⁴ and Lot. ¹⁵ Similarly, he should keep himself away from impurity [in his ordinary daily activity], even though we have not been admonished against it in the Torah,