

CHAPTER 3: TORAH AND MITZVOT □ PART 4

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

The idea of "mitzvot" often tickles people the wrong way, though. Some take offense at their suggestion of definitiveness, while others accept them unconditionally without ever considering their implications. And though obviously at odds with each other, both points of view deny the mitzvot their power.

Part of the problem stems from the fact that mitzvot are usually translated as "commandments" or "laws", which while technically correct is nonetheless off the mark. Among other things, it leads to odd phrases like "The Jewish dietary laws" or "The Laws of Shabbat" or of prayer, for example, which are so jarring. The halachot of keeping kosher, enjoying the Shabbat, and of praying to G-d Almighty, among other halachot, aren't laws per se so much as sage guides and maps.

After all, the Zohar depicts the mitzvot as "steering principles" or "guides". That's not to say that we're to use elements of Halacha like suggestions which we can then pick and choose from. That's far from the truth and debases the high worth and holiness of Halacha. Nevertheless the truth remains that mitzvot and Halacha matter far more in the course of our own spiritual lives and in the workings of the universe than the terms "laws" or "commandments" would have us think. For let it never be forgotten that they're the way we draw close to G-d and fulfill our life's purpose!

And also essential to our understanding of the mitzvah-system is Ramchal's explanation of the cosmic dynamics behind it all. It's based on an essential idea from the Zohar that sums it all up. It's the statement that "a provocation from below elicits a (corresponding) response from above". The point is that when we engage in mitzvot here we rouse a response from above that wouldn't otherwise be roused, and our not engaging in it allows a moment of goodness and rectification to fall by the waysides.

So in a sense, the Halacha could be said to be the Manufacturer's specifications (or "specs") that are essential for running the cosmic system.

Rabbi Yaakov Feldman has translated and commented upon "The Gates of Repentance", "The Path of the Just", and "The Duties of the Heart" (Jason Aronson Publishers). His works are available in bookstores and in various locations on the Web.