

THE GATES OF REPENTANCE, GATE 3:2

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

We turn now to the first category of mitzvahs ("commandments") we'll be discussing in our analysis of many of them. And they're the so-called "Rabbinic" mitzvahs. But let's explain.

Many of the mitzvahs so very well known-- like the observance of the Sabbath, the rules of Kashrut, ethics, etc.-- are enunciated in the Torah itself. Yet many other well known Jewish practises (like not eating dairy for several hours after eating meat, celebrating the holiday of Chanukkah, etc.) are **not** enunciated in the Torah. They were either alluded to there and fleshed out by the sages; or they were actually instituted by the sages themselves in order to either **bolster** or **safeguard** Biblical mitzvahs, or to commemorate special moments.

Hence, on one level the "Rabbinic" mitzvahs are somewhat less authoritative than the mitzvahs offered directly by the Torah. Since they're "supplemental".

But on another, deeper level, Rabbinic mitzvahs and details are even **more** authoritative than Torah-based ones. Since they grant Torah-based mitzvahs their color, definition, luster, and pith. And because Rabbinic mitzvahs are rooted in the sort of deep and abiding respect for G-d's will referred to as the "fear" of G-d mentioned earlier on.

For as Rabbeinu Yonah puts it, the fear of G-d is the basis of **all** mitzvahs, at bottom. Which is to say that unless I experience the aforementioned deep and abiding respect for G-d's will while fulfilling His mitzvahs I can hardly be said to be fulfilling His will, on a certain level.

Rabbinic mitzvahs in fact were instituted with that in mind. They set the sort of reverent tone around mitzvahs that one would need in order to do them in a dignified enough way. And they add depth and dimension to mitzvahs, and also provide us with enough extra material to deliberate on.

On another level, though, they protect the original mitzvah against harm, and serve as the kind of locked vault-boxes we leave our most valuable papers and jewelry in to be sure they're safe.

Nonetheless, some people tend to be rather blase and dismissive when it comes to Rabbinic mitzvahs. And they say things like, "Who said that?", "Where's that written?" when faced with those mitzvahs. As well as the infamous (and perhaps pompous), "That's man-made. I only follow G-d's will".

They might, for example, make fun of observant Jews who punctiliously wash their hands ritually before eating a meal, who go out of their way to pray with a "minyan" (a quorum) three times a day,

who are sure to insist upon certain halachic details, etc.

But those kinds of scoffers' derisions are rooted in a certain brassy indifference to the sages themselves (or, perhaps, in a lack of information and insight into what they set out to do), rather than in an all-too-human moral lapse. For people who fail to overcome the sorts of moral challenges enunciated in the Torah can almost be excused for that, since the challenges are sometimes overwhelming. And they're likely to deeply regret what they'd done because the prohibition is written out in black and white.

But the sort of person who'd question the idea of washing his or her hands ritually before eating, praying with a minyan, or insisting upon certain halachic details and the like isn't doing that because the challenge is too great. He is, as a rule, expressing disdain for (or, again, unawareness of) the sages' mandates. And he's thus unlikely to do teshuva (to return to G-d) since he's either not convinced or unaware that he'd gone against G-d's wishes, when he had. After all, it was *He* who empowered the sages to do what they do.

On a certain level, then, such an individual can be said to have separated himself from the Jewish Nation. Since he'd have neglected some of the very things that set us apart as a people and make us so unique.

The point is that anyone who'd settle for nothing less than spiritual excellence would do well to immerse himself in Rabbinic as well as Torah-based mitzvahs. And to excel at both.

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