

POSITIVE PURSUITS

by Rabbi Label Lam

When scanning "The 10 Commandments" it is immediately apparent that 70% of them are voiced in the negative. Of the 613 Mitzvoth 365 are also "Don'ts". That's almost 60%. Why am I mentioning these rather vague statistics? I can still taste the bitterness I felt as a young secular high school student being told by a social studies teacher that the "Old Testament" is filled with negativity as opposed to the other "newer" version which is filled only with love and positive precepts.

I was paralyzed with ignorance. I didn't know then what to answer. I have since heard this complaint countless times along the way echoed by Jews as well. "Rabbi, why are there all these negative Mitzvoth?" Let's try two approaches to begin the discussion!

A clever colleague once gave the following explanation at the onset of Shabbos at a weekend for the uninitiated. Shabbos is notorious for its multitude of so called Negative Mitzvoth. There are 39 basic prohibitive categories and each one has theoretically 39 subsets, not to mention a host of Rabbinical prohibitions as well. There is this fearful sense that one is entering some kind of prison surrounded by endless rules. Why all the negativity?

He explained that "Negative" Mitzvoth are really more liberating than positive or activity Mitzvoth. How so? If I have a long "to do" list, my day will be consumed with all the things that have to get done. Each one of them requires that I be there to perform the act.

Since I am required to put on Tefillin at a certain time I have to take the time to do that deed. Matzos on Pesach, Lulav on Sukkos, and Learning Torah: Each demands my presence and anchors me to a given time! I'm happy to live productively but in a world with a finite amount of time, and energy tough choices have to be made.

This is not so with "Negative" Mitzvoth! As long as I am not doing any of the things on my "don't" list I can be doing almost anything else. As long as I am not lighting a match on Shabbos or writing I can be enjoying a world of endless possibilities. We can eat and take walks and sing and talk and sleep and learn and whatever.

All the time I am not killing or coveting everything else is potentially available. I am not bound by those "Negative" Mitzvoth I am made free by the discipline of refraining. They are not "Negative" at all! They are only prohibitive. They demand that we desist from those specific behaviors but they do not bind us in the least.

Secondly, imagine please you are sending your teenage son or daughter away for a year to college or even to Israel. Let's be honest, now. Before they leave you have a parental sit-down and you give them a laundry list of "always" and "never". Which list will be longer and more emphatic? Huh?

Write home! Record the balance in your check book! Give charity! Take your passport with you wherever you go etc. Now comes the do not list! If I ever hear that you...Don't you dare try ... Violation of any of those might not only undermine your travel experience but some of them may even ruin your life.

There are more things they dare not do than they ought to do to ensure a wholesome experience. So it is with our visit here! There are more things we should not do than we need to do to approach our potential. So as long as we manage to steer clear of all those potentially destructive encounters we will have plenty more time and energy available to devote to positive pursuits.

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