

A TREMENDOUS MITZVAH

by Rabbi Label Lam

... *You shall not stand by your fellow's blood. I am HASHEM. (Vayikra 19:16)*

You shall not stand by [the shedding of] your fellow's blood: [i.e., do not stand by,] watching your fellow's death, when you are able to save him; for example, if he is drowning in the river or if a wild beast or robbers come upon him. — [Torath Kohanim 19:41; Sanh. 73a]

לא תעמד על דם רעך: לראות במיתתו ואתה יכול להצילו, כגון טובע בנהר, וחיה או לסטים באים עליו

I am the Lord: faithful to pay reward [to those who heed the above warnings], and faithful to exact punishment [upon those who transgress them].

אני ה': נאמן לשלם שכר, ונאמן להפרע

You shall not stand by your fellow's blood: Watching your fellow's death, when you are able to save him; for example, if he is drowning in the river or if a wild beast or robbers come upon him. (Rashi)

I once asked one of my Rebbeim why the Mitzvah stated above, to save the life of a fellow Jew, is communicated to us as a negative imperative, not to stand by!? Why does it not say emphatically that you should certainly save your fellow? Is that not the requirement?

The Rebbe said that there is major difference between a Mitzvah mandating a certain positive action and a Mitzvah that demands we refrain from a certain behavior. We have limitations of how much we are required to spend to perform or acquire the means to do a certain Mitzvah. We are not asked to spend our last dollar to buy Tefillin or an Esrog. We are only meant to empty a percentage of our pocket to get the job done. However, when it comes to a "don't do" there one is expected to forfeit their entire fortune or income, only not to actively transgress a law in the Torah. If the Torah would have told us to save a life as a directive of doing, perhaps we would have to stop and make a cost benefit calculation before moving into action, "Hummmm! Jumping into a river, will damage my suit and I will lose the diamonds I have in pocket. This may not be a Mitzvah I can afford to do now!HASHEM forgive me!"

However, now that the Torah mandates not to "stand by", as a negative I am required to give up everything. If all my millions will save a single Jew from being taken to certain death in a concentration camp I am required to pay it now, wow! It's good to know that piece of information just in case the situation ever arises. Likely, for most of us though, it never will. What then is the practicality of this perspective, besides appreciating the extreme value of human life, of course.

The Rebbe Elimelech ztl. writes in the beginning of the Tzetel Katan, *"At any time when one is free from learning Torah, especially when he has nothing to do and he is sitting alone in his room, or he is lying on his bed, and he is not able to sleep, he should have in mind the Mitzvah of "And I shall be made holy among the children of Israel." [This is the Mitzvah of Kiddush HASHEM: to sanctify HASHEM's holy name, even if it means giving up one's life.] He should feel in his soul, and imagine in his thoughts as if a great fire was burning before him reaching until heaven. Because of his desire to sanctify HASHEM's name, he breaks his natural inclinations [for life] and throws himself into the fire to sanctify HASHEM's name. And from this good thought, HASHEM will consider it as if he had physically done the act. This way he is not lying or sitting doing nothing. He is fulfilling a positive Mitzvah of the Torah."*

This is not an entirely new idea. The Talmud tells us that when Rabbi Akiva was being tortured to death by the Romans he was saying Shema! His students were confounded and they asked why at this time he was reciting Shema! He told them that his entire life when he said the verse, "with all your soul" which he understood it to mean that one should love HASHEM even if they are taking your life, he had been practicing visualizing this event his entire life. Now finally he was faced with this rare opportunity to live up this highest of all ideals and he embraced it with all of his soul.

Now right after we are commanded to love HASHEM "with all our heart and all our soul", we are told to love HASHEM, "with all of our might", which Rashi explains means with all our monetary resources. Maybe we can extend the concept of the Tzetel Katan and apply it to money and life as well.

When sitting idle we can imagine successfully navigating the great test of being willing to forfeit all of our wealth and all of our possessions to save a fellow Jew. We should never know of such a test, but if we do it we will be more prepared. Even more so, HASHEM will consider it as if we had just done **a tremendous Mitzvah!** DvarTorah, Copyright © 2007 by Rabbi Label Lam and [Torah.org](https://torah.org).