

EVERY WORD A MITZVAH

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R' Avraham Ragoler z"l (1722-1804; brother of the Vilna Gaon z"l) writes: The Gemara (Makkot 23b) teaches that the Jewish People were commanded to keep 613 Mitzvot. This number is mentioned also in other places in the Gemara and Midrashim. [Yet, the Gemara does not identify the 613 Mitzvot, and there seem to be many more than that number of commandments and prohibitions. Which are the "real" 613?] The Rishonim / early medieval authorities--including Rambam, Ramban and the Sefer Mitzvot Ha'gadol--struggled to catalog them. Acharonim / later authorities also participated in this endeavor. Each source disproves part of the other one's list with very strong questions. Even the Rambam's list, which has been widely accepted, is not without difficulties.

R' Avraham continues: The explanation which I heard from my brother, the Gaon, is that there certainly are not only 613 Mitzvot, and no more. If that were so, the Book of Bereishit and the first two Parashot of the Book of Shmot would have only three Mitzvot between them, which is hard to accept. [Of the Rambam's list of 613 Mitzvot, only three--to procreate, to circumcise boys, and not to eat the Gid Ha'nasheh--are found in the Book of Bereishit.] Rather, every word of the Torah is a separate Mitzvah. Indeed, there are an infinite number of Mitzvot, such that a thinking person can find guidance in the Torah about every single detail of his life, no matter how big or how small. The "613" are merely the major categories--the roots, which subdivide into branches. True, we don't know for sure what those major categories are, but we don't need to know, because the Mitzvot are all intertwined with each other [see below]. (Ma'alot Ha'Torah)

We say in the prayer before putting on Tefilin: "May it be Your Will, Hashem . . . that the commandment of putting on Tefilin be considered worthy before the Holy One, Blessed is He, as if I had fulfilled it in all its details, implications, and intentions, as well as the 613 commandments that are dependent upon it." What is the meaning of the phrase, "the 613 commandments that are dependent upon it"?

R' Gedalia Schor z"l (1910-1979; Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshiva Torah Vo'daas in Brooklyn, N.Y.) explains: Every Mitzvah has at its root some element that applies to all other Mitzvot. For example, our Sages derive from the verse (Shmot 12:17), "You shall safeguard the Matzot," that one should not delay when given the opportunity to perform any Mitzvah. How so? The words "Matzot" and "Mitzvot" have the same spelling. By substituting the word "Mitzvot" into the verse, "You shall safeguard the Matzot/Mitzvot," we learn that, just as one should not delay when baking a Matzah, lest it become Chametz, so one should not delay the performance of a Mitzvah. Another example: Rambam implies that the special Mitzvah to rejoice on Sukkot is not only a Mitzvah for that holiday; it is a prototype for the joy that should accompany all Mitzvot. So, too, the essence of every Mitzvah has implications for how we perform every other Mitzvah. (Ohr Gedaliahu: Vaykira-Bemidbar-Devarim p.218)

"Hashem said to Kayin, 'Why are you annoyed, and why has your face fallen? Surely, if you improve yourself, you will be forgiven. But if you do not improve yourself, sin crouches at the door. Its desire is toward you, yet you can conquer it'." (4:6-7)

R' Eliyahu z"l (1720-1797; the Vilna Gaon) writes that this verse teaches how the Yetzer Ha'ra operates: As long as a person is busy serving Hashem, the Yetzer Ha'ra bides its time. But, "Sin crouches at the door"--the moment a person opens the "door," i.e., as soon as he gives the Yetzer Ha'ra a small opening, it pounces like a lion. It is to remind us of the dangers of opening that "door" that the Torah commands us to put a Mezuzah on our doorways. (Aderet Eliyahu)

R' Yosef Yoizel Horowitz z"l (1847-1919; the Alter of Novardok) adds: The Yetzer Ha'ra doesn't attack a person head-on at first. Rather, Kayin's experience illustrates how the Yetzer Ha'ra first approaches a person with "kosher" arguments--even suggestions that sound like Mitzvot--and, once the person is in the Yetzer Ha'ra's grip, it drags him down until he can even commit murder (or other terrible sins). The Yetzer Ha'ra first seduced Kayin with Kinat Soferim, which loosely means, "jealousy among scholars." This is "kosher" jealousy, for our Sages say that Kinat Soferim increases wisdom. The Yetzer Ha'ra said to Kayin: "Why was Hevel's sacrifice accepted and not yours?" This caused Kayin to become upset and caused his "face to fall," as our verse relates. In fact, though, the Yetzer Ha'ra had fooled Kayin. Kayin's jealousy was not Kinat Soferim. It was ordinary envy, and it led Kayin to murder Hevel.

How was Kayin to know the difference between "kosher" jealousy and its non-kosher counterpart? Hashem Himself answers this question in our verse. Kinat Soferim is uplifting. It causes one to joyfully chase higher levels of spiritual accomplishment. If you are downcast and depressed, Hashem told Kayin, it is a sure sign that you are jealous of Hevel's spiritual success, rather than being focused on your potential growth. One who experiences Kinat Soferim asks himself, "How can I be like that Torah scholar or Tzaddik?" He never wishes that the other scholar or Tzaddik would be deprived of his accomplishments.

The Alter continues: Man has the bechirah / free will to analyze his feelings and discover whether he is experiencing Kinat Soferim or just jealousy. Nevertheless, because Kayin was deceived by the Yetzer Ha'ra, Hashem judged him mercifully as an unintentional killer and sentenced him to exile ("You shall become a vagrant and a wanderer on earth") rather than to death. (Madregat Ha'adam: Tikkun Ha'middot ch.2)

"So said the Kel, Hashem, Who creates the heavens and stretches them forth, spreads out the earth and what grows from it, gives a soul i.e., life] to the people upon it, and a spirit to those who walk on it." (Yeshayah 42:5 - in this week's haftarah)

R' Shlomo Kluger z"l (1783-1869; rabbi of Brody, Galicia) writes: Why did Hashem create the heavens before the earth? He did this in man's honor, so that mankind would not be embarrassed by the decline in the quality of its leadership from one generation to the next. By creating the heavens before the earth, Hashem demonstrated that it is the nature of Creation for lesser things to follow greater things.

This, continues R' Kluger is alluded to in our verse: When someone does a favor for someone else, the beneficiary may say, "You have given me life itself." Thus, says our verse: "He creates the heavens and stretches them forth, then He spreads out the earth and what grows from it." Why does He do it this way? Because, in this way, "He gives life, i.e., a good feeling to the people upon it, and a spirit to those who walk on it," i.e., He revives the spirit of those who are depressed by the decline in the quality of leadership they see. (Shema Shlomo: Bereishit p.598)

A Torah Tour of the Holy Land

The Mishnah (Keilim 1:6-9) teaches: There are ten levels of Kedushah / holiness within Eretz Yisrael, which itself is holier than all other lands. What is the Land's holiness? That the Omer, Bikkurim and the Two Loaves offered on Shavuot must come from the produce of Eretz Yisrael, not from the produce of other lands. These are the ten levels within Eretz Yisrael:

[1] Walled cities in Eretz Yisrael are holier than the rest of the Land in that someone with Tzara'at must be sent outside the city's walls and a dead body that was removed from a walled city may not be returned to it.

[2] Inside the walls of Yerushalayim is holier than that, for there sacrificial offerings known as "Kadashim Kalim" (for example, a Shelamim or Pesach) as well as Ma'aser Sheni may be eaten, but not outside of Yerushalayim's walls.

[3] The Har Ha'bayit / Temple Mount is holier still, as people in certain states of Tumah / ritual impurity (Zavim, Zavot, Niddot and Yoldot) may not go there.

[4] The area on the Temple Mount known as the "Cheil" / a narrow precinct surrounding the Bet Hamikdash is holier still, as gentiles and those who are impure because of contact with a corpse may not enter.

[5] The Ezrat Nashim / the large courtyard on the eastern side of the Bet Hamikdash) is holier still, as there a T'vul Yom / a person who has immersed in a Mikvah and his Tumah will end at nightfall may not enter there. However, he is not liable for a Chatat offering if he does.

[6] The Ezrat Yisrael / an 11-Amot wide strip (just inside the Nikanor Gate) is holier still, for there a Mechusar Kippurim / the lowest level of ritual impurity may not enter. If he does enter, he is liable for a Chatat offering.

[7] The Ezrat Kohanim / the area west, north and south of the altar is holier still, for a Yisrael (as opposed to a Kohen) may not go there except in connection with bringing an offering.

[8] The area between the altar and the Ulam / ante-chamber of the Temple building is holier still, as a Kohen may not go there if he has not had a haircut within the last 30 days.

[9] The Heichal / main chamber of the Temple building is holier still, as even a Kohen may not go there without having washed his hands and feet.

[10] The Kodesh Ha'kodashim is holier still, as no one may go there except the Kohen Gadol while performing the service on Yom Kippur.