

# JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

## Parshat Vayikra

Examining the local social announcements, one notices a preponderance of Mitzva-based events. Extravagant coming of age celebrations, singles scenes in bars, and a variety of social justice programs are all labeled with the prefix or suffix Mitzva. What is the meaning of this most popular term?

A recent survey among young adults in the Bay Area yielded the answer “a good deed” or “the right thing at the right time.” Pleasant enough concepts, to be sure, and with consensus perhaps, but are they definitive?

Mitzva, from the Hebrew verb *I'tzavos* (to command) is, in a word, a commandment. Generally speaking, a commandment contains a mandatory precept with defined parameters. With 613 in the Torah, there are plenty enough to support that. What might be interesting to note is, that there are a select number of these Mitzvos which are either not mandatory at all and yet others that while mandatory are nevertheless not as tightly defined as we would expect. Some cases of the latter include *Teruma* (agricultural gifts to the Cohen) and *Bikkurim* (first fruits of the new season), both of which while mandated by the Torah are arbitrary in terms of quantity. The former category includes the various contributions to the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle) which were voluntary and select *Korbanos* (offerings) described in this week's Parsha.

*If a man from amongst you shall bring forth a Korban to Hashem...*

—This is talking about a voluntary offering.

*Vayikra 1:2, Rashi ad loc.*

A concept which many a modern man finds unsettling is why an all-powerful God feels gratified from the performance of our Mitzvos? This is certainly a logical question deserving of serious thought. However, the premise upon which this point is predicated needs to be adjusted for accuracy's sake. Eating in a specific sort of hut on Succos, refraining from leavened bread products on Pesach, or blowing a ram's horn on Rosh Hashana do not directly “help” God.

Rather, we are the ones who primarily gain from these Mitzvot. Whether we sense it or not, there is a spiritual reality as real and as dynamic as the physical reality we experience continuously. The Torah is analogous to a manufacturer's manual and the Mitzvos therein are guidelines for maintaining and even enhancing our spiritual “health.” By following God's instructions, we can align ourselves with His values. God, as the ultimate Good, would seek to provide us with the superior methods of such development. That, in a very small nutshell, is the value of Mitzvos.

In following the previous concept, we may find ourselves more than a little perplexed with the idea of voluntary, or even non-quantified, Mitzvos. Considering the aforementioned explanation, would it not be fair to expect that only those Mitzvos, which enhance our spiritual standing be presented? In other words, if a given precept augments our relationship with God and His values, why make it optional? Conversely, if

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some task in no way presents an opportunity for growth, then why instruct it altogether? The Torah is not exactly a collection of tips to engage us during unstructured free time. Why, then, the voluntary Mitzvos?

There are several (other) Mitzvos which leave us with questions. There is a well-known difficulty with the Mitzva of “*V’Ahavta*” (*And you shall love Your God with all your heart etc.*). Recited twice daily in the *Shema* prayer, the bread and butter Mitzva familiar to most. Yet, can one be ordered to love someone or something? Can an emotion or a close relationship be compulsory? Rambam, among others, offers suggestions on how one can come to love God. By contemplating God’s greatness or constant kindnesses one *can* arrive at such feelings. Now, although these suggestions may have the desired effects, the difficulty still remains for one who simply does not feel the love towards God. How can one pull off the feat necessary to fulfill this essential Mitzva?

Rabbi Yisroel Yaakov Kanievski (1899–1985), the leading Torah sage of the previous generation, in his *Birkas Peretz*, offers an explanation that provides insight and guidance into the human dynamic. Maimonides tells us that while one’s inner state will normally determine one’s external conduct, nevertheless one’s external actions and grooming can also inspire and change the inner self. Thus, one who is challenged to find enthusiasm for a given Mitzva can generate the desired feeling by excitedly going through the motions. This is helpful advice in many areas such as heartfelt prayers or compassion for one’s fellow. Actively engaging in compassionate acts can have a profound, positive impact on one’s true feelings.

Before the construction began for the Mishkan, God clearly indicated the non-compulsory nature of the collection.

*From every person whose heart will [seek to] donate, shall you take my contributions.*

*Shemos 25:2*

Again, if the contributions are there to actually benefit us, why not command everyone to do so? Here, says Rabbi Kanievski, we have our solution. Ideally, one’s love for God would be manifested by his generous donation to the Mishkan campaign. But what to do if the inspiration just does not come?

For those who find it a challenge to love God, for those who do not find those feelings bubbling outwardly naturally, there is a key. By *voluntarily* donating or giving offerings, one can activate feelings of generosity and love where little existed before. The Torah allows for personal discretion in these less defined Mitzvot precisely to give the opportunity to develop one’s own positive feelings.

***Shabbat Shalom!***

