
THE MITZVOT

& WHY THEY ARE SO DETAILED

Everyone has heard of the Ten Commandments. However, some people are surprised to find out that in Judaism there aren't just ten, but actually 613 commandments! These 613 commandments branch out into all areas of daily life, and form an all-encompassing system of belief and behavior. One might get overwhelmed by the sheer number 613 and stop right there. However, a deeper understanding reveals that it is the mitzvot themselves that define authentic Jewish expression. Moreover, exploring the nature of the mitzvot in the context of Judaism as a comprehensive approach to life readily explains why there are so many of them.

In this class we will define what a mitzvah is, and explain what the mitzvot can do for us. We will see that the mitzvot are the means by which we can develop a relationship with God, refine our character, and infuse every action with purpose.

As such, we will be aiming to answer the following questions:

- What is the nature of the mitzvot?
- Why did God give us mitzvot?
- What role does reason play in keeping mitzvot?
- Why are the mitzvot so detailed?

Class outline:

- Section I. What is a Mitzvah?
 - Part A. The Concept of Commandments
 - Part B. Spiritual Laws of Nature
 - Part C. Not Just 613
- Section II. Why Did God Give the Mitzvot?
 - Part A. The Means to Build a Relationship
 - Part B. For Our Own Good
 - Part C. To Emulate God
 - Part D. Perfecting Mankind
- Section III. The Role of Reason in Observing Mitzvot
 - Part A. Meaning, Not Motivation
 - Part B. Just a Taste
 - Part C. The Reason for *Chukim* (Non-Rational Laws)
- Section IV. Why are Mitzvot So Detailed?
 - Part A. Because Reality is Detailed
 - Part B. Morality by Osmosis

SECTION I. WHAT IS A MITZVAH?

Judaism is a way of life founded on a Divine call that took place at the national revelation of the Torah at Mt. Sinai, to fulfill mitzvot. The Jewish people embraced their mission enthusiastically (Shemot/Exodus 24:7), “נעשה ונשמע”, We will do the mitzvot and learn them!” The Jewish nation accepted not just the Ten Commandments, but actually 613 commandments. And, when we look further into the world of mitzvot, we will see that it does not end there – there are actually many more than just 613 commandments. (See also the Morasha series on the System of Halachah.) All these mitzvot demand an explanation: why so many?

The first step in being able to address this question is to develop a basic understanding of what a mitzvah is. In this section we will discuss the concept of the commandments, their nature, and the number of the mitzvot.

PART A. THE CONCEPT OF COMMANDMENTS

We will first discuss the concept of a mitzvah in general. Mitzvah means commandment and the idea of being commanded by God is at the heart of Judaism. The idea of being commanded by God is what distinguishes Judaism from other ethical systems trying to attain the perfection of mankind.

1. **Rabbi Aryeh Carmell, Master Plan, pp. x-xi – The concept of commandment introduces a new motive into our lives.**

“Mitzvah” means “commandment.” In the Western world we are not familiar with the concept of doing something because it is a commandment. We behave in moral ways, if we do, because of the value system to which our upbringings and society happen to have conditioned us. When challenged we often find it very difficult to defend the system. This mode of behavior is unreliable, because it is based on vague general concepts without formal rational basis. There could be no better illustration of the instability of this type of system than the Nazi experience. We saw a nation, which had prided itself on its high level of culture, and yet within a few years turned its morality on its head, with disastrous results.

Throughout history great thinkers – Plato, Spinoza, Kant, Marx – have produced splendid ethical systems suggesting that we could curb our egotism in various ways for the good of the community. Insofar as they were tried, they all failed abysmally. First, they lacked credible authority. Second, they failed to deal with the brute facts of the human being as he really is. They failed to provide a detailed program which would nurture the growth of the individual from a self-contained being to a person prepared and motivated to give up his self-interest for an ideal beyond himself. Everyone agreed that the system was wonderful – for everyone else.

All of these shortcomings are overcome by the mitzvah system in Judaism.

The concept of mitzvah introduces a new motive into our lives: we act in a certain way not because we happen to feel it is right, but because we realize that this is how God wants us to act. This introduces a higher dimension into our lives. In fact it involves a revolutionary change in our attitude toward ourselves, the world and our fellow beings.

When we do something good because we relate to it on an intellectual or emotional level without also relating to it as a command from God, then we are essentially commanding ourselves. Volunteering to do a good deed is nice, but only a mitzvah performed as a commandment will develop a person spiritually.

2. **Rabbi Akiva Tatz, The Thinking Jewish Guide to Life, pg. 106 – Choosing to do a mitzvah attaches one to God.**

When you act spontaneously, motivated only by that which arises within yourself, you are expressing yourself. That may be great, but it can never be greater than you are at the moment you act. At best, the act will be a full and true expression of all that you are. But when the command originates outside yourself and you fulfill it, something is happening which expresses more than just yourself. When you act because you are commanded by a source outside yourself, you become the expression of that source. Your action is an expression of the command of the source, and *you are an expression of the source itself*. In fact, you and the source become one: both are needed for the result to manifest.

It is for this reason that Judaism puts a premium on fulfilling obligations.

3. **Talmud, Avodah Zara 3a – It is better to perform an act out of obligation than voluntarily.**

Rav Chanina said: Greater is one who is commanded and performs than one who is not commanded and performs.

א"ר"ח גדול המצווה ועושה יותר משאינו מצווה ועושה.

At first glance, this principle seems highly counterintuitive. We tend to regard the person who volunteers as an aid worker, for example, to be on a morally higher plane than the doctor whose job it is to help others. After all, the latter may only be motivated by the money his salary provides while the former demonstrates a true inner drive to be a good person. Acting voluntarily, says conventional wisdom, is of greater value than acting out of compunction. And yet here we are being told just the opposite!

The answer is rooted in a universal psychological phenomenon: the desire to shirk responsibility. Whenever we feel ourselves pressured into performing a task, part of us would like nothing more than to throw off the yoke of obligation. Our natural human tendency to assert our individuality feels threatened with suffocation at the thought of being forced to do something by someone else. And especially if that someone else is God.

4. **Tosafot, Ibid. – The greatness of performing an act out of obligation stems from the fact that it requires greater strength of character.**

Greater is one who is commanded and performs... The explanation is that someone who is commanded must constantly struggle to overcome his own desires to fulfill the commandments of his Creator.

גדול המצווה ועושה - פ' מפני שהוא דואג תמיד לבטל יצרו ולקיים מצות בוראו.

5. **Rabbi Akiva Tatz, The Thinking Jewish Guide to Life, pg. 105 – Responding to a command requires overcoming one's ego.**

When you are commanded to act, you are immediately confronted by resistance – your lower self steps in and says, "Don't tell me what to do!" The ego, the "I," that deep root of the personality wishes to assert itself, refuses to be subdued. Therefore, in order to fulfill a command you must overcome this inner resistance, and in doing so lies the secret of inner growth – self-control is at the heart of all personal growth. However, when you act spontaneously there is no resistance to overcome and the action is easy; it is not intrinsically an exercise in self-control and therefore has relatively little growth potential.

PART B. SPIRITUAL LAWS OF NATURE

So there is a benefit to acting out of a sense of obligation and adhering to a system of commandments. But what makes the Torah's laws more valuable or meaningful than any other system of law or religion?

The Torah's system of commandments is anything but arbitrary. The reason is that the mitzvot are not just rules – they are the laws of nature of the spiritual world. Just as God created a self-sustaining system of physical law, so He created a self-sustaining system of spiritual law.

1. Rabbi Akiva Tatz, *Worldmask*, pp. 13-14 – The world reflects the Torah, not the other way around.

Torah and the world parallel each other exactly. Torah is the spiritual core; the world is its physical expression. Although this idea is quite well known, at its heart is an element which is often entirely unknown or seriously misunderstood. Let us delve into the relationship between Torah and the world as deeply as possible in order to discover some of the true wonder which it contains.

The nature of the parallel between Torah and physical reality is that Torah is the cause and the world is the result. It is not enough to understand that there is a correspondence between every detail of the physical universe and the Torah; it is essential to realize that each detail of the world exists because the Torah says so. In fact, every fine nuance of each detail exists exactly as it does in the world only because the Torah itself contains each of those details within details.

The analogy most commonly used to portray this relationship is that of a blueprint – the Torah is the blueprint of the world; just as an architect first draws up plans and the builder then follows those plans when building the physical structure, God first brought the Torah into being and then created the world using the Torah as its plan: “*Istakel b’Oraisa u’bara alma* – He looked into the Torah and created the world.”

But there is another depth here: the Torah is not simply a plan in the sense of an architect's drawings; it is a plan in the sense of genes which themselves actually carry out the construction of the organism which results from the code carried in those genes. Certainly, the genetic code corresponds to the physical features which the organism possesses, but it would be a serious mistake to imagine that this correspondence is *descriptive*, that the genes somehow reflect in coded form the physical reality; the genes do not describe, they do not reflect – they are the *reason* that the body looks as it does, they are the instructions and the mechanisms which construct the physical. In fact, the body is a reflection of the genes!

The Torah is the genetic material of the world. The words of Torah are God's words; but God's word was not simply spoken by Him at the time of the Creation (and then recorded in the Torah later) while He created the world by some unrelated means; His word *was the means, the mechanism of creation*. Each word spoken by God in creating the world crystallized into the object it described; this is the secret of the two meanings of the word “*davar*” – an “object,” and a “word;” an object in the world is God's word concretized.

God conceived creation in such a way that man's completion comes, not as a *reward* for his action, but as a *direct result* of his action. Every human act is therefore reflected spiritually on high. Our own deeds are thus the means that generate the spiritual closeness that is our ultimate reward.

2. Chofetz Chaim, *Introduction to Shmirat HaLashon* – The 613 mitzvot correspond to human anatomy.

It is known that every person has 248 spiritual limbs and 365 spiritual sinews, and on them are “clothed” the physical 248 limbs and 365 physical

ידוע הוא דכל אדם יש לו רמ"ח איברים ושם"ה גידים
רוחניים, ועליהם מלבשים הרמ"ח איברים ושם"ה
גידים גשמיים, כמו שנאמר (איוב י"א), "עור ובשר

sinews, as it is said, “With skin and flesh You have clothed me, and with bones and sinews You have covered me” (Iyov/Job 10:11). The verse mentions skin, flesh, bones, and sinews and refers only to “covering” and “clothing.”

Who is being clothed, if not the soul inside, that is the core of the person, and each and every limb of the soul is clothed from above with a corresponding “bodily” limb, like clothing on a body.

And corresponding to this, God gave us 248 positive commandments and 365 negative commandments, and they are also divided up according to limbs, for there are commandments relating to the hands and to the feet and to other limbs ...

And when a person in this world fulfills a commandment with a certain limb, in the future a spiritual light will rest on that limb ...

Subsequently, when a person fulfills the 248 positive commandments, he is the complete person holy to God in all of his limbs ... And if a person is careful not to transgress the negative commandments in the Torah, he brings the light of holiness down onto the “sinews” of his soul.

תלבישני ובעצמות וגידים תשכני, הרי שהזכיר
הכתוב עור וקשר וגידים ועצמות ולא קראו, רק בשם
לבוש וסכך כמו שניאמר, “תלבישני” “תשכני”,

ואת מי תלביש, אם לא לנפש אשר בקרבו, שהיא היא
עצם האדם, ועל כל איבר ואיבר של הנפש מלבש
מלמעלה איבר הגוף המכנה כנגד איבר ההוא, כמו
הבגד על הגוף.

וכנגד זה נתן לנו הקדוש ברוך הוא רמ”ח מצוות עשה
ושם”ה לא תעשה, והם מחלקים גם כן על האיברים,
דלש מצוה שתלויה ביד ולש מצוה שתלויה ברגל וכן
שאר כל איברים ...

וכשאדם מקים בעולם הזה איזה מצוה באיזה איבר,
שורה לעתיד לבוא אור ה' על אותו איבר, ...

נמצא דכשהאדם מקים הרמ”ח עשין, אז הוא האדם
השלם המקדש לה' בכל איבריו... וכשהאדם זהיר
מלעבר על הלאוין שבתורה, הוא ממשך אור הקדשה
על גידי נפשו

Although, as we said before, no single person can fulfill all 613 mitzvot, the concept of the mitzvot corresponding to the limbs of the body can be understood on a national level as well. The Jewish nation finds its completion through the fulfillment of the 613 mitzvot, corresponding to the combined limbs and sinews of a person symbolic of the Jewish people.

The Jewish notion of reward and punishment, one of the thirteen fundamentals of faith according to Rambam, is built upon the understanding that mitzvot are the spiritual laws of nature.

3. **Rabbeinu Nissim, Derashot HaRan 10 – While punishment in this world is corrective, in the next world, punishment is merely the outgrowth of our actions.**

Punishment for its own sake is not a praiseworthy thing, for were it so, the Torah would not have warned us against meting it out ourselves, as it is written, “Do not take revenge or bear a grudge against your people” (Vayikra/Leviticus 19:18). For the Torah does not restrain us from actions that are good in and of themselves. And that which God is described as being “a jealous and vengeful God” (Nachum 1:2) is not referring to the act of vengeance itself but rather the good that results from it.

כי העונש מצד עצמו אינו דבר משובח, שאילו היה
כן, לא הזהירה התורה עליו, כמו שכתוב (ויקרא יט
יח) לא תקום ולא תטור את בני עמך כי התורה לא
תמנע הפעולות הטובות מצד עצמן. ומה שיתואר
השם יתברך עליה, באמרו (נחום א ב) אל קנא ונוקם,
איננו מתואר בה מצד הנקמה בעצמה, אבל מצד הטוב
הנומשך ממנה.

That is what our Sages meant when they said (Bereishit Raba 51:3) that “there is no evil that comes down from Heaven,” for it is impossible that He Who is good and the Source of all goodness could bring about something that is intrinsically evil. Rather, everything that God does is to bring about a positive result. Therefore, whenever God punishes a person in this world it is for one of two reasons: either to correct the sinner so that he will forsake his sinful ways, or in such a case as he does not accept this direction, to improve others so that they will not be evil like him.

But punishment in the next world could not possibly be like this, for at that point it is impossible to improve oneself. However a person was when his soul left his body, that is how he shall remain. Nor could such punishment be to improve others, for such punishment is completely hidden from the dwellers of this world.

There, since punishment is not intrinsically good in God's eyes, the reason must be that these kinds of punishments (in the next world) are natural, coming upon the soul as a consequence of the guilt it acquired in this world. Just as a person could not cut off one of his limbs without feeling pain, so too is it impossible that a person would rebel against God and die in that state of rebellion and not receive punishment for this.

ולפיכך אמרו רבותינו ז"ל אין רע יורד מן השמים (ע"פ ב"ר נא, ג), שאי אפשר שמי שהוא הטוב הגמור ומקור הטובות כולם, ימשך ממנו רע בעצם, אבל כל מה שנמשך ממנו יבא לתכלית טוב. ולכן כל מה שיעניש השם יתברך האדם בעולם הזה, הוא על זה הדרך, אם להישיר החוטא בעצמו שישוב מדרכו הרעה, ואם אינו מקבל הישרה, לישר אחרים שלא יהיו רעים כמוהו.

אבל עונשי העולם הבא, אי אפשר שיהיה זה כפי זה, כי הנפש לא תקבל עוד שם הישרה אחרת, אבל על הענין שהיתה כשנפרדה מהגוף, תשאר לעולם. וכן אי אפשר שיהיה המכוון בעונש ההוא להישיר אחרים, כי העונש ההוא נעלם לגמרי (מדיני) [מבני] העולם הזה, ואינו נראה להם כלל,

ואם כן אחר שאין העונש דבר טוב אצל השם יתברך ומכוון בעצמו, נצטרך לומר כי העונשים ההם ענין טבעי, משיגים לנפש מצד עצמותה כאשר הרבתה אשמה בעולם הזה, כי כאשר אי אפשר שיכרית איש עצב אחד מעצביו ולא יכאב, כן אי אפשר שאיש ממנו ימרוד בהשם יתברך וימות במרדו ולא ישיגנו העונש ההוא.

4. **Rabbi Chaim Volozhin, Nefesh HaChaim, Sha'ar 1, Ch. 12 – Each person creates his ultimate reward in the World to Come.**

“Reward” in the World to Come is [a result] of the actions of the person himself. After the soul separates from the body, it rises to delight and be satiated in the flashes of light and powers and holy worlds that were added and expanded by its good deeds ...

The truth is that the World to Come is the person's own creation; he expands and prepares his own portion in the World to Come.

וזהו ענין שכר העוה"ב שהוא מעשי ידי האדם עצמו. שאחר פרידת נפשו מהגוף. הוא העולה להתעדן ולהשביע נפשו בצחצחות האורות והכחות והעולמות הקדושים שנתוספו ונתרבו ממעשיו הטובים. ...

אבל האמת שהעוה"ב הוא מעשה ידי האדם עצמו שהרחיב והוסיף והתקין חלק לעצמו במעשיו....

PART C. NOT JUST 613

1. Jerome Hahn (ed.), Bible Basics, pp. 35-39 – The Jewish people have 613 commandments.

Mitzvot, or commandments, are directives from God as recorded in the Five Books of Moses. When many people think of commandments, they think of the Ten Commandments, which Moses brought down from Mt. Sinai on two stone tablets. Some might even be familiar with the seven Noahide laws (which were given to Noah and his descendants); these are binding (and generally accepted as being so) upon all individuals of all civilizations...

Many people, however, including a large number of Jews, are unaware that the total number of commandments incumbent upon the Jewish people, as listed in the Torah, is 613: There are 248 positive commandments (i.e., commandments to do something), and 365 negative commandments (i.e., commandments to refrain from doing something). The Ten Commandments are included in the total of 613, as are the seven Noahide laws. The 613 commandments are often referred to by the Hebrew word “Taryag,” which represents the numerical value of “613.”

Of course, not all commandments apply simultaneously. Furthermore, some only apply to specific people, such as Kohanim (priests), while others can only be performed in the Land of Israel. Many can only be fulfilled if a Beit HaMikdash (Temple) stands, and for this reason, only 297 commandments today can be considered generally “applicable” (77 positive commandments, 194 negative commandments, and 26 commandments which can only be fulfilled while living in the Land of Israel).

One of the sources for the total number of 613 Torah mitzvot is found in the Talmud:

2. Talmud Bavli, Makkot 23b-24a – There are 613 mitzvot in the Torah.

Rabbi Simlai expounded: 613 mitzvot were told to Moshe, 365 prohibitions like the days of the year and 248 prescriptions like the limbs of a person. Rabbi Hamnuna said: What verse supports this? “Moshe commanded us ‘Torah,’ a heritage...” (Devarim 33:4): ‘Torah’ has the numerical equivalent (*gematria*) of 611, while “I (am the Lord, your God)” and “You shall have no other (gods before me)” were heard directly from God.

דרש רבי שמלאי: שש מאות ושלוש עשרה מצות נאמרו לו למשה, שלש מאות וששים וחמש לאוין כמננין ימות החמה, ומאתים וארבעים ושמונה עשה כנגד איבריו של אדם. אמר רב המנונא: מאי קרא? (דברים ל"ג:ד) תורה צוה לנו משה מורשה. תורה בגימטריא שית מאה וחד סרי הוי, אנכי ולא יהיה לך מפי הגבורה שמענום.

The number 613 is taken as axiomatic as far as the number of mitzvot is concerned. But if one were to try to count the mitzvot in the Torah, one would be hard pressed to come up with exactly 613. For this reason many of the greatest minds in Jewish history put their efforts into compiling a list of the 613 based on specific parameters. Rambam (Maimonides), for instance, prefaces his count of the 613 with no less than eighteen criteria that he used to determine which mitzvot are to be counted and which not. The implication should be obvious: there are really many more than just 613.

3. Rabbi Avraham ibn Ezra, Yesod Mora, Shaar 2 – There are really many more than 613 mitzvot.

By way of investigation, the truth of the matter is that there is no end to the number of mitzvot,

ועל דרך מחקר האמת אין קץ למספר המצות כאמרו המשורר לכל תכלה ראיתי קץ רחבה מצותך מאד.

as the verse states, “For every goal I have seen an end, but Your commandment is exceedingly broad” (Tehillim/Psalms 119:96).

So all of these mitzvot just beg the question: why so many?

4. **Rabbi Mordechai Becher, Gateway to Judaism, pp. 393-394 – In order to understand why Judaism is so detailed, we need a better understanding of the mitzvot.**

One of the most commonly voiced criticisms of Judaism is that it pays too much attention to details; that it is obsessed with hairsplitting and legalities. An initial look at Jewish law appears to justify this claim. The Torah comprises 613 commandments, divided into 365 prohibitions and 248 obligations, with hundreds of rabbinical decrees and customs that govern every aspect of life. There are volumes upon volumes of detailed guidelines specifying how one should dress, eat, work and even talk. Of course, no individual Jew is obligated to fulfill all the commandments — unless that Jew is both male and female; single, married and divorced; Kohen, Levi and Israelite. All simultaneously.

This intricate structure can definitely give one the impression that the Torah is overly legalistic and that it places excessive demands on human beings without leaving them enough freedom to relax and enjoy life. Judaism’s seeming obsession with laws and technicalities also makes one wonder about the point of it all. How does not eating lobster make one a better person? Why would lighting Shabbat candles bring one closer to God?

In order to comprehend why Jews have tenaciously adhered to this way of life for close to 3,500 years, we must gain a better understanding of the purpose of the commandments, called in Hebrew mitzvot (singular, mitzvah).

We will explore the purpose of the mitzvot in Section II.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION I.

- ⌘ Mitzvah means commandment. Tradition tells us that there are 613 root commandments, but in reality they branch out into many more commandments, covering every area of human endeavor.
- ⌘ The concept of being commanded is fundamental to Judaism as an ethical system. Only acting in response to God’s commandments ensures a truly selfless and virtuous act.
- ⌘ The mitzvot in the Torah are not arbitrary. They are the laws of the spiritual universe set into motion by God as He did with the laws of the physical world. That means that the mitzvot represent a deeper reality.

SECTION II. WHY DID GOD GIVE THE MITZVOT?

Now that we know what a mitzvah is and the benefit of a system of mitzvot, we will delve into the rationale behind the mitzvot as a whole. We will see that God did not make these mitzvot for His own benefit but rather for ours, to give us an opportunity to come close to Him, to resemble His attributes, and thereby to perfect ourselves.

PART A. THE MEANS TO BUILD A RELATIONSHIP

The mitzvot are a comprehensive framework that enables us to build a genuine relationship with God.

1. Rabbi Jeremy Kagan, *The Choice to Be*, Feldheim Publishers, pp. 2-4 – Judaism is a holistic way of life to build a relationship with God.

The way people connect is through relationships; that is as true of our connection to our Source, the Creator, as to any other connection we make. A full relationship has as many facets as we have parts to our personality. We experience our self in our conscience awareness – obviously that must be involved in any significant relationship we have. If awareness constituted the whole person, perhaps we would be satisfied with our relationships restricted to sharing thoughts and emotions. But our awareness arises from a complex melding together of spiritual and physical roots and is profoundly impacted by the subconscious of both of them. Involving these deeper aspects is at least as important as our conscious self since whether we are aware of it or not they largely govern our personality.

Pen pals are nice, but they don't last because the connection never goes beyond ideas. A husband can tell his wife he loves her but if he doesn't do something that conveys that love, the relationship will inevitably flounder. This is not only because there is something missing in what he receives. It is also because without actual deeds the self we commit to the relationship is critically deficient. Full relationships need actions to incorporate our physical energies. And those actions must also give expression to our spiritual root so that it too is joined to the other. But how can we know what actions will accomplish this when our spiritual self lies beyond our conscience reach?

We turn to the Torah for guidance. In fact the word "Torah" comes from the root *horaah* which means to teach in a practical way – to guide. Although the Torah conveys an understanding of reality that is deep beyond measure, it is essentially a book of commands to action – mitzvot. Obviously those mitzvot assume and manifest all the spiritual depth that is in the Torah. When we are required for example to give charity, it is not as a utilitarian band-aid to inequity – God can take care of His poor. Rather, it is because giving charity profoundly impacts the nature of our humanity.

In general when fulfilling a command out of obedience we are nullified to its commander; our action becomes a vehicle of his will, endowing it with his intention. In the case of the Torah's mitzvot, obedience invests our action with the Creator's purpose, a spiritual content which transcends humans' understanding. The mitzvot of the Torah thus bind our spiritual root to our awareness and physical being, fostering a relationship of our whole self with our Source, the Creator.

But just as an assembly of disjointed acts cannot form the basis for a relationship between two people, so, too, a bunch of random commandments cannot form the basis for a relationship between man and God. Torah is not a mere jumble of mitzvot. Rather, the mitzvot are a system through which a relationship with the Creator develops and takes on physical expression. Understanding the relationship we are striving to form with the Creator and our overall responsibilities in achieving it requires that we grasp all the mitzvot together as a structured whole – i.e., what they are about as a system.

2. Rabbi Osher Chaim Levene, *Set in Stone*, p.31, Targum – Each mitzvah we fulfill intrinsically connects us with God.

Judaism is not as much a religion as it is a relationship. It is only through mitzvah observance that man can build a deep, enduring, and meaningful relationship with God ...

That a mitzvah is the very process of forging the bond [with God] is contained within the very word מצוה, “commandment,” closely related to the word צוותא, meaning a connection or a binding.

PART B. FOR OUR OWN GOOD

God is inherently perfect, and it is therefore obvious that He did not give any of the commandments for His own needs. Rather, God gave the commandments for a purely altruistic motive, for the sole good of the recipients.

1. Devarim 6:24 – God gave us the Torah for our own good.

God commanded us to perform all these decrees, to fear God our Lord, for our own good for all time, to give us life as this very day.

ויצונו יקוק לעשות את כל החקים האלה ליראה את יקוק אלהינו לטוב לנו כל הימים לחיתנו כהיום הזה:

The commandments were therefore given as a means through which God would be able to fulfill His altruistic purpose in creation, and are all primarily for the benefit of those who observe them.

2. Talmud Bavli, Makkot 23b – Mitzvot themselves are our source of merit.

Rabbi Chanania ben Akashia said, “God wanted the Jewish people to have merit, therefore He gave them many mitzvot, as is said, ‘God desired for the sake of His righteousness to magnify Torah and make it glorious.’”

רבי חנניא בן עקשיא אומר, רצה הקדוש ברוך הוא לזכות את ישראל, לפיכך הרבה להם תורה ומצוות, שנאמר ה' חפץ למען צדקו יגדיל תורה ויאדיר.

PART C. TO EMULATE GOD

As we have seen, performing the mitzvot brings us closer to God. But what exactly does that mean? How do we get closer; what is the measuring rod for this closeness?

The Talmud itself asks this question. Its answer – to become like Him!

1. Devarim 13:5 – Cleave to God by following Him.

Follow God your Lord, remain in awe of Him, keep His commandments, obey Him and serve Him, and you will then be able to serve Him and cleave to Him.

אחרי יקוק אלהיכם תלכו ואתו תיראו ואת מצותיו תשמרו ובקלו תשמעו ואתו תעבדו ובו תדבקון:

2. Talmud Bavli, Sotah 14a – Closeness to God is measured by likeness to His attributes.

Rabbi Chama, son of Rabbi Chanina, said: What is meant by the verse, “After the Lord, your God, shall you follow” (Devarim 13:5)? Can a person really follow behind the Divine Presence, for the verse says that “the Lord, your God, is a

ואמר רבי חמא ברבי חנינא, מאי דכתיב: (דברים יג:ה) אחרי ה' אלהיכם תלכו? וכי אפשר לו לאדם להלך אחרי שכינה? והלא כבר נאמר: (דברים ד:כד) כי ה' אלהיך אש אוכלת הוא! אלא להלך אחר מדותיו של הקב"ה:

consuming fire” (Devarim 4:24)? Rather, what it means is to follow in the attributes of God.

3. **Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, Derech Hashem, 1:2:1-3 – We attach ourselves to God by resembling His perfection.**

The purpose of all that was created was therefore to bring into existence a creature who could derive pleasure from God’s own good, in a way that would be possible for it.

God’s wisdom, however, decreed that for such good to be perfect, the one enjoying it must be its master. He must be the one who has earned it for himself, and not one given it accidentally [or by chance].

One sees that this arrangement is partially reminiscent of the perfection of God Himself, at least to the degree that this is possible, for God’s [intrinsic] perfection is not a matter of chance or accident either ...

By means of acquiring perfection [i.e., by choosing the true good that God has placed in the Creation], this unique creature [man] becomes fit to “cleave” to its Creator, simply because through acquiring perfection, it has, in a certain respect, begun to “resemble” its Creator. Moreover, by incorporating elements of perfection into itself, it “cleaves” to the Creator’s Perfection, and is drawn to Him continually – until, ultimately, its earning of perfection and its bonding in closeness to Him are one matter.

א:ב:א. ונמצא היות כונתו ית"ש בבריאה שברא, לברוא מי שיהיה נהנה בטובו ית' באותו הדרך שאפשר שיהנה בו:

א:ב:ב. ואולם גזרה חכמתו, של להיות הטוב שלם, ראוי שיהיה הנהנה בו בעל הטוב ההוא. פירוש - מי שיקנה הטוב בעצמו, ולא מי שיתלוה לו הטוב בדרך מקרה.

ותראה שזה נקרא קצת התדמות, בשיעור שאפשר, אל שלימותו ית'. כי הנה הוא ית"ש שלם בעצמו, ולא במקרה ...

א:ב:ג. ואמנם מלבד היות הבריה הזאת שקנתה השלימות ראוייה לידבק בבוראה ית' מצד התדמותה לו, הנה על ידי קנותה השלימות לה, נמצאת מתדבקת והולכת בו, עד שסוף קנותה השלימות והמצאה מתדבקת בו, יהיה הכל ענין אחד.

While following in God’s ways is one of the 613 mitzvot in its own right, it is also an umbrella term that covers all the mitzvot.

4. **Rabbeinu Bachya, Bamidbar (Numbers) 15:38, s.v. *ve'asu* – Walking in God’s ways contains all the other mitzvot.**

This mitzvah is equivalent to all the mitzvot in the Torah, for it is the cornerstone that contains all of the 613 precious “stones” of the Torah.

מצוה זו שקולה ככל המצות שבתורה לפי שהיא האבן הראשה הכוללת תרי"ג אבנים יקרות.

5. **Rabbi Mordechai Becher, Gateway to Judaism, pg. 394 – The mitzvot are the ultimate guide to becoming like God.**

We believe that our primary obligation as beings created “in the image of God” (Genesis 1:27) is to imitate God and to “walk in His ways” (Deut. 28:9). What does this mean?

The Sages defined the goal this way:

Just as He is merciful and kind, so you should be merciful and kind. Just as He clothed the naked, so should you; as He visited the sick, so should you; as He comforted the mourners, so should you; as He buried the dead, so should you (Talmud - Sotah 14a; Jerusalem Talmud - Peah 3:1).

Each of the above statements refers to an instance in the Bible in which God demonstrated these qualities. The Sages are indicating that just as a parent teaches a child by doing rather than by preaching, God intentionally incorporated these instances into the Bible to teach us the behavior He expects of us.

Although Maimonides lists the obligation of “walking in God’s ways” as just one of the 613 commandments, it is also understood in the general sense as an underlying rationale for every one of the commandments. In order to have a complete relationship with God it is necessary that we be as “Godlike” as possible. We must develop a similar intellectual framework, inculcating in ourselves the attributes of God, and act as He acts.

Imitating the Creator is not an easy task and it is not always obvious what “being good” really entails in a given situation. You may want to extend help to a needy person, but what is the best form for this kindness to take? Should you give him money, a loan, or a job? Should you give a large sum to one person, or small sums to many? How much of your own income is it appropriate to give? To address these complexities, God provided us with the ultimate guide to becoming like Him — the 613 commandments with all their attendant details.

PART D. PERFECTING MANKIND

Each mitzvah we fulfill refines our character, actualizes our potential, and completes the creation of the world.

1. **Rambam, end of Hilchot Temurah (The Laws of Temurah) – The mitzvot are God’s instructions and advice for living and improving our character.**

And all these matters [the mitzvot] are to [help us to] overcome our negative inclinations and to correct our traits; and most laws of the Torah are instruction from afar from the Great Adviser [to help us] to correct our character traits and straighten our ways.

וכל אלו הדברים כדי לכוף את יצרו ולתקן דעותיו ורוב דיני התורה אינן אלא עצות מרחוק מגדול העצה לתקן הדעות וליישר כל המעשים

2. **Midrash Rabbah, Bereishit 44:1 – The mitzvot were given to refine humanity.**

What does it matter to God if an animal is slaughtered by cutting its neck through the spine or the throat?

[The answer is:] The commandments were given only in order to refine humanity.

וכי מה איכפת ליה להקב"ה למי ששוחט מן הצואר או מי ששוחט מן העורף,

הוי לא נתנו המצוות אלא לצרף בהם את הבריות

3. Midrash Tanchuma, Parshat Shemini 7 – The mitzvot do not affect God, but they refine us.

What does God care whether Jews eat meat that has not been ritually slaughtered or whether they tear it apart and eat it, whether they slaughter from the neck or from the thigh? Know that God only commanded this method of slaughter in order to refine the Jewish people.

מה אכפת להקדוש ברוך הוא שיאכלו ישראל בלא שחיטה שיהא ישראל נוחר ואוכל ושוחט מן הצואר מן הירך תדע שלא נצטוו השחיטה הזו אלא כדי לצרף את ישראל.

4. Ramban, Devarim 22:6 – While the mitzvot don't do anything for God, they all have the positive effect of refining us.

[These Midrashim] mean that God has no personal benefit from the mitzvot. Rather the benefit is for the person himself, to avoid damage, heretical beliefs, or despicable character traits, or to remember the miracles and wonders of God in order to know God. That's what it means "to refine them," that they be like refined silver. For one who refines silver does not do so for naught but rather to remove from it any dross. So too with the mitzvot, their purpose is to remove any trace of heretical belief and to teach us truth, that we should always be aware of it.

שרצו לומר שאין התועלת במצוות להקב"ה בעצמו יתעלה, אבל התועלת באדם עצמו למנוע ממנו נזק או אמונה רעה או מדה מגונה, או לזכור הנסים ונפלאות הבורא יתברך ולדעת את השם. וזהו "לצרף בהן", שיהיו ככסף צרוף, כי הצורף הכסף אין מעשהו בלא טעם, אבל להוציא ממנו כל סיג, וכן המצוות להוציא מלבנו כל אמונה רעה ולהודיענו האמת ולזכרו תמיד:

The following Midrash uses the mitzvah of Brit Milah as a paradigm for this approach to the meaning of mitzvot. By performing circumcision on an eight-day-old child, completing the physical form, we perform the mitzvah of Milah and forge a covenant with God.

6. Midrash Tanchuma Tazria, Section 5 – It is up to mankind to perfect God's creation.

It happened that Turnus Rufus the Evil (a Roman general) asked Rabbi Akiva: "Whose actions are nicer, those of God or those of people?"

He answered, "Those of people are nicer."

He asked again, "But can a person make something as beautiful as the heaven and earth?"

Rabbi Akiva answered, "Do not bring an example from something that a person cannot do, discuss something a person can do."

Turnus Rufus said to him, "Why do you perform circumcision?"

Rabbi Akiva answered, "I knew that this was what you meant, which is why I responded that what people do is nicer than what God does."

מעשה ששאל טורנוסרופוס הרשע את ר' עקיבא איזו מעשים נאים של הקב"ה או של בשר ודם?

א"ל של ב"ז נאים

א"ל טורנוסרופוס הרי השמים והארץ יכול אדם לעשות כיוצא בהם?

א"ל ר"ע לא תאמר לי בדבר שהוא למעלה מן הבריות שאין שולטין עליו אלא אמור דברים שהם מצויין בבני אדם.

א"ל למה אתם מולין?

א"ל אני הייתי יודע שעל דבר זה אתה שואלני ולכך הקדמתי ואמרתי לך שמעשה בני אדם נאים משל הקב"ה.

Rabbi Akiva brought him stalks of wheat and cakes and said, “These [stalks] are the work of God and these [cakes] are the work of people.

“Are the cakes not nicer than the stalks?”

הביא לו ר"ע שבליים וגלוסקאות א"ל אלו מעשה הקב"ה ואלו מעשה ידי אדם.

א"ל אין אלו נאים יותר מן השבליים?

7. **Rabbi Mordechai Becher, pp. 395-396 – The Torah’s prohibitions smelt away negative traits while its positive mitzvot attach us to God’s attributes.**

Rabbi Akiva demonstrated to Turnus Rufus that just as the wheat is inedible until it goes through many steps of refinement and is turned into bread or cake, the human being also needs refinement and perfection physically, morally and spiritually. The purpose of the commandments is to refine the human being and bring him closer and closer to perfection.

Several ideas related to this process are expressed in a seemingly simple verse in Proverbs (30:5): “All the commandments of God are *tzerufah* (refined).”

The Midrash explains that the purpose of the commandments is the process called *tziruf* (Midrash Rabbah, Genesis 44:1). The Hebrew word *tzerufah* (from which *tziruf* derives grammatically) bears two opposing explanations. Depending on the context, the word can mean smelted, as in the method employed to separate the ore from metal through the application of heat. Alternatively, it can mean joining, as in soldering, where heat is used to join metals.

In the present verse, these two explanations are to be taken metaphorically: i.e., God’s commandments represent the source of heat, and the person represents the metal. Just as heat burns away waste matter, God gave us 365 prohibitions (“thou shalt not’s”) to help eliminate the negative character traits contained within a person. And just as heat has the power to merge metals together, God gave us 248 obligations (“thou shalt’s”) to consolidate positive traits and to connect human beings to a higher level of consciousness...

This is where the mitzvot of the Torah come in — they are God-given tools for refinement. Prohibitions enable people to identify their negative instincts and distance themselves from them, while obligations help channel their positive instincts toward becoming better people.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION II.

- ≈ The mitzvot were given for our benefit, not for God’s. They are the means through which we cleave to God.
- ≈ In performing the mitzvot we come closer to God by resembling His attributes.
- ≈ The overall objective of the mitzvot is to perfect mankind.

SECTION III. THE ROLE OF REASON IN OBSERVING MITZVOT

The above discussion about why God gave us the mitzvot must be understood in the big picture. While it is true that mitzvot are supposed to perfect us, make us better and more holy people and help us connect to God, that does not mean that they are simply means to an end. As we saw above, the mitzvot are the laws of the spiritual world – they have intrinsic value whether or not we can perceive their desired result.

In order to highlight this point – the intrinsic value of the mitzvot versus the benefit they are supposed to accrue – we will now explore the role of reason, meaning, and understanding in the observance of mitzvot.

PART A. MEANING, NOT MOTIVATION

We cannot understand every mitzvah, but that should not stop us.

1. Rabbi Chaim Volozhin, Nefesh HaChaim 1:22 – The ultimate explanation for each mitzvah is beyond our comprehension.

A complete explanation of the mitzvot has not yet been revealed to any person in the world, not even to Moshe Rabbeinu (Moses)...

The Holy Torah emanates from Above, above all understanding. How could [this understanding] be given over to the grasp of human beings?

כי טעמי מצות עד תכליתם לא נתגלו עדיין לשום אדם בעולם אף למשרע"ה...

כי התורה"ק אצולה מלמעלה ראש מעל כל ההשגות. ואיך אפשר שיהא הדבר מסור להשגת האדם ...

Even if we can't get to the bottom of all the mitzvot, nevertheless we should try.

2. Rambam, Hilchot Temurah 4:13 – We strive to understand the reasons for each mitzvah.

Even though all the laws of the Torah are [Divine] decrees ... it is still fitting that a person contemplate them, and give reasons for them as much as he can; and the early Sages said that King Solomon understood most of the reasons of all the laws of the Torah.

אע"פ שכל חוקי התורה גזירות הם... ראוי להתבונן בהן וכל מה שאתה יכול ליתן לו טעם תן לו טעם הרי אמרו חכמים הראשונים שהמלך שלמה הבין רוב הטעמים של כל חוקי התורה...

While understanding how a mitzvah is supposed to develop us spiritually certainly adds more meaning to the act, such meaning should not be our main motivation in performing mitzvot.

3. Rabbi Binyomin Forst, The Laws of Kashrut, Introduction – The meaning cannot replace the performance.

Furthermore, one should never be tempted to detach the moral lesson of the Jewish law from its performance. One may feel that once he has penetrated the meaning of the mitzvah and drawn from it inspiration and wisdom, he may neglect the actual performance of the mitzvah ritual. This is incorrect. As Maimonides teaches: If one experiences a spiritual awakening he must concretize it if it is to have any permanence. It is insufficient to be a good Jew in heart or mind. Torah is a Torah of life, and all its exalted ideas must find active expression and actualization in daily life. The obligation to keep the

Jewish laws is therefore independent of any understanding of them.

One who performs a mitzvah without any thought of its meaning has nevertheless fulfilled his obligation, albeit in a diminished form, while one who contemplates and internalizes, but ignores the mitzvah act, has in no way discharged his responsibility and remains liable for omission and its accompanying penalty. The principle of *na'aseh v'nishma*, fulfilling and understanding the Jewish laws, does not only mean that we accept the Torah without preconditions, but also that the hearing and understanding of the mitzvah follows and is secondary to its actual fulfillment. Internalizing the mitzvah is only meaningful when coupled with the performance of the mitzvah.

This is in tandem with the axiom (Avot 3:12), “Anyone whose wisdom exceeds his good deeds – his wisdom will not endure.” Just as the fire of the candle cannot exist without a wick on which to kindle, so the most profound and exalted concepts contained in the Divine wisdom of Jewish laws must find physical expression in order to be sustained.

PART B. JUST A TASTE

What we call the “reason” for the mitzvah is really just something to help us perform it better.

1. **Rabbis Mordechai Becher and Moshe Newman, *After the Return*, Appendix – Understanding the reason behind a mitzvah makes performing it more enjoyable.**

How is it possible for a human being to attribute reasons and motives to God's will?

A human being cannot possibly hope to comprehend the infinite wisdom of God, and to understand His motives in commanding us to do a particular mitzvah or to refrain from a transgression. It is possible, however, for the human to understand what effect the mitzvah will have on himself and on the world...

Both Maimonides (Guide 3:3 1) and Nachmanides seem to understand the reasons for the mitzvot not as the motives behind the commandments but as the side-benefits of the mitzvot, the impact that the mitzvot have on the individual, on society or on the universe as a whole. They disagree as to what those benefits are and as to how the mitzvot impart those benefits: Maimonides stresses the sociological and psychological whereas the Ramban stresses the metaphysical. All agree, however, that the mitzvot have “reasons,” and that God does not benefit from our fulfillment of the mitzvot; rather, it is we who are refined by the mitzvot.

Rabbi Moshe Shapiro once asked Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler to explain the term “*ta'amei ha-mitzvot*” (the Hebrew term used by the Talmud, meaning the “reasons” for the commandments). Rabbi Dessler replied, “The ta'am of a mitzvah is the geshmakeit [taste] of a mitzvah.” Rabbi Dessler translated the word ta'am literally as “taste,” and explained that although we eat food in order to survive, we nevertheless enjoy its variety of tastes and textures as a pleasant side-effect of eating. Similarly, God made the mitzvot with varied “tastes”; we fulfill the mitzvot because they are the will of God and they are His instructions for living; but “investment” in the mitzvot also pays other “dividends,” which are explained in the *ta'amei ha-mitzvot*.

Since reasons are only a taste of the real benefit of the mitzvot, obviously they cannot determine our performance of the mitzvot.

2. **Rabbi Binyomin Forst, *The Laws of Kashrut, Introduction* – We do not need to understand the mitzvot, but it helps.**

Mitzvot need no explanation. Our Sages teach: “One who [in referring to the mitzvah of chasing away the mother bird before taking her eggs or chicks] says: ‘even young birds merit your kindness,’ is silenced” (Mishnah – Berachot 5:3).

The purpose of understanding a mitzvah is not to comprehend what is accomplished with the mitzvah, but rather to perceive the lessons to be drawn from the mitzvah. God does not need us to care for His creatures; He has countless means at His disposal. The purpose of the mitzvah of chasing away the mother bird before taking her eggs or chicks is that we internalize feelings of compassion (see Maimonides on Deuteronomy 22:6).

Thus, when we investigate the reason behind any of the Jewish laws, it is not to explain the mitzvah, but to discover what we may draw from it. The understanding of the rationale of the mitzvah elevates its performance from a mere physical act, to an act that makes a spiritually significant impact on our lives.

Since any theory or explanation advanced as a rationale for a mitzvah is merely conjecture, one can never draw Jewish legal conclusions from any interpretation of a mitzvah, even one presented by earlier authorities. As valid as any interpretation may be, it certainly does not reflect the complete spectrum of the meaning of the Jewish law. Just as the Torah itself is infinite, so too is each of its laws. Yet, simultaneously, since we are enjoined to ponder the meaning of mitzvot, any hypothesis about their rationale, congruent with the known principles of Torah guidelines, is valid and enhances the effect of the mitzvah upon man.

PART C. THE REASON FOR CHUKIM (NON-RATIONAL LAWS)

Chukim are Divine statutes that have no apparent rationale to the human mind. That religion should contain such laws is understandable. As a wise person once said, “If I understood God then I wouldn’t believe in Him.” Were the Torah to conform perfectly to human logic there would be no bigger proof of its human origin! But since the Torah is not a product of the human mind, it “makes sense” in the big picture that there will be laws in the Torah that do not make sense to us.

Even though we do not know the ultimate logic behind mitzvot like not eating milk and meat together or wearing wool and linen together, we can still appreciate how having such laws enhances our relation with God.

1. **Rabbis Mordechai Becher and Moshe Newman, *After the Return*, pp. 181-182 – The chukim give us an opportunity to keep mitzvot even though we do not understand them.**

According to Maimonides, it is desirable for a person to incorporate certain mitzvot into his character so that his performance of mitzvot or his refraining from transgression are not the result of internal struggle, but are the natural consequences of his personality. He continues that this is only true of mitzvot whose rationales are apparent, but with regard to chukim, obedience to God should be the only motivation in their fulfillment.

Knowledge of the rationales of the mitzvot is essential for incorporating the mitzvot into one’s personality and for the shaping of a “mitzvah instinct.” One who fulfills the mitzvot in a dry, mechanical way has less of a chance of being one who “rejoices in acting justly.”

There are certain mitzvot, and perhaps aspects of every mitzvah, that are designed to instill in us

loyalty and obedience to God, and to help us recognize that the authority of the Torah does not depend upon our understanding of it. The reasons for those mitzvot still remain concealed and beyond the grasp of the human mind, even after study; and perhaps that is precisely the ta'am that one should "taste" in the chukim.

Any mitzvah, whether we understand it or not, is an opportunity to connect with God.

2. **Ramban (Nachmanides), Shemot 13:16 – All mitzvot reinforce Jewish belief in God, Divine Providence, and our appreciation for being created.**

Our Sages taught that "One should be careful with a mitzvah that people treat lightly just as he is careful with a mitzvah that people treat seriously," as all mitzvot are precious and coveted. This is because every time a person fulfills any mitzvah, he acknowledges God. And the purpose of all the mitzvot is for us to believe in God and to thank Him for creating us.

אמרו (אבות פ"ב מ"א) הוי זהיר במצוה קלה כבחמורה
שכולן חמורות וחביבות מאד, שבכל שעה אדם מודה
בהן לאלהיו, וכוונת כל המצות שנאמין באלהינו ונודה
אליו שהוא בראנו.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION III.

- ⌘ While we cannot understand all the mitzvot, it is still incumbent upon us to try to understand as much as we can. The better we understand, the more connection we will feel.
- ⌘ That said, we should not allow our intellectual or emotional connection to determine our level of commitment to keeping mitzvot. This is because every mitzvah has intrinsic value, whether we understand and appreciate it or not.
- ⌘ Judaism contains a whole category of laws which expressly defy human logic. These mitzvot challenge us to serve God simply for the sake of serving Him.

SECTION IV. WHY ARE MITZVOT SO DETAILED?

Now that we have explored what the mitzvot are, what they're supposed to do, and how we are supposed to relate to them, we are finally in a position to answer the question that we started with: why so much detail?

Here we will offer two basic approaches, one founded in the nature of the mitzvot and the other in what they are supposed to accomplish.

PART A. BECAUSE REALITY IS DETAILED

The most basic answer as to why the mitzvot are so detailed is that reality itself is so detailed. After all, since the mitzvot are the spiritual laws of nature, it just makes sense that they would be as detailed as their physical counterparts. The following source makes this point by analogy:

1. **Rabbi Aaron Moss, “Why is Jewish Law so Petty Minded?” from www.Chabad.org – Just as details are crucial in the physical world, so too in the spiritual world.**

Question:

Why does the Jewish religion seem to obsess over insignificant details? How much matzah do we have to eat, which spoon did I use for milk and which for meat, what is the right way to tie my shoelaces? It seems to me that this misses the bigger picture by focusing on minutiae. Is this nitpicking what Jews call spirituality?

(I actually already sent you this question over a week ago and didn't receive a reply. Could it be that you have finally been asked a question that you can't answer?!)

Answer:

I never claimed to have all the answers. There are many questions that are beyond me. But it happens to be that I did answer your question, and you did get the answer. I sent a reply immediately. The fact that you didn't receive it is itself the answer to your question. You see, I sent you a reply, but I wrote your email address leaving out the “dot” before the “com.” I figured that you should still receive the email, because after all, it is only one little dot missing. I mean come on, it's not as if I wrote the wrong name or something drastic like that! Would anyone be so nitpicky as to differentiate between “yahoom” and “yahoo.com?” Isn't it a bit ridiculous that you didn't get my email just because of a little dot? No, it's not ridiculous. Because the dot is not just a dot. It represents something. That dot has meaning far beyond the pixels on the screen that form it. To me it may seem insignificant, but that is simply due to my ignorance of the ways of the internet. All I know is that with the dot, the message gets to the right destination; without it, the message is lost to oblivion. Jewish practices have infinite depth. Each nuance and detail contains a world of symbolism. And every dot counts. When they are performed with precision, a spiritual vibration is emailed throughout the universe, all the way to God's inbox.

If you want to understand the symbolism of the dot, study I.T. If you want to understand the symbolism of Judaism, study it.

PART B. MORALITY BY OSMOSIS

As discussed above, the mitzvot are supposed to perfect us. To this end it was necessary that they be as detailed as possible, involving us in the process of perfection to the n^{th} degree.

1. **Rabbi Aryeh Carmell, Masterplan, pp. 270-271 – The detail of Jewish law avoids too much moralizing, imparting morality by osmosis instead.**

The purpose of mitzvot is the sanctification of life and the release of the full moral and spiritual potential of mankind. But one cannot talk about moral imperatives all the time. To dwell too much on this topic is counterproductive. The mind rebels against constant moral admonition. The Torah adopts the oblique method. Rather than dwelling constantly on morality, Torah Jews discuss the mitzvot in all their variety and subtlety. By doing so they immerse themselves in the words of God, and this itself has a purifying effect. In addition, moral and spiritual ends are implicit in all the mitzvot, though these are often not obvious on the surface. As a result one can delve into the logical subtleties of the *halachah* without being consciously aware of the moral demands that the mitzvot imply. But the spirit of the mitzvah is absorbed subconsciously, by osmosis, so to speak.

The most classic Jewish source to make this argument was the medieval work, the Sefer HaChinuch.

2. Rabbi Aharon of Barcelona, Sefer HaChinuch, Mitzvah 16 – Outward actions have the power to shape one's inner character.

A person is influenced by his actions, and his heart and thoughts follow the acts he does whether they are good or bad. Even one who is a completely wicked person who constantly thinks of doing bad deeds, if he is inspired for the better and puts time into fulfilling Torah and mitzvot, even if it is not for the sake of Heaven, will turn to the good and overcome his Evil Inclination through the power of these actions, since a person's heart follows his actions. Similarly, even if one is a completely righteous person who desires Torah and mitzvot but always involves himself in bad deeds ... after a certain amount of time he will become a wicked person, for we know, and it is true, that every man is affected by his actions.

כי האדם נפעל כפי פעולותיו, ולבו וכל מחשבותיו תמיד אחר מעשיו שהוא עושה בהם, אם טוב ואם רע, ואפילו רשע גמור בלבבו וכל יצר מחשבות לבו רק רע כל היום, אם יערה רוחו וישים השתדלותו ועסקו בהתמדה בתורה ובמצוות, ואפילו שלא לשם שמים, מיד ינטה אל הטוב. ובכח מעשיו ימית היצר הרע, כי אחרי הפעולות נמשכים הלבבות. ואפילו אם יהיה אדם צדיק גמור ולבבו ישר ותמים, חפץ בתורה ובמצוות, אם אולי יעסוק תמיד בדברים של דופי... ישוב לזמן מן הזמנים מצדקת לבו להיות רשע גמור, כי ידוע הדבר ואמת שכל אדם נפעל כפי פעולותיו.

3. Rabbi Akiva Tatz, Letters to a Buddhist Jew – The mitzvot sanctify us by commanding every part of the body to act.

Judaism requires engaging the body, requires marriage, requires the experience of bodily pleasure, and regards permanent celibacy as a sin. Our path is not to separate body and soul but to engage the body and elevate it to the level of soul. For us, the body is not the point of departure for the spiritual voyage; it is the vehicle.

The body must not be left behind while mind and spirit transcend. It must be made to serve mind and spirit. And that is the meaning of the mitzvot, the commandments. The mitzvot are physical actions (there are very few mitzvot that are performed in consciousness alone) that express spirit. Every part of the body is commanded to act; each limb and organ performs an action that expresses Torah. Mitzvot are to Torah what body is to soul.

Abraham did not bring the idea of pure spirit to the world; he brought to the world the radical idea that the body, that fallen, subversive, treacherous and lecherous body can and must be elevated to purity. Its functions and actions are not to be suppressed; they are to be expressed as holy. The world perceives the shame and the problem of male-female intimacy, its potential to erode spiritual refinement; we perceive its holiness. The world perceives the danger of alcohol, its tendency to replace mind with earthly physicality; we use it for elevation. The world understands that the body must be renounced, that is the only way to free the soul; we give the body full expression in actions that are harnessed to serve spirit. That is how we discipline the body; we do not command it to be silent, we command it to serve. That is the basis of the mitzvot...

KEY THEMES OF SECTION IV.

- ⌘ Since mitzvot are the laws of the spiritual world, they are as precise as the laws of the physical world. They are detailed because reality itself is detailed.
- ⌘ The mitzvot achieve their purpose of perfecting mankind only because they are so detailed. The mitzvot involve us entirely in the service of God as our bodies are occupied in their performance and our minds absorb morality by osmosis.

CLASS SUMMARY:

WHAT IS THE NATURE OF THE MITZVOT?

There are many mitzvot in the Torah, covering every facet of daily life. While we are used to the concept of there being 613 mitzvot, in reality those are just the roots of the mitzvot, which then branch out in countless ways.

The basic notion of a mitzvah is that it is a command from God. The idea of acting in response to a command is at the heart of Judaism's vision of an ethical system.

The mitzvot are not just a random system of commandments; they represent the God-made laws that cover the spiritual realm of existence.

WHY DID GOD GIVE US MITZVOT?

First of all, God does not command us to keep the mitzvot out of some need of His own. God is perfect and lacks nothing. Therefore, our keeping of the mitzvot is only for our own benefit, not His.

The mitzvot establish a relationship between us and God. They bring us "closer" to Him by making us more like Him, resembling His positive character traits.

The main purpose of the mitzvot, then, is to refine us, to perfect the human character.

WHAT ROLE DOES REASON PLAY IN KEEPING MITZVOT?

Not all mitzvot have an obviously discernable rationale. It is not always so easy to see how one mitzvah or another serves to refine our character.

It is considered worthwhile to instigate the reasons behind the mitzvot so as to enhance one's own performance of those mitzvot. But this will not always be possible. Some mitzvot simply defy our logic.

Our own understanding or appreciation should not determine our level of commitment to keeping the commandments. In essence every mitzvah is an opportunity to serve God, whether we understand the practical benefits of doing so or not.

WHY ARE THE MITZVOT SO DETAILED?

The mitzvot are detailed for two main reasons:

First of all, since they are the laws of the spiritual world, it stands to reason that they be just as precise and detailed as God's other creation, the physical world.

Secondly, it is essential to the task of the mitzvot to perfect mankind that they involve us to the greatest possible degree. That way we will be drawn after the spiritual, develop a moral sense, and be guided upon the correct path in life.

RECOMMENDED ADDITIONAL READING

Rabbi Jeremy Kagan, The Choice to Be, Feldheim Publishers.