

*You shall keep My laws and My rules, by the pursuit of which man shall live; I am the Lord.* --- Lev. 18:5

(More literally, “*which if a man do, he shall live by them*”.)

*Man shall live* in the world to come. For it cannot refer to this world, in which after all everyone must die. --- Rashi, based on **Torat Kohanim** 9:10

*If a man do, he shall live by them:* He will see that it is not that the duty of performing the mitzvot is merely associated with his physical being, and that he will be freed from this burden when he dies, which is the end of every person. Rather, he will perform the mitzvot with enthusiasm...*and man became a living soul*, enthused and alert. --- Rabbi Isaiah Horowitz, **Shnei Luchot ha-Brit** (1625)

The 248 limbs in the human body correspond to the 248 positive **mitzvot** in the Torah, and each **mitzvah** gives physical and spiritual life to a particular organ. If a person observed all of the **mitzvot** during his lifetime, then when he will be resurrected, all of his limbs will be intact. But if he failed to observe certain **mitzvot** corresponding to minor organs, then when he awakens, he will be lacking those organs. For example, if he fails to put on **tefillin** each weekday, he might be lacking the arm where the **tefillin** should have been. And if the neglected mitzvah corresponds to a major organ--for instance, **emunah**, faith in God, corresponds to the mind--then he is not worthy of being resurrected at all. --- **Chofetz Chaim** (Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan, 1838-1933, Belarus)

The verse tells us we are to live by the laws of the Torah, and not die by them. Life takes precedence over just about every command. --- Talmud, **Yoma** 85b

With three exceptions, all Jewish laws are suspended when human life is at stake. For example, while Jewish law traditionally forbids driving on the Sabbath, a Jew who would refuse to drive a very sick person to the hospital on the Sabbath would be violating Jewish law...

Concerning the three exceptions, Jewish law teaches that death is preferable to violating the law. The most obvious case involves murder: if one can remain alive only by murdering an innocent person, it is better to die. Likewise, one must not save one's life by performing acts of idolatry. For this reason, many medieval Jewish martyrs refused to be baptized and instead accepted execution. While contemporary Judaism has come to regard Christianity as non-idolatrous, the martyrs felt that forsaking Judaism to save their lives would be a betrayal of God, and tantamount to idolatry. Finally, in cases of **gilui arayot** (certain forbidden sexual relations), death is preferred to violation of a law. Thus, Talmudic law forbids men and women from engaging in incestuous or adulterous relations even if doing so would somehow help keep them alive.

The laws regarding **pikuach nefesh** (preservation of life) reflect the very high value Judaism assigns to human life. But the exceptions, relating to murder, idolatry and perverse sexuality, also reveal that it does not always view life as the highest value. --- Rabbi Joseph Telushkin

When one needs to violate Shabbat in order to save a life, one should not ask a Gentile adult or a Jewish child or slaves or women to do so, but it should be done by leaders of the community and Torah scholars...if observing a Torah law leads one to allow a person to die, this would imply that God's laws bring vengeance or cruelty into the world. --- Maimonides, **Mishneh Torah**, laws of Shabbat 2:3

To ask someone not obligated to take the fall would imply we are looking for a technicality to minimize the violation of Shabbat. Such an approach truly belittles the weightiness of Shabbat observance. Actually, Shabbat laws remain sacrosanct, but the principle that the Torah laws are given "to live by and not die by," suspends them for the sake of saving a life. Important religious role models should step up and do the lifesaving tasks on Shabbat to make clear the supremacy of life in Torah. --- Rabbi Yitz Greenberg, contemporary

Insofar as you put Torah and commandments first, Torah gives you life in this world as well. --- **Sefat Emet** (Rabbi Yehudah Leib Alter of Ger, 19<sup>th</sup> c.)

This week's **parsha**, **Acharei Mot**, is almost always read in the same week as the commemorations of **Yom ha-Zikaron** and **Yom ha-Atz'maut**, Israeli Memorial Day and Independence Day. The **parsha** reflects the dramatic opposites witnessed in the calendar. We know well that it opens "*Acharei Mot*," *after the death of the two sons of Aaron*. And the deaths of Aaron's sons, Nadav and Avihu, remain inexplicable to this very day. But we also read of life: *You shall keep My laws and My rules, by the pursuit of which man shall live*. This verse has become a cornerstone of Judaism, from which we learn that the saving of a life takes precedence over the entire Torah.

Thus the **parsha** has become an allusion to what we experience in the calendar, the fate of this nation of Israel: every new accomplishment, every joy experienced seems to be inextricably connected to the fall of its children. Death and tears have too often been the painful refrain of Jewish history. But the opposite side of the pain is life, choosing and embracing life with fervor, zest and appreciation. The calendar reminds us that we must pause to reflect on these two aspects of the Jewish journey, and Torah powerfully echoes such a message in this week's **parsha**. --- Rabbi Shmuel Avidor Ha-Kohen, 20<sup>th</sup> c., **Likrat Shabbat**

*If a man do, he shall live by them*: Our lives should be full of passion. We must make an effort so that the **mitzvot** we fulfill are full of life, and should be performed with excitement that shines the fire of holiness on those around us...and not, heaven forbid, that we should perform them as "dead" **mitzvot**, performed by rote. --- The Kotzker Rebbe, **Parpara'ot La-Torah**, 3:121

The root letters of "them" are **aleph-tav-mem**, which are an anagram for the word **emet**, truth. One who walks in the path of truth will indeed live by them, for truth is a characteristic associated with long life. --- **Degel Machaneh Ephraim** (the Chasidic master Rabbi Moshe Chayim Ephraim of Suklikov, 18<sup>th</sup> c.)

*He shall live by them* and not die for them. Nevertheless, the rabbis have also taught that the words of Torah are sustained only by one who is willing to give his life and his essence for them. Without this, the holy Torah cannot cleave to him. --- **Netivot Shalom** (the Chasidic master Rabbi Sholom Noach Berezovsky, the Slonimer Rebbe, 1911-2000)