

## Should the commandments be ranked?

### Omission in liturgy

- This week's portion, *Va'etchanan*, includes the repetition of the Ten Commandments.
- Something is missing in siddur: The Ten Commandments. Why?
  - Siddur is mostly praise, thanks, petition; not recitation of commandments?
  - Since we don't rank commandments, it's 613 or none?
    - But tefillin, tzitzit, mezuzah and other commandments are listed in liturgy
  - Prayer is not study?
- Real reason is in Talmud: The Ten Commandments *were* included in the Temple service, then were removed:
  - They recited the Ten Commandments, the Shema, the sections "*Vehayya im shamoa' tishm"u el mitzvotai* -- And it shall come to pass if you diligently follow [my commandments]", and "*Vayyomer Hashem el Moshe lemor: dabber el b'nei Yisrael* -- And the Lord said [to Moses saying: Speak to the Children of Israel]", "*Emet veyatsiv* [venachon vekayam] -- True and certain, [established and enduring]", the Avodah [Temple service proper, with sacrifices; now 'amidah] , and the *birkat kohanim* [priestly blessing].
  - Rav Yehudah said in the name of Shmuel: [The Sages] wished to recite [the Ten Commandments] in this manner even in the provinces, but soon abolished them because of the arguments of the *minim* [heretics], [that the Ten Commandments were the only valid part of the Torah.]
  - It was taught likewise in a Baraita: Rabbi Natan said, [Later,] They wished to [recite the Ten Commandments even] in the provinces, but soon abolished them because of the arguments of the *minim*.
  - [Later still,] Rabbah bar bar Chanah sought to reinstitute [the recitation of the Ten Commandments] in Sura [a great academy in Babylon], but Rav Chisda said to him: They already abolished their recitation because of the arguments of the *minim*.
  - [Even later,] Amemar sought to reinstitute [the recitation of the Ten Commandments] in Nehardea, but Rav Ashi said to him, They already abolished their recitation because of the arguments of the *minim*.  
[Berachot 12a; also in Mishna 5:1 in Tamid 32b]

-So the Ten Commandments were left out of the service for fear that the man-in-the-street walking in would hear them and conclude that they are all that Jews need to observe.

-The Talmud generally assumes that the man in the street has the IQ of a cauliflower.

-Does it make sense to eliminate a very important passage for fear that people will think it is the only valid part?

-Isn't it cutting off your nose to spite your face?

-Should we bring them back in liturgy?

## **Are the commandments ranked by importance?**

-No. Many people think the Ten Commandments are the most important. But the Torah does not say so. Judaism does not rank the commandments. Mishna:

Rabbi [Yehudah haNasi] said: Be as scrupulous in observing a minor commandment as a major commandment, because you do not know the value of each commandment. [Pirkei Avot 2:1]

So we do not know enough to rank mitzvot.

Note: There IS a value to each mitzvah; we just don't know what it is.

A specific mitzvah may be worth dozens of other mitzvot. Rambam:

Only the Master of Opinions knows how the comparison between sins and merits is made. [Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah 3:1-2]

-Why rank commandments?

-Lets people know exact reward and punishment, as in civil law.

-Counterpoint: Ranking would lead to bitter disputes on values within Jewry, and be a moot exercise since the bottom line is that all commandments must be observed.

-A lot of people pick and choose anyway. Ranking would allow them to choose wisely.

-Example: I would take kashrut more seriously if I knew its worth.

-Counterpoint 1: I did a mitzvah worth 1,000 points today (do not murder), so I don't need to bother with one worth only 5 points (do not eat shrimp).

-Counterpoint 2: I earned 20,000 points so far, so I can afford to lose 500 by stealing that new car I like.

-Implication: Stay away from saints. They may one day decide to cash in some of their points on YOU!

## Yet some commandments still stand out

-The Ten Commandments: They are felt to be of more immediate relevance than the rest, perhaps because they affect our daily lives so directly.

-The big three (“cardinal sins”): One may break any commandment to save a life, except the ones against idolatry, sexual immorality and murder -- three of the Ten Commandments (*pikuach nefesh*). [Sanhedrin 74a-b]

-The seven Noahide laws, applicable to all humankind:

Our Rabbis taught: The sons of Noah were commanded seven precepts: To establish courts of justice; and to refrain from blasphemy, idolatry; adultery; murder; robbery; and eating flesh cut from a living animal. [Sanhedrin 56a]

-Those that seem rational.

-Understanding possible reasons for commandments gives us “instinctive rankings”.

-We “feel” that *shaatnez* is less important than no stealing.

There are two types of *mitzvot*: Ordinances (*mishpatim*) and statutes (*chukkim*). We feel the first are rational (and therefore should rank higher), but don’t understand reasons for the second (“supra-rational”).

-Example: The Red Heifer (*Parah Adumah*). Torah calls it “the” *chok*:

*Zeh chukat hattorah* -- This is **the** statute of the Torah which the Lord has commanded, saying: Speak to the children of Israel, that they bring you a red heifer, faultless, with no blemish, and upon which never came a yoke. [Numbers 19:2]

-King Solomon implied it’s the only one he did not understand. Midrash:

Solomon said: "I delved and examined the entire Torah, and I found it logical." But when he came to the section of the Red Heifer, he said: "I thought I was wise, but this one is far from me." [Eccl. 7:23] [Numbers R. 19:3]

## Yet Sources implicitly rank commandments

-Type of punishment: When Torah mandates death penalty, it implies the crime is more serious than a crime that does not carry the death penalty, because Judaism values life above all else:

He who destroys a single life is as if he had destroyed an entire world. And he who saves a single life is as if he had saved an entire world. [Mishna in Sanhedrin 37a]

-The study of Torah is as valuable as many other commandments rolled together. Mishna:

These are the things that produce fruits for a person to enjoy in this world, while the principal remains for him in the World to Come: Honoring father and mother, acts of kindness [*gemilut chassadim*], and bringing peace between two people. But the study of Torah is equal to all of them (*V'talmud Torah k'neged kulam*). [Mishnah, Peah 1:1; see also Shabbat 127a]

-Credit appears to be awarded only for refraining from idolatry. Talmud: Idolatry is so grave a sin that its rejection fulfills the whole Torah. [Nedarim 25a]

-If you must choose between doing two mitzvot, do first the one that recurs more frequently. Talmud: *tadir veshe'eno tadir, tadir kodem*. [Berachot 27a and 51b, Pesachim 114a, Megillah 29b, Sukkah 54b, Horayot 13, and Zevachim Mishna 10:1]

-Implication: Because it recurs more often, it must be more important.

-Example: We put on the tallit before tefillin, because tzitzit recurs every day, but tefillin recurs every day except Shabbat. [Sefer Ta'amei Haminhagim Umkorei Hadinim]

-Rav Nachman of Breslov:

-A mitzvah that costs money is worth more than one that costs nothing.

-When faced with two mitzvot, do first the one that requires more control of your impulses.

-Pick a mitzvah and observe it very strictly. Observe the others normally.

-*Lashon hara'* (evil gossip) is equivalent to idolatry, sexual immorality and murder. Talmud:

-The School of Rabbi Ishmael taught: Whoever speaks slander increases his sins even up to [the degree of] the three [cardinal] sins: idolatry, sexual immorality and murder. Slander [is worse than murder because murder kills only one person, but slander] kills three persons: The slanderer, the one who listens to him, and the person being slandered. [Arachin 15b, Yerushalmi Peah 1:1]

-Tzedakah is of primary importance:

-Tzedakah is as important as all the other commandments put together. [Baba Batra 9a].

-Not giving tzedakah is tantamount to idolatry. [Ketubot 68a]

-Tzitzit: The mitzvah of tzitzit is equal to all the mitzvot, because the gematria of tzitzit is 613!

**The “value” of a mitzvah can vary**

-Mishna: Ben He He says: According to the effort is the reward [Pirkei Avot 5:21]

-Mitzvot that require more effort count for more.

-Talmud: One mitzvah involving pain is worth a hundred painless mitzvot. [Jerusalem Talmud]

-(Contemporary) Rav Dessler: Someone born into an observant family will receive relatively little reward for observance, because it took little effort. Keeping commandments is automatic for him. Conversely, someone born in a non-religious family will receive very little, if any, punishment for not spending many hours a day studying Torah. [Rabbi E.E. Dessler, Michtav M'Eliyahu, Hebrew edition, book 1, page 113]

-Talmud: Rabbi Hanina said: He who is commanded and does, stands higher than he who is not commanded and does. [Avodah Zara 3a]

-Because he who is commanded and does, may not want to do it, so he earns credit by overcoming his reluctance; whereas he who is not commanded and does, definitely wants to do it.

**Teku.**