

Mitzvah

In its primary meaning, the Hebrew word ***mitzvah*** (/ˈmɪtsvə/). meaning "commandment", מִצְוָה, [mitsˈva], Biblical: *mišwah*; plural מִצְוֹת *mitzvot* [mitsˈvot], Biblical: *mišwoth*; from צִוָּה *šiwwah* "command") refers to precepts and commandments commanded by God, with the additional connotation of one's religious duty.

It is used in rabbinical Judaism to refer to the 613 commandments given in the Torah at biblical Mount Sinai and the seven rabbinic commandments instituted later for a total of 620. The 613 commandments are divided into two categories: 365 negative commandments and 248 positive commandments. According to the Talmud, all moral laws are, or are derived from, divine commandments. The collection is part of the larger Jewish law or *halakha*.

The opinions of the Talmudic rabbis are divided between those who seek the purpose of the *mitzvot* and those who do not question them. The latter argue that if the reason for each *mitzvah* could be determined, people might try to achieve what they see as the purpose of the *mitzvah*, without actually performing the *mitzvah* itself (*lishmah*), which would become self-defeating. The former believe that if people were to understand the reason and the purpose for each *mitzvah*, it would actually help them to observe and perform the *mitzvah* (some *mitzvot* are given reasons in the Torah).

In its secondary meaning, Hebrew *mitzvah*, as with English "commandment", refers to a moral deed performed within a religious duty. As such, the term *mitzvah* has also come to express an individual act of human kindness in keeping with the law. The expression includes a sense of heartfelt sentiment beyond mere legal duty, as "you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18). The tertiary meaning of *mitzvah* also refers to the fulfillment of a *mitzvah*.

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Hebrew Bible

The feminine noun *mitzvah* (מִצְוָה) occurs over 180 times in the Masoretic Text of the Hebrew Bible. The first use is in Genesis 26:5 (https://www.mechon-mamre.org/p/pt/pt0126.htm#5) where God says that Abraham has "obeyed my voice, and kept my charge, my commandments (מִצְוֹת *mitzvotai*), my statutes, and my laws". In the Septuagint the word is usually translated with *entole* (ἐντολῆ).^[1] In Second Temple period funeral inscriptions the epithet *phil-entolos*, "lover of the commandments", was sometimes inscribed on Jewish tombs.^[2] Other words are also used in Hebrew for commands and statutes; the Ten Commandments (עשרת הדיברות), for example, are the "Ten Words".^[3]

Rabbinical enumeration

The Tanakh does not state that there are 613 commandments. The tradition that the number is 613 began in the 3rd century CE, when Rabbi Simlai claimed it in a sermon, apparently to make the point that a person should observe the Torah every day with his whole body.^[4]

Rabbi Simlai gave as a sermon (*darash Rabi Simlai*): 613 commandments were communicated to Moses, 365 negative commands, corresponding to the number of solar days [in a year], and 248 positive commands, corresponding to the number of the members [bones covered with flesh] of a man's body.

— Talmud, Tractate Makkoth, 23b

Writing in the 12th century, Abraham ibn Ezra observed that there were over a thousand divine commandments in the Bible, but fewer than 300 applied to his time.^[4] Nachmanides found that the number was in dispute and uncertain.^[4] The number 613 is a rabbinical tradition rather than an exact count.^[4]

In rabbinic literature there are a number of works, mainly by the Rishonim, that attempt to enumerate 613 commandments:

- Maimonides' *Sefer Hamitzvot* ("Book of Commandments"), on which there is a critical commentary by Nachmanides;
- *Sefer ha-Chinuch* ("Book of Education"), attributed to Rabbi Aaron ha-Levi of Barcelona (the Ra'ah);
- *Sefer ha-Mitzvoth ha-Gadol* ("Large book of Commandments") by Rabbi Moses ben Jacob of Coucy;
- *Sefer ha-Mitzvoth ha-Katan* ("Small book of Commandments") by Rabbi Isaac ben Joseph of Corbeil;
- *Sefer Yere'im* ("Book of the [God-]fearing") by Rabbi Eliezer of Metz (not a clear enumeration);
- *Sefer Mitzvot HaShem* ("The book of God's Commandments") by Rabbi Boruch Bentshar of Sokol;
- *Sefer ha-Mitzvoth* by Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan (the "Chafetz Chaim") - this work only deals with the commandments that are applicable at the present time.

According to Rabbi Ishmael, only the principal commandments of the 613 were given on Mount Sinai, the remainder having been given in the Tent of Meeting. Rabbi Akiva, on the other hand, was of the opinion that they were all given on Mount Sinai, repeated in the Tent of Meeting, and declared a third time by Moses before his death. According to the Midrash, all divine commandments were given on Mount Sinai, and no prophet could add any new ones.^[5]

The number 613 can be obtained by gematria (a traditional Jewish method of number substitution). The gematria value for the word "Torah" is 611, which corresponds to the number of commandments given via Moses, with the remaining two being identified as the first two of the Ten Commandments, which tradition holds were the only ones heard from the mouth of God himself.^[6] Jews are also reminded of the 613 commandments by the Tzitzit, known as 'fringes' or 'strings'.^[7]

Rabbinical mitzvot

The Biblical mitzvot are referred to in the Talmud as *mitzvot d'oraita*, translated as *commandments of the Law (Torah)*. In contradistinction to these are rabbinical commandments, referred to as *mitzvot d'rabbanan*. *Mitzvot d'rabbanan* are a type of *takkanah*. Among the more important *mitzvot d'rabbanan* are:

- To recite a blessing for each enjoyment
- To ritually wash the hands before eating bread
- To prepare lights in advance of Shabbat (to have peace in the home, and to act in contradiction to customs of Karaite Judaism)
- To construct an eruv to permit carrying to and within public areas on Shabbat
- To recite the Hallel psalms on holy days
- To light the Hanukkah lights
- To read the Scroll of Esther on Purim

These seven rabbinical commandments are treated like Biblical commandments insofar as, prior to the performance of each, a benediction is recited, i.e.:

Blessed are You, O LORD our God, King of the universe, Who has commanded us ...

They give rise to the phrase "*Keter Torah*" ("The Crown of the Torah") as the numeric value of *Keter* is 620^[8] (613+7).

The divine command is considered implied in the general law to follow any instructions of the religious authorities (Deuteronomy 17:11, and 32:7; Shab. 23a). In addition, many of the specific details of the Biblical mitzvot are only derived via rabbinical application of the Oral Torah (Mishna/Gemarah); for example, the three daily prayers in any language and the recitation of the Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4-7) twice a day in any language, the binding of the tefillin and the fixing of the mezuzah (Deuteronomy 6:8-9), and the saying of Grace After Meals (Deuteronomy 8:10).

Six constant mitzvot

Out of the 613 Mitzvot mentioned in the Torah, there are six mitzvot which the Sefer Hachinuch calls "constant mitzvot": "We have six mitzvot which are perpetual and constant, applicable at all times, all the days of our lives".

1. To know God, and that he created all things.
2. Not to have any *god(s)* beside God (lit. *in his face*).
3. To know God's Oneness.
4. To fear God.
5. To love God.
6. Not to pursue the passions of your heart and stray after your eyes.

Academic treatment

In modern Biblical scholarship, six different law codes are considered to compose the body of the Torah's text:

- The Ten Commandments.
- The Covenant Code follows, and provides more detailed laws.
- The Ritual Decalogue, roughly summarising the Covenant Code, is presented after a brief narrative describing the design for the Ark of the Covenant and Tabernacle.
- The Priestly Code, containing extensive laws concerning rituals and more general situations, is given from above the *mercy seat* in the Tabernacle, once the Ark and Tabernacle have been completed. This code is extended further when events occur not quite covered by the law, causing Moses to ask Yahweh for greater clarification.
- The Holiness Code is contained within the Priestly Code, close to the end, but is a distinct subsection placing particular emphasis on things which are holy, and which should be done to honour the holy. It also contains the warnings from Yahweh about what will occur if the laws are not followed, as well as promises for the event that the laws are followed.
- The Deuteronomic Code is remembered by Moses, in his last speeches before death, both covering the ground of prior codes, but also further laws not recorded earlier, which Moses has, by this point, remembered.

In Biblical criticism, these codes are studied separately, particularly concerning the features unique, or first appearing, in each. Many of the mitzvot enumerated as being from one or other of these codes are also present in others, sometimes phrased in a different manner, or with additional clauses. Also, themes, such as idolatry, sexual behaviour, ritual cleanliness, and offerings of sacrifice, are shared among all six codes, and thus, in more religiously motivated theological studies, it is often the case that the mitzvot are organised by theme, rather than the location in which they are found within the Bible.

Mitzvot and Jewish law

In rabbinic thought, the commandments are usually divided into two major groups, positive commandments (obligations) – *mitzvot aseh* [מצוות עשה] and negative commandments (prohibitions) – *mitzvot lo ta'aseh* [מצוות לא תעשה].

The system describing the practical application of the commandments is known as *Halakha*. *Halakha* is the development of the *mitzvot* as contained in the Written Law (Torah), via discussion and debate in the Oral Law, as recorded in the rabbinic literature of the classical era, especially the Mishnah and the Talmud. The *halakha* dictates and influences a wide variety of behavior of traditionalist Jews.

Many of these laws concern only special classes of people—such as kings, Kohanim (the priesthood), Levites, or Nazarites—or are conditioned by local or temporary circumstances of the Jewish nation, as, for instance, the agricultural, sacrificial, and Levitical laws.

The majority view of classical rabbis was that the commandments will still be applicable and in force during the Messianic Age. However, a significant minority of rabbis held that most of the commandments will be nullified by, or in, the messianic era. Examples of such rabbinic views include:

- that the grain-offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to God as in the days of old, and as in ancient years (Malachi 3:4)
- that today we should observe the commandments (Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Avodah Zarah 3a, 4b); because we will not observe them in the world to come (Rashi)
- that in the future all sacrifices, with the exception of the Thanksgiving-sacrifice, will be discontinued (Midrash Vayikra Rabbah 9:7)
- that all sacrifices will be annulled in the future (Tanchuma Emor 19, Vayikra Rabbah 9:7)
- that God will permit what is now forbidden (Midrash Shochar Tov, Mizmor 146:5)
- that most mitzvot will no longer be in force (Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Niddah 61b and Tractate Shabbat 151b).

There is no accepted authoritative answer within Judaism as to which *mitzvot*, if any, would be annulled in the Messianic era. This is a subject of academic debate and, not being viewed as an immediately practical question, is usually passed over in favor of answering questions of the practical *halakha*.

See also

- Aveira (Transgression)
- Dharma (Hindu/Buddhist/Sikh)
- Emil Fackenheim
- Fard (Islamic)
- Law given to Moses at Sinai
- Mitzvah goreret mitzvah
- Pay it forward
- Seven Laws of Noah
- Tao (Chinese)
- Volunteerism

References

1. Philip Leroy Culbertson, *A word fitly spoken*, 1995, p. 73. "See also Lieberman, *Texts and Studies*, 212, where he shows that the Greek *entole* is parallel to *mitzvah*, both coming to suggest a particular emphasis on charitable alms."
2. *The Journal of Jewish studies* Volume 51, 2000 "Note, however, by way of example, the funerary epithet *philentolos* (lover of the commandments), coined from the stock LXX word for commandment, *entole* (Heb. *mitzvah*), and the LXX allusions in that most favoured of all Romano-Jewish ..."

3. Mark Rooker, *The Ten Commandments: Ethics for the Twenty-First Century*, 2010, p. 3. "The Significance of the Ten Commandments in the Old Testament" The Ten Commandments are literally the "Ten Words" (aseret haddebarêḿ) in Hebrew. The use of the term *dabar*, "word", in this phrase distinguishes these laws from the rest of ..."
4. Drazin, Israel (2009). "Chapter 31: Are There 613 Biblical Commandments?". *Maimonides and the Biblical Prophets* (<https://books.google.com/books?id=PerLtdiAKx0C&pg=PA203>). Gefen Publishing House Ltd.
5. Midrash *Sifra* to Leviticus 27:34; Talmud, *Yoma* 80a.
6. *Makkoth* 24a
7. *Rashi* Numbers 15:39 (from *Numbers Rabbah* 18)
8. Vital, Dovid bar Shlomo (1536). *כתר תורה* (<http://hebrewbooks.org/11561>) [*Keser Torah*] (in Hebrew). *Istanbul*. Retrieved January 15, 2013.

External links

- *Maimonides Sefer HaMitzvot* (Hebrew full text) (<http://www.daat.ac.il/daat/mahshevt/hamitsvot/shaar-2.htm>)
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