**It’s a Mitzvah class**

**Introduction:** It’s a Mitzvah. **What’s** a Mitzvah?

Mitzvah – Hebrew root: *tzadee*, *vav*, *heh* = “command”; pl. is *mitzvot*; *B’mitzvotav* (with his commandments), *v’tzivanu* (and commands us). Commandments by which a Jew makes the world a more scared, sensitive, just and compassionate place; *mitzvot* as the concrete actions Judaism uses to fashion lives of ethical rigor and spiritual insight; sacred deeds; some mitzvot focus primarily on ritual (for ex., *Shabbat*) and others attend more to ethical considerations (caring for the elderly, visiting the sick, etc.)

“Commandments” presume a “Commander.” Performance of *mitzvot* as more than just an empty formality or a good/nice thing to do or the imposition of an ancient tradition; rather, a divine imperative. Furthermore, *mitzvot* are the Jewish avenue for knowing and experience God. Rather than relying on contemplation, Judaism places primary value on \*doing\* as the principal path for serving God. *Mitzvot* translate the lofty principles of *Torah* into tangible acts of caring individuals and righteous/just societies. What if you don’t believe in God? Ok, then a religious imperative. But not just voluntary. *Mitzvot* are demanded by an “observant” (however, liberally, each of us understands that), meaningful Jewish life. As liberal Jews, some *mitzvot* may be optional (or even fully rejected), but the framework of *mitzvot* (I would suggest) is not optional. *Mitzvah* is how we do our Judaism, whatever our theology.

Traditional understanding that there are 613 (taryag) *mitzvot*. (*Makkot* 23b). (There is not universal agreement over this number of the mitzvoth that compose it. This is an ongoing matter of “discussion/controvery.” But this is the traditional understanding.) 365 negative (Thou shalt not/don’ts; corresponds to the number of days in a solar year) and 248 positive (Thou shalts; rabbinic belief that this number corresponds to the number of bones in the human body, although this is not correct by modern science). Not enumerated in *Torah* or *Talmud*. First systematic enumeration by Simon Kairo in 8th century, who listed 265 positive and 348 negative. Most significant enumeration is *Sefer HaMitzvot* by Maimoides in 1170 C.E.; cites the biblical source for each *mitzvah* and discusses certain aspects of its observance; criticized by some medieval authorities but became the definitive list. *Sefer HaChinuch*, 13th centuryby Spanish Talmudist Aaron HaLevi of Barcelona, utilizes Maimonides’ work and lists the *mitzvot* in the order they are found in the Torah and discusses each one. Only 297 are still capable of being fulfilled today (that number for an adult Jewish male.) Some are gender-based/restricted. Many depend on the existence of a Temple in Jerusalem. And there isn’t universal agreement on this list either . . .

Besides positive and negative, there are other significant divisions of the mitzvot:

* Time bound and non-time bound. Observed at a particular time each day or during the year (or not). Halachically, women not obligated to time-bound *mitzvot*. (Not obligated, however, does **not** mean that a woman can’t do these. However, historically, this has been the reason given for women being forbidden from various *mitzvot* – such as wearing a *tallit*. This is also the rationale for not counting a woman in a *minyan* – i.e., since she isn’t obligated to be there, she can’t “count” in the required quorum.)
* *Mitzvot Kallot* (light) and *Mitzvot Chamurot* (heavy, serious, substantive). Some sources distinguish between “light” (less important) and “serious” (more important) mitzvot. General consensus, however, that one should observe all the mitzvot and that violating any of them is a serious transgression,
* *Mitzvot she’bein adam lachaveiro* (between one person and another)/*Mitzvot* *she’being adam l’Makom* (between a person and God). Those between one person and another and those that are between a person and God (similar to HHD distinction of transgressions and the requisite request for forgiveness). All transgressions against another person are also against God.
* *Mishpatim*/*Chukim*. These words would seem to be synonyms for statures, laws, commandments. But the Rabbis distinguish between *mishpatim*, those laws that would have been apparent even if they were not in the *Torah* (e.g., not to murder, steal, slander, etc.) and *chukim*, those that are divine decree and wouldn’t have been universally obvious (*kashrut*, *sha’atnez*, the red heifer etc.). During the Middle Ages, some rabbis saw *mishpatim* as laws based on reason, and *chukim* as those to be observed for no apparent logical reason but because they were commanded by God.

*Ta’amei Mitzvot* – coming up with reasons for the *mitzvot*. Controversial. Some authorities insist that the reasons for the *mitzvot* were purposefully left unclear in order that we might have to think about the “why” of them or, conversely, because we shouldn’t worry about the “why.” Others argue that the reasons are in the *Torah* and that we must simply persist in searching them out. Maimonides – every *mitzvah* has a reason that is known to God, if not to humans and, ultimately, every *mitzvah* is intended for the welfare of the body and/or the soul. (Faith versus reason . . . Just observe because you’re supposed to observe, not because it’s sensible to do so.) Debate is also due to sparseness of explication in *Torah*. Very few of the *mitzvot* include a reason for their observance. (to make us “holy,” i.e., set apart . . .)

Doing *mitzvot* often seems to carry the implication of reward in the World To Come. However, what this means is never made clear. Opposing teaching that emphasizes to do *mitzvot* **not** for a promised reward but simply because God commands.

*Kavanah* (intention) with which we approach *mitzvot* considered important. Simply going through the motions to fulfill the law, while acceptable, is discouraged. Rather, *mitzvot* are to be performed with joy and devotion. (concept of *chidur mitzvah* – making the *mitzvah* beautiful, adorning the *mitzvah*).

*Halachah* (“the way”), Jewish law, is the process of interpreting the *mitzvot* as they apply to specific situations. *Mishnah, Talmud, Codes, Responsa*, etc.

For Orthodox, *mitzvot* are binding and absolute. Conservative movement considers the *mitzvot* binding, but preserves and enhances *halachah* through rabbinic decisions, some of which differ significantly from tradition (driving to services on *Shabbat*, women as rabbis and cantors, etc.). Reform with its emphasis on personal autonomy, places responsibility on the individual (guided by the tradition), to decide which *mitzvot* to observe and how. Historically, Reform has put greatest emphasis on the ethical *mitzvot*, while de-emphasizing the ritual. That, however, is changing . . . (as Reform is becoming more “traditionoid.”)