

RABBI'S MESSAGE

What is a Mitzvah? Let's explore!

Hebrew is an interesting language because one word can mean many things. Usually, the things are connected in some way. For instance, at the beginning of the Torah, in the Book of Genesis, it says, “*When God began to create the heaven and earth, the earth was unformed and void...and a wind from God swept over the water.*” (Gen. 1:2) The word for “wind” in Hebrew is “*ruach*,” which also means “spirit.” Different interpretations use both translations, which are similar, but not exactly the same. Imagining a wind sweeping over the waters, you might visualize a hurricane or a tornado, spreading the beginnings of creation all over. With a spirit, you might imagine a sacred, holy presence that will descend upon all the upcoming creation. Both translations have validity, and it sparks curious discussion about the infinite ways Torah can be interpreted.

Another important word that starts in Torah is *mitzvah*. We all know that a mitzvah is a good deed. But it comes from the root letters for tzee-vah, or command. A mitzvah is technically a commandment. With 613 total commandments in the Torah, it is impossible to follow every one of them 100%. Some of the commandments are assigned to men, others to women, others to descendants of the Priestly class (the Kohanim), etc. There are ritualistic commandments, like lighting Shabbat candles, eating in a Sukkah and affixing a mezuzah to your doorpost. Some of the most interesting mitzvot are those that command a feeling, like “Love your neighbor as yourself.” (Lev. 19:18) and “You shall love the LORD your GOD with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your might.” (Deut.6:5) In English, we think of a command as an order, like a military order. Disobeying a military commandment has severe consequences. But is it possible to manipulate our own feelings, like love, because we are ordered to do so?

Once, I was in a discussion about making choices, and someone said to me, “God doesn’t give us choices. God gives us commandments.” I’ve thought about that statement ever since, and decided there is a blend. We might follow some commandments only because God said so (in the Torah). This is a special kind of devotion, and the we might do it out of habit or routine. Another thought is that if we contemplate the meaning behind the commandment, we may or may not follow it; but we will be doing so out of knowledge rather than ignorance. Perhaps an understanding leads to fulfillment; perhaps fulfillment leads to understanding. The balance may be “God gives us commandments, and the choice of how to follow them.”

This is the difference between the Hebrew terms *keva* – the form, ritual and structure of observance - and *kavanah* – the sacred intention and mindfulness that motivate us. Which brings us to the importance of learning. The more we learn what the Torah teaches, the more we can delve into our hearts and souls to find deeper meaning. I invite you to come explore the balance when we get together the evening of May 9th for THE JEWISH NIGHT OF WHY. Learning from each other is quite a mitzvah! As 1st Century scholar Rabbi Akiva said, “Study is most important when it leads to action.” (Babylonian Talmud, Kiddushin 40b). Or, as a slightly older

Talmudic scholar, Hillel the Elder (110 BCE – 8 CE) said, “What is hateful to you, do not do to another. All the rest is commentary. Now, go study.”

As we study together, we can understand the commandments and make choices about how to follow them with both *keva* and *kavannah*.

L’shalom,

Rabbi Dan Gordon