



High Holy Days 2019  
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Rosh Hashanah Evening  
Introduction: 613 Mitzvot or 1?

You have before you a text from the Talmud, from the end of Masekhet Makkot, which will be the focus of our learning this year. It begins:

Rabbi Simlai expounded: 613 mitzvot were communicated to Moses, 365 “don’ts” (negative mitzvot) equal to the number of solar days [in the year], and 248 “dos” (positive mitzvot) corresponding to the number of bones and sinews in the human body....

And then it goes on to say, that David distilled those 613 mitzvot down to eleven, citing Psalm 15. Then Isaiah distilled them to six, Micah got them to three, Isaiah came again and distilled them to two, and finally Amos boiled the whole Torah down to one essential mizvah: Seek Me and live.

There are a handful of other rabbinic texts like this, that try to suss out the “core” of what Judaism stands for:

- The famous story of the man who came first to Shammai, then Hillel, asking to be taught entire Torah on one foot. Shammai pushed him away but Hillel answered: “what is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow.”
- The debate between Rabbi Akiva and Ben Azzai about greatest principle in the Torah, with Ben Azzai saying that it’s that all human beings are descended from one ancestor in the image of God, while Akiva says it’s “v’ahavta l’re’akha kamokha,” love your neighbor as yourself.
- And from Pirkei Avot, the “*al shlosha devarim*”: the world stands on three things, on the Torah, on worship, and on deeds of lovingkindness.

But really, these kinds of texts are sort of un-Jewish. In general, Jewish tradition is anti-reductionist. E.g., at one time, the ten commandments were recited as part of the daily liturgy. They were removed, out of concern that people would think that’s the essence of Torah, and nothing else is as important.

The rabbinic tradition is suspicious of broad principles that can be left in the abstract; it likes to concretize, and deal with behavior. We don’t have a dogma or credo; we have mitzvot. And the more mitzvot the better! The 613 Biblical mitzvot were expanded into volumes of halakhot. In fact, just before our text the Talmud says (Makkot 23b):

Rabbi Hananya ben Akashya says: The Holy Blessed One sought to confer merit upon the Jewish people; therefore, God increased Torah and mitzvot for them....

And Judaism is about living in complexity and contradiction. We're a both/and, not an either/or tradition.

So why this text? This kind of reductionism (or less judgmentally, the focus on core values and principles) is necessary:

- a) when losing forest for trees, becoming obsessive about the details of observance and losing their meaning -- what Abraham Joshua Heschel called religious behaviorism; or
- b) when there's a need for re-envisioning, when the way our core values have been expressed has stopped being fully functional. Either intrinsically -- the forms that embody these values have become corrupted themselves (e.g., when valuing life has become obsessively focused on pre-birth, something is wrong). Or extrinsically -- the world has changed, and the old forms don't work as well in a new context. Then we need to refocus on what the whole enterprise is supposed to be about, and rebuild, perhaps in a new way.

It's not at all about abandoning commitments, but re-vamping how we embody them, or balance them

And I think my reading of the text in this way is supportable, because the context in which this midrash appears in the Talmud suggests that that's precisely its intent. Our text is immediately preceded by a list of three matters in which the bet din - the earthly court -- legislated something, and the heavenly court confirmed it. For example, reading the book of Esther on Purim. And then, three instances in which the *ru'ah hakodesh* -- the "holy spirit" -- appeared to the earthly court to confirm some decision. Then there's our text. Then four things which Moses "decreed" and prophets overruled.

Thus, our text about distilling 613 mitzvot down to eleven, six, then three, two one essential mitzvot emerges out of a discussion about the way that Torah and Jewish law evolves over time, *even within the Torah itself*.

And the section concludes with a discussion of rabbinic responses to the destruction of the Temple - when things fell apart, the core institutions structuring society were broken, and things couldn't as they were. Most of the sages weep, but Rabbi Akiva laughs, because he sees possibility going forward: he finds hope in creative reinterpretation. And the tractate ends: Akiva, you have comforted us. Akiva, you have comforted us.

In other words, the context suggests that this reductionist impulse -- yes 613 mitzvot, but what is Torah really about? What are the essentials of Judaism? -- emerges out of a sense that things are changing around us, and we need to change too. Something seems deeply wrong, or frightening. Things are broken. And we need creativity and innovation. That's where comfort is found.

This is a powerful way of conceiving of our personal teshuvah, the work of the High Holy Days. We can think of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur as an annual back-to-basics, when we reconnect with, assess, and confirm or shift our core values -- who we really are, what animates and motivates us, what really gives our lives meaning. Then we take a hard look at how we are or aren't expressing those essential principles -- our essential being -- in the day to day living of our lives. Stripping down to my basics, without all the baroque detail - what aspects of my life (my character, my day to day activities, how I am at work, in my relationships, at play) are working, are accurately expressing what I claim to believe and value, and what needs to change?

And it's also the model for our collective, societal teshuvah -- the Jewish people, Israel, America. What are our core commitments and values, at the center of our identity? Do any of them need to change? How are we embodying those commitments and values?

It is of course tempting to stay at the surface level of detail. When Rubik's cube was in fashion, I used to use that as the metaphor: you get to the point where it's almost perfect, and there are just a couple of squares that need switching. But of course in order to switch those squares, you end up having to rework the entire thing. Both psychotherapy and teshuvah are often like that -- pushing us to go deep, to our essence.

So as we dive into this text over the next two days and Yom Kippur, a few caveats:

- 1) This is not *heirarchy* of values. That is, the three principles of Micah are not more important than the eleven principles in Psalm 15. Rather, it's a search for essence, what animates and informs the increasing specificity. Like those Russian matryoshka dolls - we're looking for what's ever further inside.
- 2) Viewing the teshuvah process as a search for our essential values, is not the same as moral relativism. Judaism is not value-neutral. Values and life principles aren't all equally valid. Sometimes someone's values (even some of our own) are -- like false facts -- simply wrong. To use moral philosopher Martha Nussbaum's terminology, Judaism holds that there are "false social values." So once we identify our values, we have to be willing to question them -- in light of our tradition, are our values right? Do they need tweaking? Radical revisioning?

At the same time, Rabbi Simlai's particular formulation here is one of many possible expressions of the essence of Judaism. And to some extent it's artificially shaped by his framework of finding passages from the prophets and writings to make his point. He might have chosen others instead of these. This is one of the difficulties of reductionism -- there is no single, universal formulation of the essence of Judaism.

- 3) Looking for essence isn't the same as absolutism. What happens when your values conflict with each other, or when your values conflict with "Jewish values"? That's a complicated question beyond the scope of what I can do frontally here, but in brief: there's no clear answer to that. Yes, we have to assess our values in light of Jewish tradition, *and* sometimes we have to question our tradition in light of the evolution of our values. Is our tradition in need of change? Has it become distorted by history, especially by trauma? It's a process of discernment, what the work of teshuvah is all about. It's really the core question of the religious personality

Beginning tomorrow, we're going to start at the end of the text -- Amos condensed the 613 to one principle, "Seek Me and Live" -- and then work back out, looking at how that principle might be embodied in ever more expansive ways. And I invite you to spend some time on your own throughout these ten days, dwelling with Rabbi Simlai's lists and also your own. What do you see as the essence of Jewish teaching? How does that square with your own values, and with your choices -- overarching life choices, and the small everyday choices that make up your life?