



## **Mosaic Religion and the Religious Mosaic** **An Approach to the Jewish Community for Christian Seminarians**

### **Script 12: What is a Mitzvah?**

What is a *mitzvah*? The Hebrew word *mitzvah* means “command” or “commandment.” You may have heard the term ‘mitzvah’ when referring to the ceremony known as “Bar Mitzvah,” “Bat Mitzvah,” or “B’nei Mitzvah” – which is an affirmation of Jewish identity by twelve or thirteen-year old Jewish boys and girls. Here it is often translated as “child of the commandments,” or “one who is obligated to perform the commandments.” On the other hand, you may also have heard people talk about ‘doing a mitzvah’ which in common parlance means ‘doing a good deed’. Neither of these, however, really gets at exactly what a “mitzvah” is.

In Judaism we are guided by ethical principles that derive from 613 commandments in the Torah, called *mitzvot*, the plural of “mitzvah.” These, in addition to the well-known Ten Commandments, are understood as divinely given laws or obligations. For example, in Leviticus Chapter 19, we have what is called “The Holiness Code” with many mitzvot listed, such as “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your countrymen,” and “The wages of a laborer shall not remain with you until morning.” Some traditional lists include 365 laws that are written as negative precepts, i.e., “Do not do this,” and 248 written in the affirmative, i.e., “Do this.” They are further divided into those that apply to our relationships with other people, and those that apply to our individual relationship with God.

There are seven mitzvot called the seven Noahide precepts that, according to traditional Jewish thought, are incumbent upon all human beings. These are:

- Establish courts of justice;
- Do not worship idols;
- Do not blaspheme;
- Do not commit incest;
- Do not murder;
- Do not rob; and
- Do not eat the flesh cut from a living animal.

The basic precepts are stated in the Torah, but the details of their application are extensively discussed in the Talmud and later Jewish legal writings.<sup>1</sup> Some of these mitzvot regulate life in the land of Israel--sacrificial worship in the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, or being a monarch, priest or Nazirite --so they don't apply in our times. But many still do apply and guide our lives today. Here are a few major examples of mitzvot that many Jews practice:

**First, *kashrut* or keeping kosher.** These are the dietary laws found in the Torah, which categorize foods which may and may not be consumed by Jewish people. Like other mitzvot, there is no reason given for this other than "to be holy for God." Thus, many Jews who keep kosher will not eat pork, shellfish, birds of prey, fish without fins and scales, and animals that do not chew their cud and have split hooves. Also, Jews do not have dairy products at the same meal with meat products based on the rabbinic interpretation of the Biblical verse, "Do not boil a kid in its mother's milk."

Today, many Jews who observe kashrut will also keep separate dishes, silverware, pots and pans, and cooking utensils for meat and dairy products. A number of Jews who keep kosher will also only eat in recognized kosher restaurants and will only buy products in the supermarket that are marked with the trademarked signs that they have been approved by a kosher-certifying organization. Kosher animals also must be slaughtered in the proper fashion based on the principles that the blood-- seen as the life-giving source--has been totally drained from the meat, and the animal is slaughtered with the least amount of pain by generally cutting the jugular vein in one swift motion of the knife.

**Another mitzvah is known as *tikkun olam* or "repairing the world."** This is a precept that refers to our role in creating a just society and an environmentally healthy world. While God created a beautiful world, it is up to human beings to perfect it as partners with God. Wherever there is injustice, we are not to stand by passively, but it is incumbent upon us to do what we can via legislation, speaking out, and taking action to help correct this situation, especially so others will be able to live with the same opportunities and rights that the rest of us have as a free society. It is this mitzvah that inspires many Jewish groups to act to protect and restore our physical environment. Ultimately, by living in accordance with this principle, we will bring about the Messianic times -- when there will be no longer war, sickness, death, or poverty.

**Another foundational mitzvah is *tzedakah*,** which refers to giving charity or doing something to remove any injustice in a given situation. It comes from the Hebrew root that means "justice," or as we might say today, 'leveling the playing field.' At every Jewish holiday, at every Jewish celebration, lifecycle event, and at any time we see or hear of a person who needs financial or other help, we are bidden to give tzedakah. According to the Jewish sages, even a poor person is required to give something to help another, no matter how small, since we are responsible for each other in this world. Maimonides, a medieval Jewish scholar and one of the greatest of the philosophical and legal minds, created a hierarchy of tzedakah. His levels of tzedakah begin with a person who, when asked to give tzedakah, does so begrudgingly. The highest level, according to Maimonides, is giving another person the means to make a living so that they are no longer in need of tzedakah, a version of 'teaching someone to fish.' Though

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<sup>1</sup> To learn more about the Talmud, please refer to "The Written Torah and the Oral Torah," another episode in the "Mosaic Religion and the Religious Mosaic" series.

there is a verse in the Torah that says that there will always be poor people in our society, Jews believe that by doing tzedakah, we are working towards the Messianic age when there will not be any people dependent on others for their livelihood.

**Yet another important mitzvah is *shalom bayit*, which means “peace in the home.”** It is the underlying precept of the laws and rulings about how spouses are to treat one another, how parents are to treat children and vice-versa, how we are to take care of our relatives, and how a friend or acquaintance should intervene to try to make peace between members of a family. The home is seen as a microcosm of our world and the relationships and values we develop there are also the ones that most influence our behaviors and treatment of others in the world outside of our families. We realize that we cannot choose who is in our families. We recognize that there are individuals who cause great harm to their families because of their own problems. Nonetheless, we must try our best to develop positive relationships with members of our family, paying respect to parents, grandparents and older relatives, in order to create a loving, caring, and welcoming home where all can thrive.

These are just a few of the many different mitzvot that guide Jewish life and practice throughout the centuries and today.

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