

Mitzvot & Tzadaka

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Today, I want to introduce you to a uniquely Jewish approach to the Scriptures that you may not know about, and through it, to another Jewish subject – money. Part of this teaching will be somewhat technical, so please prepare yourself.

There have been several attempts in Jewish history to codify God's Word into numbered commandments; the Hebrew word for “commandments” is “*mitzvot*.” The earliest of these attempts was called *Hilchot Gedolot*, which was a work that was published sometime in the 8th Century by Simon Kairo. By that time, a principle had already been established in the *Talmud*, that the total number of commandments in the *Torah* was *Taryag* (613); and of these, 248 were positive (*mitzvot aseh*), and 365 were negative (*mitzvot lo ta'aseh*).

Anyone who attempts to number *mitzvot* in the *Torah* expecting them to add up to 613 soon realizes that there are decisions to be made like:

- What should one consider to be a commandment? How must it be stated? Does it have to be stated “I command you,” or can it be less obvious?
- What level of inference is allowable? Can we construe a commandment from a situation?
- How do we count similar expressions of God's will that are stated differently at different places in the Scriptures?
- Do we count as two *mitzvot*, those that are expressed both in the positive and in the negative in different verses of Scripture, or do we count them as one?

It's not surprising that those who have attempted this work have often come to different conclusions as to exactly what the *mitzvot* in Scripture are.

To bring consensus, Judaism needed a scholar of such prestige that he could define 613 *mitzvot* that would be acceptable to a majority of the Jewish community. Such a scholar emerged in the person of Moshe ben Maimon (Maimonides) who, sometime prior to 1170 c.e., wrote his compilation of *Torah* law in Arabic under the title *Kitab Al-Fara'id* (The Book of Divine Precepts). He subsequently revised his work and so, by the end of his life, there were two Arabic texts or versions of *Kitab Al-Fara'id* in existence. Unlike his predecessors, Maimonides was careful to follow defined principles – fourteen in all – to justify his conclusions; that made all the difference, and his work eventually received almost universal acceptance. Three contemporaries of his translated his arabic texts into Hebrew, and these translations became known as *Sefer haMitzvot*, -- “Book of Commandments,” as it is known today.

As an academic achievement, Maimonides' enumeration of *mitzvot* was huge. However, it was too exhaustive to be a convenient tool in the post-Temple era, when many of the *mitzvot* dealing with sacrifices and the Levitical priesthood could no longer be performed. Enter Rabbi Yisrael Meir haKohen, known as “the Chafetz Chaiyim.” In 1931, Rabbi Meir published his *Sefer haMitzvot haKatzar* (The Concise Book of *Mitvot*), in which he extracted from Maimonides' list, 297 *mitzvot* – 77 positive, 194 negative, and 26 applicable only in the Land of Israel. Rabbi

Meir intended his book to be a compilation of *mitzvot* that could be observed by Jews of the 20th century and particularly in the diaspora. That's us. Let me give you an example of some *mitzvot* and how they read so you will get a feel for their usefulness.

Maimonides' positive *mitzvah* number 73 has to do with confessing our sins. It is drawn from Numbers 5:6-7 which reads:

"Speak to the children of Israel: 'When a man or woman commits any sin that men commit in unfaithfulness against the LORD, and that person is guilty, ' then he shall confess the sin which he has committed. He shall make restitution for his trespass in full, plus one-fifth of it, and give it to the one he has wronged.'"

Maimonides extracts from this the following:¹

“By this injunction we are commanded to make oral confession of the sins we have committed against the Lord (exalted be He) after we have repented of them. This is the form of the confession: ‘O God, I have sinned, I have committed iniquity, I have transgressed, and I have done thus and thus.’ One must elaborate and ask forgiveness with all the eloquence at his command.”

For Messianic Jews and *Torah*-adherent Gentile followers of Messiah Yeshua, neither Maimonides', nor Meir's works are a sufficient guide for daily conduct and for relating to God. The reason is that New Covenant believers acknowledge the continuing priesthood of Yeshua, look to regular communication with the *Ruach Hakodesh* for personal guidance (including guidance in applying Scripture), and seek to be obedient, as well, to the teachings contained in the *Kitvey B'rit Chadasha* (the New Testament Scriptures). By contrast, Jews who do not acknowledge the New Covenant have no sacrifice for sin and none of the benefits of an interceding priesthood, so their approach to God is necessarily limited. That notwithstanding, New Covenant believers (both Jews and Gentiles) have the same need as Rabbinical Jews for a handy compilation of Scripture-based *mitzvot* to assist them in their walk of obedience. It is a Jewish approach.

Dan Juster and I are collaborating on a book called “The Law of Messiah,” where I am listing and commenting on the *mitzvot*, and recognizing New Covenant commandments as well as those from the *Torah* that are enumerated by Maimonides and Meir. Let's take, for example, that Maimonides positive *Mitzvah* number 71 that I mentioned a few minutes ago, that speaks of confessing our sins to God. In my book, I add the implied commandment from James 5:16:

“Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.”

You see, this New Covenant Scripture expands the requirement of confessing to God, to confessing to one another; it is implied though, because it is spoken by James – not by God.

¹ Charles B. Chavel, editor & translator, “The Commandments”, v1, p. 83 (New York: The Soncino Press, 1967).

The challenge in writing “The Law of Messiah” book is to provide a tool that parallels the older works in form, but which adds additional Scriptures, and provides interpretation for New Covenant usage. Under-girding this attempt is my conviction, based in Scripture, that the *Torah*, which God gave to the ancient Israelites, is relevant today for both the Jew and the non-Jew, albeit sometimes differently for each. Here are some Scriptures from the Complete Jewish Bible that cause me to draw that conclusion:

"The same teaching is to apply equally to the citizen and to the foreigner living among you." (Exodus 12:49)

"For everything written in the past was written to teach us, so that with the encouragement of the *Tanakh* we might patiently hold on to our hope." (Romans 15:4)

"Being circumcised means nothing, and being uncircumcised means nothing; what does mean something is keeping God’s commandments." (1 Corinthians 7:19)

"Accordingly, the *Torah* functioned as a custodian until the Messiah came, so that we might be declared righteous on the ground of trusting and being faithful." (Galatians 3:24)

"All Scripture is God-breathed and is valuable for teaching the truth, convicting of sin, correcting faults and training in right living; thus anyone who belongs to God may be fully equipped for every good work." (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

"For the *Torah* has in it a shadow of the good things to come, but not the actual manifestation of the originals. Therefore, it can never, by means of the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, bring to the goal those who approach the Holy Place to offer them." (Hebrews 10:1)

Just a word about Exodus 12:49 that the Complete Jewish Bible translates: "The same teaching is to apply equally to the citizen and to the foreigner living among you," and the New King James Version translates "One law shall be for the native-born and for the stranger who dwells among you." This verse of Scripture is often wrongly generalized to mean that all the commandments of *Torah* are applicable to Jews and Gentiles in the same way. This is a mistaken view because the context of this Scripture is of the sojourner who desired to eat the *Pesach* and thus needed to be circumcised. Even if one generalizes the verse from its narrow context of *Pesach* and circumcision, the Complete Jewish Bible’s choice of the word “teaching” rather than “law” suggests that there may be different applications for the Jew and the Gentile.

So now that you have the idea about using *mitzvot* to focus in on what God requires of us, let me turn my attention to one of those requirements, which is what we do with our money, and I will narrow it further to what we do with our money to help others who are in need.

I’ll begin with a page from my book that contains *Mitzvah* #B1 which states:

We are to lend money without interest to our brother, sufficient for his need and without regard for the Sabbatical Year.

This precept is derived from several Scriptures recognized by Maimonides and Meir, and one that is omitted by them. First, Exodus 22:25 [Hebrew 22:24] which states:

"If you lend money to any of My people who are poor among you, you shall not be like a moneylender to him; you shall not charge him interest."

This Scripture does not require that you lend your poor brother money but, if you do, it states that you must not charge him interest. It is explained in Maimonides' positive and negative *mitzvot* 197 and 237 respectively, and Meir's positive and negative *mitzvot* 62 and 53 respectively, so you see that, in each of their cases, one statement has been turned into two.

Next we come to Leviticus 25:35-37 which reads:

"If one of your brethren becomes poor, and falls into poverty among you, then you shall help him, like a stranger or a sojourner, that he may live with you. Take no usury or interest from him; but fear your God, that your brother may live with you. You shall not lend him your money for usury, nor lend him your food at a profit. I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to give you the land of Canaan and to be your God."

This Scripture says that we must help our poor brother so that he can continue to live among us, but it does not say in what way we must help. It does say, as in the previous Scripture, that if we lend him money, we cannot collect interest on the loan. Maimonides' and Meir's negative *mitzvot* 235 and 54 respectively recognize only verses 36 and 37; I added verse 35.

Now we come to Deuteronomy 15:7-8 which reads:

"If there is among you a poor man of your brethren, within any of the gates in your land which the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart nor shut your hand from your poor brother, but you shall open your hand wide to him and willingly lend him sufficient for his need, whatever he needs."

What this adds to the subject is our obligation to lend to a poor brother, and to do so willingly. This is treated in Maimonides' positive *Mitzvah* #197 and negative #232, as well as Meir's positive *Mitzvot* #38 and his negative #62.

Moving right along, we go to the next verse in Deuteronomy 15, which is verse 9:

"Beware lest there be a wicked thought in your heart, saying, 'The seventh year, the year of release, is at hand,' and your eye be evil against your poor brother and you give him nothing, and he cry out to the LORD against you, and it become sin among you."

This verse is really important because it tests a person's willingness to trust God. It requires that we lend to our poor brother even just before the seventh year of release, after which we will not be able to demand repayment. This is dealt with in Maimonides' negative *Mitzvah* #231, and Meir's positive *Mitzvah* #62.

Finally, an interesting one, Deuteronomy 23:20 [Hebrew 23:21]:

"To a foreigner you may charge interest, but to your brother you shall not charge interest, that the LORD your God may bless you in all to which you set your hand in the land which you are entering to possess."

What's this? God says we can be hard-hearted and charge interest to a poor non-Jew but not to a brother Jew? Maimonides and Meir do not get to the heart of the matter which is answered by Leviticus 25:35:

"If one of your brethren becomes poor, and falls into poverty among you, then you shall help him, like a stranger or a sojourner, that he may live with you."

You see here that the role is reversed. Here, we are told that we have to help a poor brother Jew on the same level as we would a poor non-Jew, so clearly, Deuteronomy 23:20 is not meant to apply to needy persons, but rather to normal business transactions. The point that is being made here is that, even in a business transaction where we can normally charge interest, we cannot charge interest to a brother Jew.

Now this is all pretty complicated so, in my book, I condense all of this to the one statement:

We are to lend money without interest to our brother, sufficient for his need and without regard for the Sabbatical Year.

And I also expand the meaning of "brother" from only brother Israelites, to our brothers in Yeshua, regardless of where they live, or the faith community with which they affiliate.

There are many other Scriptures and *mitzvot* that speak of how we are to provide for our brother who has fallen on hard times, but I won't go into that now because I want to use my final minutes to change the subject but, in a way, not change the subject.

We are living in a season today, where our brother believer next to us who had a job yesterday may not have one today. He may have been able to pay his rent and buy food yesterday, but he may not be able to do either today. To those of you who are in that situation, please hear me. It is part of your obligation as a disciple of Yeshua to put aside any pride you may have, and ask for help if you need it. Now to you others who do not need help but your brother believer alongside you does, then you – I say we must help him in every way that is possible and reasonable.

Giving money is always a sacrifice because when we give it, we cannot spend it on ourselves. We may be giving *tzadaka* individually, but those of us who are members of Ohev, you should know that your tithes and offerings partly go to *tzadaka* – to benevolence to support our fellow Ohev members and others. Lately some of our brothers' and sisters' needs for serious financial help have gone up at the same time that the tithes coming into our storehouse have gone down.

Part of that is to be expected because when brothers are doing badly financially, their tithe goes down or even stops, and that is as it should be because a tithe is a percentage of our increase.

But I am speaking now to those of us who do have jobs and can earn income. We must not allow our just tithes to the Lord to drop below the ten percent to which we all agreed when we became members of Ohev. The money that is given to Ohev in the Lord's name goes to paying our bills, supporting our ministries, and very substantially to helping our needy brothers and sisters weather the financial storm that is affecting the entire country.

In speaking to those of us who are employed and have our financial heads above water, I say *Baruch HaShem!* To those of you who are not – I do not want to embarrass you by raising this issue, but I have to raise it. I know most of you, and know that your difficulty is caused by the times and is not a blemish on your character. There was a time in my own life when I was pretty well down and out, and frankly, I had to be rescued, and I am grateful for it. Since then, *Baruch HaShem*, I have been able to pay my bills, but at times barely, and even now, it would not take much of a financial set-back to cause Marie and me grave difficulty. We are grateful for what we have, but we are living paycheck to paycheck by faith as are most of you. I tell you this to assure you that we are all in similar circumstances, and all connected when it comes to assisting one another.

But God is in control, but know that when He promises in Scripture to meet our needs, he is talking to the whole community, because one of the ways He meets our individual needs is through each other.

I want us to conclude with a prayer for financial blessing to our community, and for us to be drawn together by the conviction that blessing or trouble to one is blessing or trouble to all.