

COMMANDMENTS



Recall the story about the four who entered the *garden*.

“Four entered the Garden, Ben Azzai, Ben Zoma, Elisha ben Abuya, and Rabbi Akiba. Ben Azzai peered into the mysteries and became demented; and of him it is said, Hast thou found honey? Eat so much as is sufficient for thee (Proverbs 25:16). Ben Zoma peered and died, and of him it says, Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints (Psalm 116:15). Elisha b. Abuya began to 'lop the branches.'. How did he 'lop the branches'? When he entered a synagogue or house of study and saw children making progress in the Torah, he uttered incantations over them which brought them to a stop; and of him it is said, Suffer not thy mouth to bring thy flesh into guilt (Ecclesiastes 5:5). Rabbi Akiba entered in peace and came out in peace.”
(Song of Songs Rabbah 1:27)

If nothing else, this story stresses the importance of being whole and balanced before setting out on any mystical path. And in *Judaism* the way for achieving balance or righteousness is by observing the *commandments*.

Traditionally, in *Judaism*, there are 613 *commandments*. This number was arrived at by the rabbis of the *Talmud* by extrapolating from the following *Biblical* passage.

“And all the people saw the thunderings, and the lightnings, and the sound of the shofar, and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they were shaken, and stood far away. And they said to Moses, Speak with us, and we will hear; but let not God speak with us, lest we die.”
(*Exodus 20:15-16*)

The story in the *Talmud* is that the first two commandments were given to the people directly by *God*, and then, because they were afraid, the rest were communicated through *Moses*. Because the word *Torah* (*tet-vav-resh-hey*) has a numerical value of 611, we add 611 and 2 to get 613 as the total number of *commandments*.

“Six hundred and thirteen precepts were communicated to Moses, three hundred and sixty-five negative precepts, corresponding to the number of days in the year, and two hundred and forty-eight positive precepts, corresponding to the number of bones in man's body. Said R. Hamnuna: What is the text for this? It is, Moses commanded us Torah, an inheritance of the congregation of Jacob, ‘Torah’ being in letter-value, equal to six hundred and eleven, ‘I am’ and ‘Thou shalt have no other gods’ not being counted, because we heard them directly from the mouth of God.”

(B. Makkoth 23b)

However, even the rabbis of *Talmud* tried to reduce these to smaller lists of essential edicts, and at the same time, the rabbis added many of their own injunctions. However, the important point is that in order to be a righteous and balanced individual, you have to have a good code of ethics to live by.

Michah came and reduced them to three principles, as it is written, 'It has been told to you, O man, what is good, and what the Lord does require of you: [i] only to do justice, and [ii] to love mercy and [iii] to walk humbly with your God (Michah 6:8).'

What follows now is my own personal list of 36 injunctions that I try to live by. However, what I really recommend is that you make up your own list that is tailored to your particular needs.

1. Treat other people the way you would like to be treated.

“On one occasion it happened that a certain heathen came before Shammai and said to him, ‘Make me a proselyte, on condition that you teach me the whole Torah while I stand on one foot.’ Thereupon, Shammai repulsed him with the builder's cubit. When he went before Hillel, Hillel said to him, ‘What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. That is the whole of the Torah. The rest is just commentary. Now go and learn the commentary.’”

(B. Shabbath 31a)

2. Give! Give! Give!

“Charity is equivalent to all the other religious precepts combined.”

(B. Baba Bartha 9a)

“Mar Zutra said, ‘Even a poor man who himself subsists on charity should give charity.’”

(B. Gittin 7b)

“Rabbi Eleazar said, ‘A man who gives charity in secret is greater than Moses.’”

(B. Babba Bathra 9b)

3. Do random acts of kindness.

“In three respects are acts of loving kindness superior to charity. Charity can be done only with one's money, but acts of loving kindness can be done with one's person and one's money. Charity can only be given to the poor, but acts of loving kindness can be done for both for the rich and the poor. Charity can be given to the living only, but acts of loving kindness can be done for both the living and the dead.”

(B. Sukkah 49b)

4. Greet people with a smile. Be a clown! Be a clown! Be a clown!

*“Greet all men with a pleasant countenance.”
(Pirkei Avot 1:15)*

*“While they were conversing, two men passed by and Elijah remarked, ‘These two have a share in the world to come.’ Rabbi Beroka then approached and asked them, ‘What is your occupation?’ They replied, ‘We are jesters, when we see men depressed we cheer them up. Furthermore, when we see two people quarrelling we strive hard to make peace between them.’”
(B. Taanith 22a)*

5. Use your brain!

“Rabbi Eleazar also said, ‘Whenever there is knowledge in a man, it is as if the Sanctuary had been built in his days. For knowledge is set between two names of God, “For a God of knowledge is the Lord (I Samuel 2:3),” and the Sanctuary is set between two names of God, “Thou hast made, O Lord, the sanctuary, O Lord (Exodus 15:17).””
(B. Berachoth 33a)

“It is the glory of God to conceal a thing; but the honor of kings is to search out a matter.”
(Proverbs 25:2)

6. Pray and give thanks for what you have.

*“Rabbi Hanina ben Papa said, ‘To enjoy this world without a benediction is like robbing the Holy One.’”
(B. Berachoth 35b)*

*“Rabbi Eleazar also said, ‘Prayer is more efficacious than offerings, as it says, “To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto Me (Isaiah 1:11),” and this is followed by, “And when ye spread forth your hands (Isaiah 1:15).”’”
(B. Berachot 32b)*

7. Choose life.

“I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing. Therefore choose life that both you and your seed may live.”

(Deuteronomy 30:19)

8. Be cheerful.

*“A merry heart is good medicine.”
(Proverbs 17:22)*

9. Don't be lazy!

“Go to the ant, you sluggard. Consider her ways, and be wise. The ant, having no guide, overseer, or ruler, provides herself bread in the summer and gathers for herself food in the harvest.”

(Proverbs 6:6-8)

10. Stay far away from a transgression.

“All the offerings that are to be eaten within one day may lawfully be consumed until the coming up of the dawn. Why then did the sages say, ‘Until midnight?’ In order to keep a man far from transgression.”

(B. Berachot 2a)

11. Don't engage in risky behavior.

“Can one go on hot coals, and his feet not be scorched?”

(Proverbs 6:28)

12. Make sure your heart is good.

*“The Holy One, blessed be He, requires the heart, as it is written, ‘But the Lord looks on the heart.’”
(B. Sanhedrin 106b)*

*“It matters not whether a man offers much or little so long as his heart is directed to heaven.”
(B. Menachoth 110a)*

*“Righteousness, righteousness shall you pursue.”
(Deuteronomy 16:20)*

13. *Don't gossip.*

“The talk about third persons kills three persons - him who tells the slander, him who accepts it, and him about whom it is told.”

(B. Arachin 15b)

14. *Don't always insist on your full rights.*

“Three the Holy One, blessed be He, loves: he who does not display temper, he who does not become intoxicated, and he who does not insist on his full rights.”

(B. Pesachim 113b)

“Do not proceed hastily to litigation.”
(Proverbs 25:8)

15. *Listen to your spouse.*

*“If your wife is short, bend down and hear her whisper!”
(B. Baba Metzia 59a)*

*“In all that Sarah has said to you, listen to her voice.”
(Genesis 21:12)*

16. End the day on an inspirational note.

“Resh Lakish says, ‘To him who is engaged in the study of the Torah by night, the Holy One extends a thread of grace by day, as it is said, “By day the Lord will command his loving kindness, and in the night his song shall be with me. (Psalm 42:9)” For what reason will the Lord command his loving kindness by day? Because His song shall be with me in the night.’”
(B. Avodah Zarah 3b)

17. Don't embarrass people.

“Rabbi Johanan said on the authority of Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai, ‘Verbal wrong is more heinous than monetary wrong, because of the first it is written, “And thou shalt fear thy God,” but not of the second.’ Rabbi Eleazar said, ‘The one affects his person, the other only his money.’ Rabbi Samuel ben Nahmani said, ‘For the former restoration is possible, but not for the latter.’ A tanna (a member of the early generation of rabbinic sages that spanned the period from approximately 70-200 CE) recited before Rabbi Nahman ben Isaac, ‘He who publicly shames his neighbor is as though he shed blood.’ Whereupon he remarked to him, ‘You say well, because I have seen such shaming, the ruddiness departing and paleness supervening.’

(B. Baba Metzia 58b)

18. Plan for the generations to come.

*“One day Honi the Circle Drawer was journeying on the road and he saw a man planting a carob tree. He asked him, ‘How long does it take for this tree to bear fruit?’ The man replied, ‘Seventy years.’ He then further asked him, ‘Are you certain that you will live another seventy years?’ The man replied, ‘I found ready grown carob trees in the world. As my forefathers planted these for me so I too plant these for my children.’”
(B. Taanith 23a)*

19. Be honest.

“Raba said, ‘When man is led in for Judgment he is asked, “Did you deal faithfully with others [i.e., with integrity and honesty], did you fix times for learning, did you engage in procreation, did you hope for salvation, did you engage in the dialectics of wisdom, did you understand one thing from another?”””

(B. Shabbat 31a)

20. Think twice before rejoicing in the failure of those you don't like.

“The ministering angels wanted to chant their hymns as the Egyptians drowned in the Red Sea during the exodus, but the Holy One, blessed be He, said, ‘The work of my hands is being drowned in the sea, and shall you chant hymns?’”

(B. Megilah 10b)

“Rejoice not when your enemy falls, and let not your heart be glad when he stumbles.”

(Proverbs 24:17)

21. *Don't be too quick to judge others.*

“Judge not your fellow man until you have stood in his place.”

(Pirkei Avot 2:4)

22. Respect your elders even when they've lost their abilities.

“You shall rise up before the hoary head, and honor the face of the old man.” (Leviticus 19:32)

*“Which you did break, and you shall put them in the ark (Deuteronomy 10:2).’ Rabbi Joseph taught ‘This teaches us that both the tablets and the fragments of the tablets were deposited in the ark. Hence we learn that a scholar who has forgotten his learning through no fault of his must not be treated with disrespect.’”
(B. Menachoth 99a)*

23. Don't be filled with guile; be sincere in your dealings with others,

*“Raba said, ‘Any scholar whose inside is not like his outside, is no scholar.’”
(B. Yoma 72b)*

24. Think about how your actions will affect others.

“It is said, ‘Shall one man sin, and you will be angry with the whole congregation? (Numbers 16:22).’ Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai taught, ‘This may be compared to the case of men on a ship, one of whom took a drill and began drilling a hole beneath his own room. His fellow travelers said to him, “What are you doing?” Said he to them, “What does that matter to you, am I not drilling in my own room?” Said they, “It matters because the water will come up and flood the ship for us all!” Even so did Job say, “And be it indeed that I have erred, my error remains with myself (Job 19:4),” and his friends said, “He adds transgression to his sin, and he extends it among us.” They said to him, “You extend your sins among us.”””

(Leviticus Rabbah IV:6)

25. *Live joyfully with your spouse.*

*“Live joyfully with the wife whom you love.”
(Ecclesiastes 9:9)*

*“A man should always eat and drink less than his means allow, clothe himself in accordance with his means, and honor his wife and children more than his means allow.”
(B. Chullin 84b)*

26. Listen to your own heart.

“Rabbi. Jannai said, ‘If the patient says, I need food, while the physician says he does not need it, we listen to the patient. What is the reason? ‘The heart knows its own bitterness (Proverbs 14:10).’”

(B. Yoma 83a)

27. *Be flexible.*

“A person should always be as bending as a reed and not as rigid as the cedar.”

(B. Taanit 20a-b)

28. *Don't eat too much.*

*“More people die from overeating than from hunger.”
(B. Shabbat 33a)*

29. Give people the benefit of the doubt.

*“Judge all men in the scale of merit.”
(Pirkei Avot 1:6)*

30. *Don't just study; do good deeds.*

“Anyone whose deeds exceed his wisdom, his wisdom is enduring, but anyone whose wisdom exceeds his deeds, his wisdom is not enduring.”

(Pirkei Avot 3:9)

“Study is not the most important thing, but deed.”

(Pirkei Avot 1:17)

31. *Respect other people's property.*

“Let the property of your fellow man be as precious to you as your own.”

(Pireki Avot 2:12)

32. Respect another person's honor.

“Let the honor of your friend be as precious to you as your own.”

(Pirkei Avot 2:10)

“Rabbi Nehunia ben haKaneh was asked by his disciples, ‘In virtue of what have you reached such a good old age?’ He replied, ‘Never in my life have I sought respect through the degradation of my fellow, nor has the curse of my fellow gone up with me upon my bed, and I have been generous with my money.’”

(B. Megillah 28a)

33. *Take a walk after eating.*

“If one eats without walking afterwards, his food rots and that is the beginning of a foul smell.”

(B. Shabbath 41a)

34. Pursue peace.

“Hillel used to say, ‘Be thou as the disciples of Aaron, loving peace and pursuing peace.’”

(Pirkei Avot 1:12)

35. *Don't follow the multitude to do evil.*

*“You shall not follow a multitude to do evil.”
(Exodus 23:2)*

36. Control your outbursts.

*“He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty; and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city.”
(Proverbs 16:32)*

*“Commit your deeds to the Lord, and your thoughts shall be established.”
(Proverbs 16:3)*

*“A soft answer turns away wrath, but grievous words stir up anger.”
(Proverbs 15:1)*