

Beginners Torah #2: Understanding the Mitzvot

By Rabbi Edward L. Nydle-Revised 9-4-03

This is the second lesson of the beginner's Torah series .In this lesson we are going to study how to understand the *mitzvah* or *mitzvot* (pl.) of Yahweh in the Torah.

The word –*MITZVAH*-means a command that comes from Yahweh that requires an action in order to fulfill it. Perhaps you have recognized the word from the word –*Bar Mitzvah*- meaning “son of the commandment”. The source of commandments is found in the *Torah* or the first five books of the Scriptures known as the Five Books of Moshe. All the commandments are found in the Torah, although they are not numbered or even specified in the Torah. We have to look to the rabbinical interpretation of the Torah to find the enumeration of the commandments. It was Rabbi Simlai, in the third century, who first taught the 613 commandments of the Torah.He counted 365 negative commandments (the same as the number of days in the solar year) and 248 positive commandments, corresponding to the number of parts in the human body. These 613 commandments are called in Hebrew the *Taryag Mitzvot*, as the numbering (gematria) of *TaRYaG* equals 613.

Categories of Mitzvot

- Positive and negative *mitzvot*-The positive commands (*mitzvot aseh*) are the commands which require a person to actually do something, such as wear tzit-tzit, give charity (*tzadaka*), keep Feasts, etc. The negative commands (*mitzvot lo ta'aseh*) are commandments that tell a person to refrain from doing something, such as not to steal, bear false witness, etc.
- Time-bound and non-time bound commands.the time-bound commandments are laws that must be observed at a certain time of the day, month, year, etc. According to Jewish tradition, women are exempt from many of these commands due to the responsibilities in raising children and keeping the home. Non-time bound commandments are laws that are not related to any time of the day, week, year, etc. These may apply to helping the poor, care of animals, keeping of vows, etc.
- Light and serious commandments-The light commands (*mitzvah kallah*) are laws such as tithing, Feasts while the heavy or weightier (*mitzvah chamurah*) laws are love, compassion, belief, etc.
- Rational and nonrational commands –Honor your parents and love your neighbor are ethical rational commands (*mishpatim*), but the nonrational (*chukim*) are commands such as *kashrut* (the dietary laws). More on this later.
- The commandments that guide us in our relationship with our fellow man (*mitzvot bay adam lechayvaro*) and our relationship with Yahweh (*mitzvot bayn adam laMakom*). The laws pertaining to our fellow man are the laws of –not to steal etc. and the laws pertaining to our relationship with Yahweh are laws that help establish identity as Yisrael such as Tzit-Tzit, mezuzah, the Feasts, etc.
- Non-Torah related commands such as washing the hands before eating, lighting Shabbat candles, reading the Scroll of Hadassah at Purim, the saying of blessing before partaking of food, making an *eruv* are all traditional commandments.

In the classification of the commandments we must also include the following list:

- Laws that pertain to all Yisrael, everywhere, and all the time, laws that pertain only to the Levitical Priesthood (*kohenim*), laws that pertain only to women (*niddah*) and laws that pertain only to men, Temple laws, laws binding upon all mankind, laws that apply to the whole community and laws that apply only to the individual Yisraelite, laws that pertain only to a specific time and place (*the lulav*), obligatory commands that only are to be observed when the occasion or circumstances arise (the hired laborer), the laws that applied only to the King of Yisrael, and laws that are constant-such as love Yahweh and your neighbor. If we understand some of these classifications, and categories it will help us to properly interpret the Torah and its obligatory nature upon Yisrael.

Mishpatim, Edot, and Chukim

First, we have to understand that the word TORAH does not mean LAW! It means instruction or teaching. The word LAW has negative connotations to the Western and Greek mind-set. Greek only has one word for the Torah-*nomos* or law. Hebraic thought understands that Torah is instruction given by a loving Elohim to His children, Yisrael, as a life-style to protect them and bring His blessing into their lives. It is the accepted life-style of the redeemed people of Yisrael.

- “And this is the TORAH which Mosheh placed before the children of Yisrael (*b’nai Yisrael*). Devarim (Deut.4: 44) *the Scriptures* I.S.R.
- “These are the witnesses (testimonies KJV) *EDOT*, and the laws (statutes KJV) *chukim*, and the right rulings (judgments KJV) *mishpatim* which Mosheh spoke to the children of Yisrael after they came out of Mitsrayim.” Devarim 4:45 *the Scriptures* I.S.R.

This verse tells us that there are three major categories of the Torah commands in the Scriptures: *EDOT-CHUKIM-MISHPATIM*.

- The *mishpatim* are all the moral and ethical laws (right-rulings –judgments) within the Torah that require no explanation or even justification to obey. In Greek the word is *krimata*, a word meaning carrying a bundle of associations to the Greek mind of punishment and condemnation. This is because to violate a *mishpatim* usually held a penalty attached to the instruction.
- The *edot* or witnesses and testimonies are the Feast Days, Sabbaths, or any other instruction that communicated to the Hebrew mind a deep spiritual truth. The Greek word is *marturia*. This word is found in its singular form in Yehoshua (Joshua) 22:34 “And the children of Reuven and the children of Gad called the altar –*ED* A Witness between us that Yahweh is Elohim.” These witnesses are REMINDERS or remembrances that Yahweh is faithful, to Yisrael and *kadosh*- set-apart. When we observe these commandments they serve to strengthen us and to reinforce our identity as Yisrael, and also reveal to us the attributes, character of Yahweh.
- The *chukim* are laws or statutes that do not seem to have any rational reason behind them. These are laws like *kashrut* and *Kil’ayim*. The Greek word is *dikaiomata* meaning decision, requirements, and regulations. The reasons behind these laws are not stated in the text and require one to dig deeper into the Torah to find the hidden truth in them. These are the instructions from the torah people seem to have the most trouble with keeping, as they see no rational reason behind the law.

ALL are included in the RENEWED Covenant

- “And I will put my *Ruach* (Spirit) within you. And I shall cause you to walk in my laws-*Chukim*- and guard My right-rulings –*Mishpatim*-and shall do them.” Yechezqel 36:27
- “So that they walk in my laws, and guard my right-rulings, and shall do them. And they shall be My people and I shall be their Elohim.” Yechezqel 11:19
- “..And I shall put my TORAH in their inward parts...”Yirmeyahu 31:33

Those who teach we should obey only the moral laws and dismiss the *chukim* and *edot* as non-binding upon Believers in Yahshua need to understand that the Torah that was placed in their hearts by receiving the RENEWED Covenant (*Brit Chadasha*) which contains all three categories of instruction. Also, the reason we are given the *Ruach Hakodesh* is to enable and empower us to walk out ALL the Torah.

When we reject both the *EDOT* and the *CHUKIM*, and think only the *MISHPATIM* (the moral and ethical laws) apply after the death, burial, and resurrection of Moshiach Yahshua, we then justify the changing of the *Shabbat* from the Seventh Day to SUNDAY, eating pork and shellfish, rejecting circumcision, and not wearing fringes or keeping the Feast Days.

We do not obey the Torah because everything needs to make sense, be logical, or have reasons behind it. The fact that an instruction may not have a rational reason behind it makes the obedience to it even more a step of belief. It shows Yahweh that we are placing the Torah of Yahweh ABOVE our own mind and reasoning faculties, to walk in belief and obedience before Him as our father Avraham did. His ways are not our ways, and His thoughts are not our thoughts! Rav Shaul wrote in **1 Corinthians 1:25**, “For the foolishness of Elohim is wiser than men, and the weakness of Elohim is stronger than men.” In our obedience to all three- *edot-mishpatim-chukim*- we show our love for Yahweh and His Torah.

I pray this teaching helped to being more understanding to you concerning the Torah of Yahweh.

May He grant you Wisdom, Understanding, and Knowledge of His Torah.