

Shabbat Yitro 5773 -- Vav Class Shabbat
D'var Torah: Three Meanings of "Commandment"
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This morning I'm giving my D'var Torah before we even begin the Torah service. Today we read from *Parashat Yitro*, and we will read and reenact the revelation of the Ten Commandments, the **עֲשֵׂרַת הַדְּבָרוֹת**. As *Kitah Vav* knows, the whole Torah service every week is a reenactment of the experience on and near Mt. Sinai. Today during the reading we will do one more special thing, which is to stand up while the Ten Commandments are being read, just as our ancestors stood at the foot of the mountain when God spoke these words to them.

I've called this *D'var Torah* "Three Meanings of 'Commandment.'" I picked this theme for a couple of reasons. One is the Ten Commandments. This is the one time that the Torah says all the people heard *mitzvot* directly from God, not just from Moshe or from other teachers. The other reason is this class service today. You young people are approaching the time of your *Bar* and *Bat Mitzvah* -- when you become a person of the *mitzvot*. I think it's important for you to think about what *mitzvot* really are, what commandments are. And not just you, but your parents too, and actually all of us. So I'll talk to you, but I'm really talking to everyone. I'm talking before the Torah reading so you'll have some thoughts to get you ready to hear this reading, to think about the experience of being commanded, or receiving *mitzvot* from God.

What does it mean when we say that God commands us? Most of us do not like to be commanded. We're okay with being asked, or being taught, or encouraged. We're used to being told what's good for us, or being offered some options to choose from. Being commanded? Who wants to be commanded? "Commanded" sounds like being overpowered. If we obey a command, maybe it's out of fear, like we'll be punished.

I'm going to tell you why I think you need commandments in your life. But I promised you three meanings of the word **מִצְוָה**, the word we usually translate as "commandment." *Command* is going to be my third meaning.

The first meaning of *mitzvah* comes from a rabbi in the Talmud named Rabbi Yochanan. He lived about seventeen hundred years ago. He says that a *mitzvah* is a kiss.

A kiss?

When you think of the Ten Commandments, you probably imagine a booming voice thundering from the top of the mountain. But Rabbi Yochanan said: This is how the Ten Commandments were given at Mt. Sinai. Each time God spoke one of the commandments, a special messenger went out whose job was to carry the words to one specific Israelite, and to teach it to them. Every Israelite had a special messenger like this. The messenger would explain everything there was to know about this particular *mitzvah*, all the details and all the ways that it could apply.

So for example, it says **לֹא תִגְנוֹב**, which means “Do not steal.” The messenger would explain that stealing includes if you lie and say that you had a coupon but you just forgot it at home and the store charges you less. And it includes taking credit for something that you didn’t really do. And there are variations and applications if someone is charging you a completely unreasonable amount for a loaf of bread or some medicine that you need so your family won’t starve.

Or the messenger would bring the *mitzvah* of Shabbat, and start to describe how beautiful the sky looks when the sun is setting, and how no matter what’s pressing down on you for work or for school, you don’t have to work on it or think about for a whole day. Everyone else out there is scurrying around and worried, but you sit and eat delicious meals, and you sing beautiful songs with other people, and have a chance to hear the Torah read from an ancient scroll and hear words of wisdom. You wear your nicest clothes and think about what makes you proud from the week, and your parents give you a special blessing.

And after the personal messenger would explain everything and answer the person’s questions, Rabbi Yochanan says the messenger would ask: Do you accept this *mitzvah*? And the person would say yes, and the messenger would give her or him a kiss. Then the messenger would go back to God to get the next of the Ten Commandments.

A kiss from a messenger from God, every time you accept a *mitzvah* into your life. That’s what Rabbi Yochanan says a commandment is.

The second definition of “commandment” comes from Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik. He lived in the last century, and was such a great rabbi that his students just called him *The Rav*, which means “The Rabbi.” The Rav said that for a religious Jew, *mitzvah* means freedom.

Now you’ll say -- that doesn’t make any sense. Freedom and commandment are completely the opposite. If you command me, I don’t have any choice, or any freedom at all.

Well, the Rav wasn't stupid. So let me give an example of what he meant.

One of the traditional Shabbat laws is that writing is prohibited. So in the synagogue, you'll never see us writing anything down. No one will be writing down someone's phone number during Kiddush when they make plans to get together later. No one is writing a check for the next USY event, or writing a label on the leftover food this afternoon, or taking notes about my *D'var Torah*.

But what about this situation: We want to keep track of attendance by our students for services or Junior Congregation, and we're pretty sure we won't remember exactly who was here. What should we do? You see we have this binder where you can put stickers on a chart by your name. But before we came up with that, we had to think about it carefully. Is the sticker book really just the same as writing?

It depends how you define writing. Is it writing when you don't use something that can write letters and words, like a pen or a crayon? Would it be writing if you just arranged a whole bunch of stickers so that they made pictures of all the letters in your name? Would it make a difference if the stickers weren't that sticky, so we could just take them off on Sunday after we wrote everything down from the chart, and then the paper would be like we had never had stickers on it at all?

We could have a whole discussion about what writing is. What makes writing writing? We had to debate and decide before we'd know whether you could use stickers.

What about calling someone on a cellphone on Shabbat? When you do that, you push numbers and they come up on a screen. After the call is over, the phone records the number on a memory chip inside your phone and you can see who the last thirty people you called are.

Is dialing a phone writing? Is it not writing, because it's not paper, and the picture on a screen goes away? Is it writing because information is stored away?

We could have a whole discussion of what writing is, and you could say anything at all. One person could say that you need something like a pen and something like paper, or there's no writing. Another person could say that whenever you make some information visible in a way that's durable, that's writing. I bet you could think of some other definitions too.

Rav Soloveitchik would call this an example of a *mitzvah* and of freedom at the same time. I bet if I sat down with *Kitah Vav* to discuss the sticker system or making phone calls, we could easily talk for an hour and have really lively discussion. There would be all kinds of opinions and arguments, and people would say "You're so wrong"

and “That’s the most brilliant thing I ever heard”... and someone might even say, “I never really thought about what writing is, what it *really* is. It’s a very specific and special thing.”

The Rav would say that when you’re studying about writing on Shabbat, you’ll feel free and creative. And if you didn’t have a *mitzvah* like Shabbat to care about, you’d never have that discussion, and you’d never experience that kind of freedom and creativity. You might if you happened to be an artist or a writer. But when there’s a *mitzvah* that we all have, everyone can feel free and creative anytime they stop to study or talk about it. The Rav says that studying any *mitzvah*, no matter what it is, is an opening to freedom and creativity.

Think about it: the tradition says “don’t write.” But God isn’t telling us, and will never tell us, what to do about stickers and cellphones. Once we have the *mitzvah*, it will be up to us to decide what it means in these cases. If you choose to ignore the *mitzvot*, you won’t experience just how much freedom and creativity there is in life.

The third definition of *mitzvah* is the obvious one: something you are commanded to do. Most of the time, the *mitzvot* will feel to you like great works of art, like freedoms for your mind and soul, like kisses from God. But sometimes they should feel like commands, and it’s good to live by them and obey them, because it’s good not to think that everything in life is up to you. This is called humility, remembering that you are not all powerful. It’s good to feel that way, to remember that you are not the only important thing in the universe. Why don’t I shave on Shabbat, when I might look better if I did? Because if I decided all the rules, then I wouldn’t have any humility at all, I’d just be arrogant and stuck up all the time, and I’d think that Shabbat was really just our own invention.

It’s good to realize that we don’t know it all, and once a week to get a reminder that there are bigger things than what I think I know.

We all know that the commandments are something you have a choice about. When you become *Bar* or *Bat Mitzvah*, you’ll have power to decide whether the *mitzvot* are in your life. And all of us, adults too, make that decision.

It might seem like the *mitzvot* take away choices, and there are times when they do. But the point is not to lose choices, but to have more in your life. When you see that there is a *mitzvah* for every part of life, for every moment and occasion, you see how beautiful life really is. The *mitzvot* remind you that no part of life is wasted. No part of *your life* is wasted, no part of *you* is wasted, ever, from God’s point of view.

As you stand in a few minutes, as we all experience again what it was like to hear the

Ten Commandments for the very first time, think about all of this. *Mitzvot* are commands, but they are paths of freedom, they are your works of art and creativity. And they are given to you by God with a special kiss.