

A PHILOSOPHY OF MITZVOT

THE RELIGIOUS AND ETHICAL PRINCIPLES OF JUDAISM,
THEIR ROOTS IN BIBLICAL LAW
AND THE JUDAIC ORAL TRADITION

תורת המצוות לאור משנתו של ספר החינוך

BY
GERSION APPEL

YASHAR BOOKS
NEW YORK, 2008

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Revised and augmented second edition

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Appel, Gersion.

A philosophy of mitzvot: the religious-ethical concepts of Judaism.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Commandments (Judaism) 2. Ethics, Jewish
3. Aaron, ha-Levi, of Barcelona, 13th cent. Sefer ha-hinukh.

I. Title. II. Appel, Gersion.

BM520.7.A65 296.3 75-1226

ISBN 978-1-933143-17-7

For information and catalog write to:

Yashar Books Inc.

1548 E. 33rd Street

Brooklyn, NY 11234

or visit our website: www.YasharBooks.com

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CHAPTER FIVE

A RATIONALE OF MITZVOT

Jewish religious philosophy, as we have seen, reveals a sustained effort to probe for the purpose and meaning of the commandments.¹ However, such investigation was generally conducted independently of any definitive study of the mitzvot. Even Maimonides, who dealt extensively with this subject, did so not in his *halakic* works, but rather in his philosophical treatise, *The Guide of the Perplexed*.² Thus, in the *Mishneh Torah* he generally assigns no reasons for the observance of the mitzvot, except for a few parenthetical observations which are only incidental to his exposition of the laws.³ It remained for the Hinnukh to pursue the quest for the purpose of the mitzvot and their religious and ethical significance through a comprehensive and systematic analysis of every one of the *Taryag Mitzvot*. The Hinnukh, it may therefore be said, pioneered in his endeavor to devise a rationale for the mitzvot of the Torah in an *halakic* work.

The basis of the Hinnukh's approach to an understanding of the mitzvot lies in the thesis that there is purpose to the commandments; that in the ultimate sense the commandments are rational and their reasons are capable of being known. It follows, then, that as intelligent human beings we should strive, to the best of our ability, to find a meaning or reason for each of them.

THE PRECEDENT OF THE SAGES

The Hinnukh points out that his thesis has ample support and authority in Jewish tradition.⁴ That the Rabbis assumed that the commandments have reasons, and are not merely arbitrary expressions of the will of God, is evident from several statements in the Talmud and in the Midrash. He cites a Midrashic statement concerning the mysterious rite of the red heifer.⁵ “Solomon said, All of these laws I have fully comprehended; but as regards the section dealing with the red heifer, I have investigated and inquired and examined, ‘I said, I will get wisdom, but it was far from me’” (Ecclesiastes 7:23).⁶ To Moses, however, even this was revealed. The Midrash states: “The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moses: To thee I shall disclose the reason for the heifer, but for anybody else it is a statute.”⁷ The Hinnukh notes another instance. The Talmud states:⁸ “What does *ve-li-mekaseh ‘atik*⁹ mean? This refers to him who reveals the things which the Ancient of Days concealed. And what are they? The reasons of the Torah.”¹⁰

The Sages themselves, the Hinnukh maintains, offered reasons for certain commandments, indicating thereby that they were of the opinion that there are reasons for the commandments. While the Hinnukh does not cite examples, some are quite evident. We may cite Rabban Gamliel’s dictum regarding the reasons for the Passover sacrifice, the unleavened bread, and the bitter herbs.¹¹ Another instance is the discussion of the Rabbis as to the reason for blowing the *shofar*.¹² The Talmud also frequently indicates that Rabbi Simeon expounded the reasons of the scriptural texts.¹³ It is to be noted, however, that these instances generally reflect a tendency toward the exposition of scriptural laws rather than a deliberate inquiry into their rational basis. The Rabbis, it is apparent, did not intend to develop a rationale of the mitzvot. Their purpose in ascribing reasons for some of the laws was to serve an educational objective and to reveal the Torah as a priceless treasure.¹⁴ Beyond that, they were content in the belief that the mitzvot were ordained by God, this being reason enough for their observance.¹⁵

A Pivotal Mishnah

Pivotal to a consideration of the question of whether or not the attempt to find reasons for the commandments is in keeping with Jewish tradition, is our understanding of the following Mishnah,¹⁶ which is subjected by the Hinnukh to careful analysis.¹⁷

The Mishnah states: "If a man said, 'To a bird's nest do thy mercies extend'...they put him to silence." It is believed that the reference here is to the mitzvah of *shiluah ha-ken*, the commandment requiring one to spare the mother bird and to let her go when a nest is taken out (Deuteronomy 22:6, 7). The Mishnah is understood to mean that if a man includes this statement in the course of his prayer¹⁸ he is silenced. The Talmud¹⁹ cites two opinions in this matter. One maintains that he is silenced, "because he causes jealousy among the works of creation." Rashi explains this to mean that he intimates that God's love of his creatures is partial. "He causes jealousy by saying that God has compassion on the birds but not on cattle and animals."²⁰ The other maintains that he is silenced, "because he makes the *middot* of God to be acts of mercy, whereas they are but injunctions." Rashi interprets the term *middot* in this context to be the equivalent of mitzvot, referring to God's commandments. Hence, according to Rashi, the second opinion holds that he is silenced because he is stating that God's commandments are acts of mercy, whereas in reality they are statutes imposed upon Israel for the purpose of demonstrating its willing subservience to God.²¹

Maimonides' view is that the Mishnah reflects the belief that the commandments have no reason but are only the will of God.²² Maimonides, to be sure, rejects this presumption. In his *Guide of the Perplexed* he writes as follows: "When in the Talmud those are blamed who use in their prayer the phrase, 'Thy mercy extendeth to young birds,' it is the expression of one of the two opinions mentioned by us, namely, that the precepts of the Law have no other reason but the divine will. We follow the other opinion."²³

Maimonides contends that the mitzvah reflects God's mercy, and likewise teaches us compassion. "When the mother is sent away, she does not see the taking of her young ones, and does not feel any pain. The eggs over which the bird sits, and the brood that are in need of the mother, are generally unfit for food. Consequently this commandment will cause man to leave the whole nest untouched. The Torah provides that such grief should not be caused to cattle or birds; how much more careful must we be that we should not cause grief to our fellowmen."²⁴

Maimonides' contention finds rabbinic support in a Midrash²⁵ which mentions several laws in the Torah that are indications of God's compassion for men as well as for cattle and fowl. The Midrash cites

the laws with respect to circumcision on the eighth day (Genesis 17:12, Leviticus 12:3), to refrain from parting the young from its mother until the eighth day (Exodus 22:29, Leviticus 22:27), to refrain from slaughtering the mother and its young on the same day (Leviticus 22:28), and to spare the mother bird (Deuteronomy 22:6, 7).

Surprisingly, however, Maimonides' belief, as stated in his philosophic work, would appear to be in contradiction with his own view as expressed in his *halakic* work. In his *Commentary on the Mishnah* he rejects the belief that this mitzvah is because of God's compassion for the bird, but claims it to be a commandment for which there is no reason.²⁶ It cannot be contended that the above statement is only an exposition of the Mishnah itself and does not necessarily reflect his own view, because in the *Mishneh Torah* he explicitly states that the commandment to spare the mother bird and the commandment forbidding one to slaughter an animal with its young on the same day are not inherently acts of mercy, but are only statutes expressive of the will of God. "If one says in his prayer, 'May He who had mercy on a bird's nest in enjoining one from taking the mother bird with the young, and who prohibited the slaughter of an animal with its offspring on the same day, also have mercy upon us,' and the like, they silence him because these commandments are divine decrees and not acts of mercy. For were they due to compassion for the animal, He would not have permitted us the slaughter of animals altogether."²⁷

Nature of Divine Providence

The Hinnukh disagrees with Maimonides in his strict interpretation of the Mishnah, and indicates that it should not be construed as maintaining the view that the commandments are merely expressive of the will of God and have no inherent reasons. In the course of his construction of the Mishnah and the views expressed in the Talmud, wherein he essentially follows the lead of Nahmanides, the Hinnukh lays down the guidelines for an understanding of certain specific principles of belief and the general purpose of the commandments. The object of this mitzvah, the Hinnukh states, is to teach us divine providence, namely that "the providence of God, blessed be He, over His creatures extends in the case of the human species to the individual, as it is written, 'For His eyes are upon the ways of man, and all his steps doth He see' (Job 34:21). In the case of all other living creatures it extends to the species in general; that is, God's desire that the species be perpetuated."²⁸

Preservation of the species in the case of all living creatures is, for the Hinnukh, a direct manifestation of divine providence. This is even more clearly stated by him in his discussion of the biblical law prohibiting the slaughtering of an animal and its offspring on the same day. "The purpose of this commandment is that a man should take to heart the fact that God's providence extends generally to all species of living creatures, and that by His providence over them will they continue to exist forever; for divine providence in relation to things constitutes their very existence. Hence none of the species will ever become totally extinct. And though divine providence in the case of the human species extends to the individual, it is not so in regard to other living creatures. In the latter instance God bestows his providence in a general way over the species alone."²⁹ In the view of Nahmanides, which is shared by the Hinnukh, the two commandments, to let the mother bird go and not to slaughter an animal together with its young, have the common purpose of perpetuating the species, in addition to an abhorrence of cruelty to animals. Maimonides relates the two in that man is prohibited from causing grief to animals.

Hence we may infer from the above that, since God's providence over all creatures other than man extends only to the species and not to the individual, the form of prayer cited in the Mishnah is inconsistent with the view of Judaism. Though the Hinnukh does not explicitly draw this conclusion, it nevertheless follows from his stated principle regarding the nature of divine providence. This, then, would be the meaning of the first opinion cited in the Talmud. He is silenced "because he causes jealousy among the works of creation." In other words, he errs in his prayer in extending divine providence to the individual among animals.

Nurturing the Quality of Mercy

Moreover, it cannot be said that God commanded us to let the mother bird go when a nest is taken out because He is moved by a special compassion for the mother bird in this instance in the same manner as would a human being. For if this were so, why did God permit the slaughter of animals altogether?³⁰ The attribute of mercy is of the nature of man. The attempt to apply qualities, such as mercy, to God is erroneous and incompatible with Judaism's conception of the nature of God. "This is not to say," the Hinnukh explains, "that God is not merciful...but it means that His mercy is unlike man's. Mercy in man is a necessary consequence

of the nature with which God endowed him. God's mercy, on the other hand, is the result of His free will. His wisdom moves Him to be merciful because it is a quality of goodness, and God is the source of all good."³¹

This view is a development of the second opinion cited in the Talmud, namely, that he is silenced "because he makes the *middot* of God to be acts of mercy, whereas they are but injunctions." It is significant, we may note, that the Talmud uses here the term *middot* which, in its stricter sense, means attributes or qualities, a meaning that is eminently pertinent in this context. The statement above is consequently to be understood in this sense, namely, that "these commandments with respect to cattle and fowl are not because of compassion for them, but are rather injunctions intended to train us and to teach us good traits."³² The object of this mitzvah is therefore to teach us to refrain from cruelty, and thereby to nurture within us the human quality of mercy and compassion. For, indeed, the basic purpose of the commandments is to provide man with a means of purifying his soul, thus meriting the good life in this world and in the World to Come.

Hence, in the light of his construction of the Mishnah in question, the Hinnukh believes that it does not mean to indicate that the mitzvot are without reason, nor does it reflect a negative attitude on the part of the Sages toward a rational understanding of their purpose. Quite the contrary, it would appear that their attitude in this respect was a positive one.³³ Thus, in summation, the Hinnukh is convinced of the correctness of his thesis, and that it is manifestly in consonance with authoritative Jewish thought.

JUSTIFICATION FOR A RATIONALE OF MITZVOT

The question arises: If there are reasons for the mitzvot, why are they not given in the Torah? In answer, the Hinnukh cites³⁴ the following statement in the Talmud: "Why were the reasons of the Torah laws not revealed? Because in two verses reasons were revealed and they caused the greatest in the world to stumble."³⁵ The reference is to King Solomon, who did not heed the prohibitions forbidding a king's acquisition of excessive wealth and an inordinate number of wives and horses.³⁶ He violated these prohibitions, the Rabbis explain, in the mistaken belief that he would not succumb to the resultant evils of which the Torah explicitly warns. His transgression was thus due to the fact that in both instances Scripture revealed the reasons for the prohibitions. Presumably, had no reasons been

set forth, he would have simply complied with the biblical injunctions. Hence, had the Torah given the reasons for other mitzvot as well, similar miscalculations would have followed. This would be particularly true, for example, in the case of forbidden foods for which the Torah gives no reason, lest those who consider themselves wiser than their fellows be prompted to contend that a harmful effect ascribed to a forbidden food applies only in certain climates, or to certain persons whose nature makes them susceptible to it. By this kind of specious reasoning, they themselves would eventually be misled, and they would mislead others, thus causing incalculable harm.³⁷

But if this be so, why does the Hinnukh himself attempt to offer reasons for the commandments? It may be pointed out, as the Hinnukh suggests,³⁸ that in offering reasons for the mitzvot he is but following the precedent already established by the Sages in the Talmud, as previously indicated, and by the great authorities who preceded him. Indeed, as we have seen, both Nahmanides and Maimonides are unequivocally committed to the position maintained by the Hinnukh.

Comprehension of God's Ways

For Maimonides, a comprehension of God's ways and of the purpose of His commandments is man's supreme objective in life. Even as creation and the actions of God are not merely the result of His will, but of His wisdom, so "all commandments and prohibitions are dictated by His wisdom and serve a certain aim. Consequently there is a reason for each one of the precepts; they are enjoined because they are useful."³⁹ The thesis that the commandments are rational and their reasons are to be probed was not mere speculation which Maimonides allowed himself within the confines of his philosophical work alone. Indeed, he deems it proper and germane to a true conception of Jewish law. In the *Mishneh Torah* Maimonides writes: "Even though all of the statutes of the Torah are divine decrees, as we explained at the end of *Hilkot Me'ilah*, it is nevertheless fitting to reflect upon them and to offer reasons for them wherever possible."⁴⁰

Nahmanides expresses substantial agreement with the general principle established by Maimonides. "The Master's conclusion that there are reasons for the commandments is exceedingly evident...The Rabbis have explained that what prevents us from knowing the reasons for the mitzvot of the Torah is but our own intellectual blindness. In fact, the reason for

the most difficult one among them was already revealed to the Sages of Israel.”⁴¹

Strictly speaking, moreover, the author of the *Sefer ha-Hinnukh* would maintain that he only delineates general objectives which the commandments serve, as in the case of the laws of impurity and of forbidden foods. Indeed, in his opinion, only the essential object of a given commandment should concern us. We may ascribe a reason as regards the general aspects of a commandment, but we need not attempt to explain the purpose of its details.⁴² In this way the danger anticipated does not enter into consideration. This view is also expressed by Maimonides. “The repeated assertion of our Sages that there are reasons for all commandments, and the tradition that Solomon knew them, refer to the general purpose of the commandments, and not to the object of every detail.”⁴³

Commandments Have Purpose

Nevertheless, the above would not be a sufficient answer; for, if ascribing reasons for the mitzvot may lead to their misunderstanding and neglect, then why pursue this line of investigation? It would appear that the Hinnukh’s justification for advancing reasons for the commandments is his assumption that, in order to assure an observance of the mitzvot, we must seek out and offer reasons that are convincing and acceptable. “My intention in writing these reasons,” says the Hinnukh, “is to guide the youth, and to impress upon them at the beginning of their studies that the words of the Torah have reason and purpose, so that they may accept them in accordance with their training and to the extent of their limited intelligence. Let not the mitzvot appear to them at the outset as words of a sealed book, lest they thereby spurn them in their youth and abandon them forever to follow after vanity.”⁴⁴

The fear that a stated reason may be misconstrued is then no longer a valid concern, in view of the total disregard of the commandments which can result from a lack of appreciation of their purpose. In the final balance, the harm that may accrue from misunderstanding must be equated with the infinitely greater harm that comes from the belief that the commandments have no rational basis or intelligent purpose, and hence are of no meaning in our lives.⁴⁵

The Transcendent Wisdom of God

In embarking upon his quest for a rationale of the commandments, the Hinnukh affirms one fundamental condition as a prerequisite. Regardless of whether or not we are successful in fathoming the reason for a given commandment, we must presume the commandments to be of divine origin and their observance in no way subject to the outcome of our quest. "There is no man in the world," the Hinnukh emphasizes, "who has attained to the ultimate of all wisdom and from whose knowledge nothing is hidden. Of Moses it is said that he had access to but forty-nine of the fifty gates of wisdom.⁴⁶ One was closed even to him. King Solomon, the wisest of men, said of himself, 'I said I will be wise, but it was far from me' (Ecclesiastes 7:23)...If, then, in our wisdom we attain to an understanding of the purpose which the laws serve, we can be pleased. However, where we do not in our wisdom fathom their purpose, we must nonetheless consider that God in His wisdom, which transcends that of any being, knew the purpose which a given law serves and for that reason did He command us concerning it."⁴⁷

It is from this very premise that Maimonides took his point of departure in his investigation into the reasons of the mitzvot. In the *Mishneh Torah* he enunciates this clearly, as follows: "It is proper for a man to reflect upon the laws of our holy Torah in order to understand their final object according to his ability. However, if there is something whose reason he will not have found and whose cause he does not know, let him not consider it as being unimportant...Note how strict the Torah is regarding the improper use of sacred property, which is but wood and stone but which has become hallowed by reason of the fact that God's name was bestowed upon it,...how much more so must a man refrain from spurning the commandments which God ordained for us, only because he does not know their reasons."⁴⁸

This view is also clearly affirmed by Saadiah and Ibn Ezra. Saadiah concludes his brief analysis of the laws with the statement: "But even though the chief reason for the fulfillment of these principal precepts and their derivatives and whatever is connected with them is the fact that they represent the command of our Lord and enable us to reap a special advantage, yet I find that most of them have as their basis partially useful purposes. I see fit, therefore, to note some of these motivations and discuss them, although the wisdom of God, blessed and exalted be He,

is above all that.”⁴⁹ Ibn Ezra, likewise, states: “God forbid that any of the mitzvot should be contrary to reason. However we must keep all that God has commanded us irrespective of whether their reason has been revealed to us or not.”⁵⁰

THE OBJECT OF THE MITZVOT

The Hinnukh’s approach to an understanding of the mitzvot of the Torah is based in the first instance, as we have shown, on the premise that there is reason and purpose to the commandments. To this he adds a second, corollary hypothesis, namely, that the object of the mitzvot is to further man’s welfare. We shall examine this second hypothesis and endeavor to delineate those principles enunciated by the Hinnukh which reflect his conception of the general object of the commandments.

The Hinnukh indicates this to be a fundamental premise in his rationale of mitzvot. “The great benefit that we derive in acquiring virtuous qualities and in avoiding evil is due to the fact that goodness will cleave to the good. And our good God, Who desires our benefit, has therefore commanded His people to choose the good. This is the way that I follow with regard to most of the commandments in explaining their plain meaning.”⁵¹

Mitzvot Are for Man’s Good

The thesis set forth by the Hinnukh may be stated as follows. The mitzvot were given by God solely for man’s benefit. Their observance renders man capable and worthy of receiving goodness from God, who is the source of all good, and whose very essence is goodness. In violating or neglecting them, however, he becomes susceptible to evil and grief.

“Know my son,” says the Hinnukh, “that God derives nothing from man’s observance of all His commandments, other than that it is His desire to do good to us. When man is prepared to receive this goodness by the observance of these commandments, then God bestows it upon him.”⁵² God, therefore, made known to man the good way that leads him to be good, namely, the way of the Torah, for by it man can be good. We find, therefore, that whoever observes God’s commandments fulfills His will since he is then worthy to receive His goodness. On the other hand, whoever does not prepare himself in this way is exceedingly wicked, because he knows what the will of God is, but he acts contrary to His will.”⁵³

In the final analysis then, the mitzvot are for our own good. Some of them are designed to keep our souls pure.⁵⁴ Those which designate certain actions or procedures are intended to teach us good traits. We must, therefore, assert that the commandments are given exclusively for our benefit and not for God's benefit. It neither adds to nor detracts from God's honor, for instance, whether we slaughter according to ritual or not, or if we eat unclean and forbidden foods. The same can be said of the other commandments. "The mitzvot of the Torah," the Hinnukh concludes, "have the purpose of helping the people to refine their opinions and of training them to improve all of their actions. There is no benefit in their observance to the Creator, blessed be He."⁵⁵ This, the Hinnukh emphasizes, is basic to his thesis. "Indeed, this is the view which I maintain in all of my discussions in this book, namely, that the commandments are of benefit to us, but not to Him who commanded them. If you will set your heart to it, you will find this to be the intention of all of them."⁵⁶

The Hinnukh's exposition above is substantially that of Nahmanides,⁵⁷ who cites as authority the midrashic statement, "What does it matter to God whether the animal is slaughtered at the throat or at the back of the neck? The Torah has been given only to ennoble mankind."⁵⁸ The Midrash bases itself upon the verse, "The word of the Lord is tried [*zerufah* = refined]. He is a shield unto all who take refuge in Him" (Psalms 18:31). The verse is understood to mean that the mitzvot are intended to purify, refine, and ennoble and, as a consequence, to protect and benefit man.

In this connection he quotes a significant talmudic discussion on the annulment of vows. The Mishnah states: "Rabbi Zadok said: Rather than open the way for a man by reason of the honor due to father and mother, they should open the way for him by reason of the honor due to God."⁵⁹ The Jerusalem Talmud⁶⁰ proceeds to analyze the Mishnah: "What is honor due to God? If he says I will not make a *sukkah*, or I will not take the *lulab* or I will not wear the *tefillin*, this is a matter of honor to God? Indeed, he benefits himself, as Scripture says: 'If thou be righteous what givest thou Him? (Job 35:7)⁶¹ If thou sin, what dost thou effect against Him?'" (Job 35:6).

This same thought, Nahmanides notes, is expressed in the prayer on Yom Kippur: "Thou hast set man apart from the beginning and

acknowledged him that he should stand before Thee. Yet who shall say unto Thee: 'What dost Thou?' And if he be righteous, what boon is that to Thee?"⁶² Maimonides, likewise alluding to this prayer,⁶³ though in a different context, concludes, "The service of God is not intended for God's perfection; it is intended for our own perfection."⁶⁴

THE IMPRESS OF MITZVOT UPON THE SOUL

The mitzvot were given by God in order to benefit man materially and to purify and ennoble him spiritually.⁶⁵ Certain of the mitzvot are quite evidently designed to promote man's physical health and well-being, a condition desirable in itself as well as for its felicitous effect upon his spirit. "God, blessed be He, removed his chosen people from all things which harm the body, because it is the vessel for the soul which has cognition of its Creator."⁶⁶ Should the body be subject to any defect, it would impair the function of the mind. Therefore, the Torah has forbidden us anything that would be harmful. "In this way we can explain all of the prohibitions of the Torah regarding forbidden foods."⁶⁷

It is equally reasonable to assume that other mitzvot may have as their purpose the preservation of man's spiritual health and well-being. In some way, of which we are not fully cognizant, man's soul and intellect may suffer ill-effects as a result of adverse physical factors. "Do not be dismayed, my son," the Hinnukh contends, "by the laws of impurity, even though their reason is generally unknown to people. For it is possible that impurity is harmful and has some ill-effects upon the soul."⁶⁸

In support of this thesis, he draws upon a statement by the Rabbis wherein they call attention to the injurious effect of transgressions upon the soul, particularly in the case of prohibited foods. Citing the biblical verse, "Ye shall not make yourselves abominable with any creeping thing that creepeth; and ye shall not make yourselves unclean with them, that ye should be defiled thereby" (Leviticus 11:43), the Rabbis conclude that forbidden food "dulls the heart of man," defiling the soul and deadening its finer qualities and its purer nature.⁶⁹

Interrelatedness of Body and Soul

Food is an important factor in man's health. Some foods are demonstrably detrimental to the proper functioning of the body. That *terefah* meat is harmful should be obvious from the fact that the defect resulted in the animal's having become diseased, thus endangering

the health of one who would eat such meat.⁷⁰ Since body and soul are inseparable, one affecting the other, this will likewise result in a harmful effect upon the soul. For this reason, the Torah forbade certain fats and prohibited the ingestion of blood.⁷¹ In the case of the restriction against blood, he cites an additional consideration: the eating of the life force of another living creature is bound to develop in man a cruel and brutal nature.

As the craftsman depends upon the strength and the quality of his tools, so does the soul depend upon the body in order to function properly. Even those prohibited foods whose harmful effect upon man's physical being is not readily apparent may still be injurious to man's physical and spiritual nature in a way as yet not known to us or to medical science. In the final analysis, the Hinnukh emphasizes, "God knows that all of the foods which He prohibited His chosen people are harmful to the body, which is the vessel of the soul, in which the soul functions and by means of whose good deeds the soul is uplifted. God, therefore, forbade them to us so that the soul might perform its appointed functions without being restricted by the ill disposition of the body or the dullness of the heart."⁷²

Hence, until we have acquired conclusive knowledge of the nature of man's soul, we would do well not to question the proscriptions of forbidden foods and impurities. "The human soul may be ill-affected by material things though they are not of its kind. In all probability, this happens because of the interrelatedness of the body and the soul. If we humans, in our limited understanding, do not know the nature of the soul, how can we presume to know, of a certainty, what is beneficial to it or harmful to it merely through investigation? Indeed, the doctors have no means of curing an illness until they first recognize the essential nature of the illness. Therefore, as regards all of the restrictions found in the Torah regarding impurity, we cannot expect to lay bare all of their reasons until we will have first reached an ultimate knowledge of the nature of the soul, its origin and its function. Understand this, and bear it in mind, because in it you will find a partial answer as to the purpose of the laws of impurity and purity."⁷³

The Hinnukh here points up the innate interdependence of body and soul, maintaining that the body is "the vessel of the soul, through which the soul functions."⁷⁴ The belief in the interrelatedness of man's body

and soul, as set forth by the Hinnukh, was anticipated by Maimonides.⁷⁵ It is more precisely developed by Nahmanides in his discourse on the prohibition of the blood of animals;⁷⁶ the reason for the prohibition being that the coarse animal spirit in the blood would be absorbed and become a part of the spirit of man. "It is well known," Nahmanides writes concerning animals that are forbidden by the Torah, "that they are not beneficial to health, and besides this, they are harmful to the soul."⁷⁷ Noting that this is of especial consequence to Israel, he elaborates, "The reason for the statement, 'Thou shalt not eat any abominable thing' (Deuteronomy 14:3), is to indicate that all things which are forbidden are an abomination to the pure soul...because forbidden foods, being coarse, give rise to a denseness and a dullness in the soul."⁷⁸ Ibn Ezra, in like manner, understands this to mean that Israel, as a holy people, must abjure anything which defiles the purity of the soul.⁷⁹

This approach to mitzvot, which views them in terms of the interdependence of body and soul, is particularly evident in the writings of the Kabbalists. Thus, Menahem Recanati, a Jewish mystic who was a disciple of Nahmanides, writes: "In connection with all of these prohibited foods it states, 'Ye shall be holy unto me' (Leviticus 20:26). This is in order that the soul, which draws its substance from food, be kept pure in accordance with its essential refinement and purity."⁸⁰ This conception was also anticipated by Saadiah,⁸¹ who explains that forbidden foods and prohibited forms of cohabitation have a debilitating and defiling effect upon the soul. While the effect may, at times, not be evident to men, it is perfectly clear to God.

MAN IS AFFECTED BY DEEDS

There remains to be considered one further hypothesis that is essential in the Hinnukh's rationale of the mitzvot—his belief that the deepest impressions upon a man's soul are made not by thoughts alone but by overt acts. "You must know that man is affected by his actions. His heart and all of his thoughts invariably follow the deeds with which he is occupied, whether they be good or bad."⁸² The Hinnukh advances this as the reason why God commanded the performance of so many acts in remembrance of the exodus from Egypt, when it might seem that one act of remembrance would suffice to bring the miraculous event to mind.

The notion that man's character is molded by habitual acts and conduct, also propounded by Aristotle,⁸³ is affirmed by Maimonides in

his discourse on the acquisition of moral dispositions. "How shall a man train himself in these dispositions, so that they become ingrained? Let him practice again and again the actions prompted by those dispositions and repeat them continually till they become easy and are no longer irksome to him, and so the corresponding dispositions will become a fixed part of his character."⁸⁴

Moral and Spiritual Effects of Mitzvot

The Hinnukh takes this to be a guiding principle to be followed in explaining the commandments, which are designed to promote man's well-being and to cultivate the moral and spiritual phases of his personality. The object of the Torah, he asserts, is to envelop us with mitzvot and righteous deeds, thereby directing our thoughts to holiness and guiding us to the good life. "Our Sages, of blessed memory, have therefore said, 'The Holy One, blessed be He, was minded to make Israel worthy; wherefore He gave them a copious Torah and many commandments,'⁸⁵ in order to occupy therewith all of our thoughts and activities for our own ultimate good, because through good deeds we will be inclined to become good and to merit life everlasting."⁸⁶

Even a man's garb and dress can have an effect upon his attitude and conduct. Thus, the priests were commanded to wear prescribed garments while performing the service in the Temple, the Hinnukh observes, because apart from the fact that the garments were a means of according honor and respect for the divine service, they were also intended as a constant reminder of their sacred duties and their dedication to God.⁸⁷ The Hinnukh evinces a keen insight into the psychology of the human personality and the effect of habit upon human actions and feelings. Echoing rabbinic dicta, he maintains that even the inveterate sinner, who makes a sincere effort to follow the commandments of the Torah, can in the course of time incline toward a good life even if his motives initially are not pure. "Were he to rouse his spirit and endeavor to occupy himself diligently with the Torah and the commandments, even if not for the sake of Heaven, he would immediately incline toward the good and by the power of his deeds he would destroy his evil nature, because men's hearts are drawn after their actions."⁸⁸

A man's character has a quality of pliability and is not completely impervious to sustained pressure resulting from certain factors and conditions in life, be they for good or for evil. No man may consider

himself impenetrable to the corroding influence of evil habits and morally degrading situations. Hence, says the Hinnukh, "Even if a man be wholly righteous, upright and wholehearted, delighting in the Torah and the commandments, were he perchance to occupy himself continually with shameful things—let us say, for example, that the king imposed upon him an appointment to an evil occupation, and if he were indeed engaged all day continually in that occupation—he would in due time turn away from the righteousness of his heart and become a completely wicked man, for it is a known and true fact that every man is affected by his actions."⁸⁹

For this reason the observance of the commandments, even if in a perfunctory and mechanical manner, is beneficial both in the inherent goodness achieved and in the strengthening and cementing of good habits. Thus, the Hinnukh writes, "In accustoming themselves to that which is good and upright, even if at first out of fear, they will train themselves eventually to do justice and righteousness out of love, once they perceive the way of truth. This is in accord with what the Sages say, that habit becomes second nature; that is, just as a person's nature compels him to gratify his wants, so will a strong habit become a part of his very nature, impelling him to follow in the way in which he has become accustomed. Hence, when people walk in the ways of uprightness and faith and choose the good, then goodness will cleave unto them and God will rejoice in His works."⁹⁰

The Hinnukh thus bases his conception of the mitzvot on what he believes to be the consensus of opinion held by the Sages and the religious philosophers, namely, that the commandments, divinely ordained, are purposeful and capable of being rationally comprehended, and that they were designed by God to promote man's welfare. That some of the mitzvot are beyond our understanding is due, as we have noted, to the limited knowledge which man presently possesses. Since our knowledge is still too meager to allow us fully to apprehend the manner in which they influence and determine our well being, we must observe unquestioningly all of the commandments, even the *hukim* for which no reason is given and which baffle and elude our comprehension. "No intelligent person," the Hinnukh contends, "will doubt that God, Who is the source and embodiment of all wisdom, and the source of all goodness, will command His creatures anything except it be for their good and for their benefit."⁹¹ The Torah laws thus demand unqualified obedience and implicit faith in God's superior wisdom. The knowledge

of God in these matters far transcends the limits of human intelligence.

Having thus established that the mitzvot are rationally comprehensible, the Hinnukh accordingly proceeds to probe the reasons for all of the *Taryag Mitzvot*.

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Meir Loeb ben Jehiel Michael
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Moses ben Jacob of Coucy
Thirteenth century talmudist

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