

The Cubit

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These are the Generations of Noah

The L_RD recompense thy work,
and be thy reward complete from the L_RD,
the G_d of Israel, under whose wings thou art
come to take refuge.' Ruth 2: 12

From The Editor

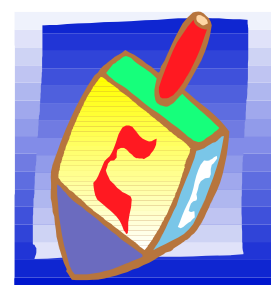
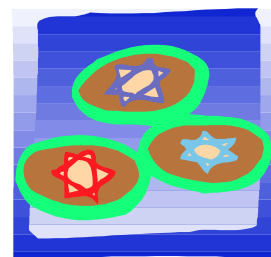
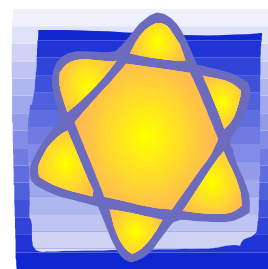
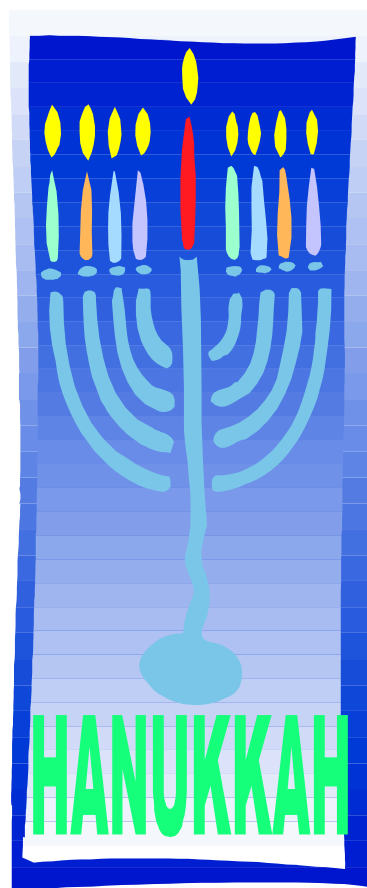
December sees the anticipation of Hanukkah which takes place at the end of this month.

Although Hanukkah is an uniquely Jewish Festival it is one of the times when Noachides can also celebrate. Why? Because it reminds us of how faith is of use in practical times.

Liz ❖

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Honor Your Teacher

A Story for Shabbos from Ascent of Safed www.ascent.org.il/

A Chabad chassid who lived in Vitebsk remained childless for many years. Several times he had traveled to Liozhna to beseech the Alter Rebbe (Rabbi Shneur Zalman, founder of the Chabad movement) to arouse Heaven's mercy with the Rebbe's prayers and blessings, but strangely, the Rebbe responded each time that it wasn't in his power to help him.

Once again he decided to seek the Rebbe's help. He enclosed with his written request to merit children a charitable contribution (a combination commonly known as *pidyon hanefesh*--"soul redemption"). Again the Rebbe answered that it was not within his power to help him, but this time he offered a surprising recommendation: to go to the Rebbe, **R. Shlomo of Karlin**, that he would be able to help him.

Now, it is well known how Lubavitcher chassidim feel about going to other Rebbes. Nevertheless, the Rebbe himself had suggested it, the need was great, and the years were slipping by, so off he went.

Arriving at Karlin, he consulted with some of the local chassidim. They recommended that the best time to gain access to the Rebbe was when he set out on one of his journeys. On the way, the Rebbe would regularly give advice to those that accompanied him. So the chassid stayed in Karlin several days, until finally the Rebbe announced he was about to leave on a trip, and that anyone who needed anything of him was welcome to come along. The chassid climbed aboard the caravan of coaches and wagons, which soon after set off.

The Rebbe and his entourage passed through many towns and villages. The journey continued, but still the chassid had not received any encouragement to present himself to the Rebbe. Finally, after they stopped at a certain village, the Rebbe summoned the chassid and told him that if he would turn over to him a certain large sum of money, he would then merit to be blessed with offspring.

The chassid was by no means a wealthy man. Also the extended traveling had already cut deep into his resources. What to do? Eventually he made up his mind that he just could not meet the Karliner's demand. He respectfully took leave of the Rebbe and departed for home, but in his heart he felt resentful: how could a tsaddik request so much money for a blessing?

After he was home for a period of time, the chassid decided to go again to Liozhna to visit the Alter Rebbe. When his turn came for a private audience, the Rebbe asked him if he had gone to the Karliner Rebbe, and if so, what had the

tzaddik advised him? The chassid answered that indeed he had gone, and invested a lot of time and money in a long journey with him, but in the end the Rebbe had requested a large sum of money which he wasn't able to provide, and what kind of business is this anyway to demand so much money for a blessing?

Said the Alter Rebbe: "The reason you don't have children is because you once gravely insulted a Torah Sage."

"But I never insulted a Torah Sage in my life!" cried the chassid.

"Yes, you did," insisted the Rebbe, "the great scholar and righteous man, the Rav of Lubavitch, Rabbi Yisasschar Ber, of blessed memory."

"But I never thought him to be a sage," said the chassid.

"Is that so?," marveled the Rebbe. "You should know that Eliyahu HaNavi (Elijah the Prophet) was revealed to him everyday.

"It is written in the Talmud," continued the Rebbe, "that part of the appeasement process is to pay a liter of gold. But as R. Yisasschar is no longer in this world, it was longer possible for you to apologize to him and make amends. There are certain latter rabbinical authorities, however, who have ruled that even posthumously, paying the liter of gold helps to ease the censure. The Karliner Rebbe took you around with him to all the places where those Rabbis are buried in order to garner support for you. The large sum of money he requested from you was exactly equivalent to a liter of gold. Unfortunately, you passed up the opportunity.

"I, myself am not able to help you in this matter," explained the Rebbe, "because R. Yisasschar was my teacher, and a student cannot forego the honor of his teacher."

translated and retold by Yrachmiel Tilles from Reshimat HaDevarim, Vol. III, page 89 (and first published in Kfar Chabad Magazine).

Biographical notes:

Rabbi Shneur Zalman [18 Elul 1745-24 Tevet 1812], one of the main disciples of the Maggid of Mezritch, is the founder of the Chabad-Chassidic movement. He is the author of Shulchan Aruch HaRav and Tanya as well as many other major works in both Jewish law and the mystical teachings.

R. Shlomo of Karlin [1738-22 Tammuz 1792], was also a student of the Maggid, as well as of Reb Aharon the Great of Karlin, whom he succeeded in 1772. Most of the Chassidic leaders of the next generation in the Lithuanian region were his disciples. His son, Rabbi Asher, was the first Rebbe of Stolin.

חנוכה

That's "Hanukkah" in Hebrew!

Information taken from the Beit Nirenberg Hanukkah website :

www.geocities.com/Heartland/Prairie/5493/hanuka.html

Hanukkah, which means "dedication" and is also referred to as "The Festival of Lights", is a

Jewish festival which begins on the Hebrew date of the 25th of Kislev and lasts eight days, through the 2nd of Tevet. This year, that corresponds to December 4th through December 11th.

Hannukah commemorates the victory of the Maccabees (led by Judah) over the Hellenistic Syrians in a revolt that took place around 165 BCE (note: Jews use BCE--Before the Common Era and CE--the Common Era instead of BC and AD).

The victory in itself was considered a miracle, but Jewish legend gives an additional explanation for Hanukkah rituals, explained below. Once the Temple Mount in Jerusalem had been reclaimed, the Temple had to be rededicated. According to legend, only one jar of sacramental oil was found, enough for one day. Miraculously, the oil burned for eight days, thus the eight days of Hanukkah.



The most important Hanukkah ritual is the candle lighting. Jews light candles in a special candleholder called a "menorah" or a "hanukkiah". Each night, one more candle is added. The middle candle, called the "shamash", is used to light each of the other candles and it is lit every night.

Therefore, on the first night of Hanukkah, two candles are lit (the shamash and the candle for the first night) and on the last night, there are nine lit candles.

It is traditional to eat foods fried in oil during Hanukkah. Some common foods are potato latkes and "sufganiot" (jelly doughnuts).

נס גדול היה פה



Another tradition is to play the "dreidel" game. A dreidel (or "sivivon") is a four-sided top. On each side is a different Hebrew letter: נ(nun), ג(gimel), ה(heh) and פ(peh), corresponding to the words in the sentence "nes gadol haya po" ("A great miracle

happened here"). Of course, the miracle happened in Israel, so outside of Israel, the letter פ(peh) is replaced by ש(shin) for "nes gadol haya sham" ("A great miracle happened there"). The dreidel is used for a gambling game in which each letter represents a different amount of money (or whatever...) won or

lost.

Winning or losing is determined by the side that the dreidel falls on and the wins or losses are:

Nicht	(No)	No win, no lose
Gut	(Good)	Win all
Halb	(Half)	Win half
Schlecht	(Bad)	Lose all

Another common Hanukkah practice is giving gifts or "gelt" (money) to children. In Hebrew, "gelt" is called "d'mei Hanukkah".

In Israel, Hanukkah is a very festive time. Schools are out for a week and there are lots of parties and special events around the country. We sing Hanukkah songs (like the one playing in the background), eat lots of fattening food and have lots of fun!

Understanding Hanukkah

Information taken from ORT's Hanukkah site: www.ort.org/ort/hanukkah/

The History of Hanukkah

Hanukkah, the Festival of Lights, is celebrated for eight days, commencing on the 25th day of the month of Kislev (November/December), to commemorate the victory of the Jews over the Hellenist Syrians in 165 BCE.

Following their victory, the Maccabees, sons of the Priestly Hasmonean family which led the Jews in their revolt against the Syrian overlords, entered the Holy Temple in Jerusalem defiled by the Syrian invaders, cleansed it and dedicated it anew to the service of God. Then, in memory of their victory, the Maccabees celebrated the first Hanukkah. (Hanukkah is the Hebrew term for dedication).

The Talmud, the body of Jewish oral law, relates how the Judean heroes, led by Judah Maccabee, were making ready to rededicate the Temple and were unable to find enough undefiled oil to light the lamps. However, in one of the Temple chambers, they finally came upon a small cruse of oil which, under normal circumstances, would have lasted only one evening.

Miraculously, this small amount of oil kept the Temple lights burning, not for one night, but for all the eight nights until new oil fit for use in the temple could be obtained. This is the miracle commemorated by the kindling of the Hanukkah lights.

Lights, Symbolism & Blessings

The most important observance associated with Hanukkah is the kindling of the Hanukkah lights on the Menorah or Hanukkiya, a seven- or nine-branch candelabrum. On each

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Anxiety Relief: The Kabbalah Approach to Mental Health

Therapeutic Techniques

A Torah Message from Rabbi Yitzchak Ginsburgh.

Taken from The Inner Dimension : www.inner.org

In general, we may safely say that most psychological disorders stem from anxiety. On the simplest level, the tension and pressure that accompanies worrying about even the most basic things, like health and money, itself causes and exacerbates many psychological problems. On a deeper level, close examination reveals that almost every psychological disorder stems either from some form of conscious or subconscious fear or phobia, or from frustration regarding the inevitable conflict between man's base, animalistic urges and his higher, spiritual aspirations. In a person who believes in G-d and tries to live according to the teachings of the Torah, these fears and frustrations will also be expressed as the fear of sinning. The encounter with and treatment of anxiety in whatever form it may assume is the basis of all psychological therapy.

The teachings of Kabbalah, like the teachings of Judaism in general, are intimately bound up with the textual nuances of the written text of the Torah. Any inquiry into the Kabbalistic approach to a particular subject must begin with an analysis of how the sacred text treats that subject.

Anxiety is mentioned several times in the written Torah, but the most seminal instance is the following verse from the book of Proverbs (12:25):

"If there be anxiety in a man's heart let him quash it, And turn it into joy with a good word."

The book of Proverbs was written by King Solomon, who was the wisest of all men, particularly in the realm of human psychology. In this verse we may thus expect to find the key to psychological well-being and the proper approach for dealing with problems of mental health.

The phrase "let him quash it" is actually only the most basic meaning of the verb that describes what we are to do with anxiety. Tradition has recorded two other, ancillary meanings of this verb: "let him ignore it" and "let him articulate it." We thus have three distinct instructions regarding the proper response to anxiety. These three meanings therefore represent three different, complementary therapeutic techniques for dealing with anxiety. Together, these techniques, when properly implemented, may be expected to keep anxiety from developing into a more serious condition, and even to cure the sufferer completely.

HOLIDAYS & FESTIVALS FOR DECEMBER

HANUKKAH (8 DAYS)

STARTS: 22-DEC-00 / 25- KISLEV-5761

ENDS: 29-DEC-00 / 03- TEVET-5761

The 'Festival of Dedication' also called 'The Festival of Lights' commemorates the victory of the Maccabees over the Syrians in 165 B.C.E and the re-dedication of the Temple in Jerusalem which had been defiled by them. Each night of the festival an additional candle is lit until on the last night, eight candles are burning. According to tradition, when the Temple was re-captured, only one small vessel of consecrated oil -- enough for just one day -- was found. Miraculously, it sufficed for eight days until new oil could be prepared and the festival was established for this length of time to commemorate the miracle.

SHABBAT & HOLIDAY READINGS FOR DECEMBER

Days start at sundown and end at sundown.

Thus Sat 5th XXX would start at sundown on Friday not midnight Friday night / Saturday morning.

Holiday	Date	Torah	Haf Torah
Shabbat	2-Dec	Gen. 25.19-28.9	Malachi 1.1-2.7
Shabbat	9-Dec	Gen. 28.10-32.3	Hosea 12.13-14.10 Optional addition Micah 7.18
Shabbat	16-Dec	Gen. 32.4-36.43	Obadiah 1.1-21 Optional substitution: Hosea 11.7-12.12
1 st Day of Hanukkah	22-Dec	Num. 7.1-17	None
Shabbat & 2 nd Day of Hanukkah	23-Dec	Shabbat: Gen. 37.1-40.23 Holiday: Num. 7.18-29	Zechariah 2.14-4.7
3 rd Day of Hanukkah	24-Dec	Num. 7.24-35	None
4 th Day of Hanukkah	25-Dec	Num. 7.30-41	None
5 th Day of Hanukkah	26-Dec	Num. 7.36-47	None
Rosh Hodesh & 6 th Day of Hanukkah	27-Dec	Rosh Hodesh: Num. 7.42-47 Holiday: Num. 28.1-15	None
7 th Day of Hanukkah	28-Dec	Num. 7.48-59	None
8 th Day of Hanukkah	29-Dec	Num. 7.54-8.4	None
Shabbat	30-Dec	Gen. 41.1-44.17	I Kings 3.15-4.1



At long last we have begun to recognize that reality includes a spiritual dimension. But somehow God has gotten lost in the shuffle.

by Sara Levinsky Rigler

Aish Spiritual Issues – Philosophy

(aish.com/ar.asp?an=1221)

Melody died last week, at the age of forty-two. Exactly 12 months ago, she got a surprise diagnosis: that her throbbing back pains were caused by metastasized breast cancer.

Her prognosis was less than two months to live. Melody and her long-time boyfriend Kevin fought valiantly, using every weapon in the arsenal of New Age cures including energy healing, acupuncture, rebirthing, visualization, diet, and contact with nature, in addition to radiation and chemotherapy.

Melody's religion was made up of meditation, vibrational healing, positive thinking, and music

Although I did not know Melody well, her ordeal touched me deeply. She had been a periodic member of the ashram where I lived for 15 years before moving to Jerusalem and taking on the path of Judaism. The daughter of

a Swedenborgian minister, Melody practiced a generic New Age religion, which embraced meditation, vibrational healing, positive thinking, and music. She played the guitar and sang beautiful songs of her own composition, songs about love and the spirit.

Kevin sent out frequent e-mails about Melody's progress, and eventual decline. In the spring she rallied, miraculously defying her prognosis. She started to walk again, gained weight, and was featured on a PBS television special about alternative healing. A euphoric Kevin wrote to thank all the people who had sent Melody their prayers and healing thoughts.

Something was bothering me. I wondered why, in his long letter, he never thanked God.

ANGELS AND MIRACLES, BUT NO GOD

Throughout the year, Kevin wrote of angels, miracles, spiritual worlds, dreams, and the importance of sending Melody only positive energy. Many times he asked everyone to pray, but the more I contemplated his messages, the more I became aware of something I can only call, "horizontal prayer" -- the sending of positive, healing wishes for recovery not to God, but to Melody! In fact, in his very first letter Kevin wrote:

"I've asked that all the Swedenborgian churches that we performed at during the Peace Prayer tour offer prayers to Melody this Sunday morning."

I originally thought the "to" was a typo.

The last letter, written by Devipriya, one of our ashram friends, described Melody's passing -- she was surrounded by fragrant flowers, with four of the ashram members chanting to their lineage of gurus, sending her off to complete her mission in the spirit world. During the transition, they devotedly followed the directions of a shaman and a Buddhist lama. Devipriya wrote: "The room was so charged and so peaceful at the same time, like angels had come and lifted her from her body."

God was never mentioned.

RELATIONSHIP, NOT RELIGION

Reading that letter amidst my sorrow, I couldn't help but think how different is the focus of the Jewish tradition, where a yearning for a connection with God permeates every conscious act.

Rabbi Leib Kelemen is fond of saying: "Judaism is not a religion, it's a relationship." All the elements of Judaism work to further the relationship between the human being and God. Prayer is vertical: a one-to-one conversation with God. The commandments are to be performed in the same way that a lover does the bidding of his or her beloved. Therefore, Judaism without God would be like Romeo and Juliet without Juliet.

Judaism without God would be like Romeo and Juliet without Juliet

It is a truism that increasing numbers of people are not marrying, because of their inability to commit to a relationship. One wonders if the predilection for spirituality without God derives from the same syndrome: valuing freedom and independence over a relationship which will often demand the total giving of one's self.

My teacher, Rebbetzin Tzipporah Heller, says that even when one is dealing with a situation in accordance with lofty principles and techniques, one must still ask, "Is God in the picture?"

For example, the self-help market offers dozens of books on how to control destructive anger. All these techniques may be useful. Judaism, however, would add that when faced with an anger-provoking situation, one must recognize that everything comes from God. And that includes the phone ringing with a wrong number in the middle of the night, the spilled salad dressing on your just-washed floor, the train you are running to catch pulling out of station one minute early. No matter which techniques you apply to bring down your blood pressure, if God is not in the picture, you are missing out on a custom-made opportunity to connect with the

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Divine.

What's wrong with a picture devoid of God? Quite simply: God is reality -- both ultimate reality and immediate reality. To live in this world oblivious to God is like being a fish oblivious to water. It's okay for a fish, but not for a person who aspires to greater consciousness.

LOST IN THE SHUFFLE

After two centuries engrossed in a materialistic vision of the world, the West is enjoying a resurgence of spirituality. The popularity of angels, psychic phenomena, faith healing, meditation, and near-death experiences testifies to a paradigm shift in our concept of reality. We have at long last begun to recognize that reality includes a spiritual dimension, which is not susceptible to scientific measurement.

But somehow God has gotten lost in the shuffle. It is rather like a lavish Bar Mitzvah party, replete with a 10-piece orchestra, 14 tables of smorgasbord, six Viennese dessert tables, a troupe of jugglers and acrobats, and no glimpse of the Bar Mitzvah boy.

The materialistic worldview which prevailed in the 19th and 20th centuries denied the existence of God. The spiritual worldview gaining popularity at the threshold of the 21st century is too busy with psychic phenomena and personal growth to care about the existence of God.

It is no coincidence that the most popular Eastern paths in the West are derivatives of Buddhism, a non-theistic religion. Gautama Buddha, the fifth century BCE founder of

Buddhism, never mentioned God in his teachings. His Four Noble Truths and his Eightfold Way speak about escaping the inherent suffering of this world by transcending desire and practicing right action and thought. The entire thrust is on human consciousness, control of mind, and self effort. This forms the prototype of most of the personal growth movements prevalent in America.

While Hinduism is a totally theistic religion, its American transplants emphasize their lineage of gurus rather than the deities of the Hindu pantheon (with the exception of the Krishna Consciousness movement).

**The "inner voice"
rarely tells one
what one doesn't
want to hear..**

The advantages of spirituality without God are obvious: One can choose one's own direction, methods, and goals without the intrusions of the Divine. The

"inner voice," which functions as the CEO of most New Age enterprises, rarely tells one what one doesn't want to hear.

Judaism, on the other hand, has bequeathed to the world a God Who not only created and sustains the universe, but Who also issues orders, like, "Do not steal," and, "Do not commit adultery." Little wonder that most people resist such encroachments on their personal lives.

Sara Levinsky Rigler graduated from Brandeis University magna cum laude. For fifteen years she practiced and taught Vedanta philosophy and meditation. She is the author of A Bridge of Dreams. She presently resides in the Old City of Jerusalem with her husband and two children, working as a book editor and writer.

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night more more light is kindled, beginning with one candle on the first night of Hanukkah and ending with eight on the final evening. The lighting is accompanied by the chanting of appropriate blessings and the singing of songs. The ninth branch is reserved for the shamash, the servant light, which is lit first and used to kindle the other lights of the Menorah.

In a broader sense, however, the Hanukka light symbolizes the light of religious, national and cultural freedom won by the Maccabees for their people. It gave new force to the faith that had waned under the influence of Hellenism and Jewish culture began to flourish again. Also the Hebrew language, which had been largely supplanted by Greek, came into its own once more.

הַמִּנְחָה הַשְּׁמִינִית הַשְּׁמִינִית הַשְּׁמִינִית

EXPEND FOR A FRIEND

The Sages say that having a friend is so important that one should be willing to pay for it! (Talmud - Avot 1:6)

Paying a price does not necessarily refer to financial payments. We might need to spend time and energy to keep a friend. We may have to tolerate some of his negative habits. Or at times he might quarrel with us. Nevertheless, the price we pay for a close friend is a worthwhile investment.

(Rabbi Pliskin's Gateway to Happiness, p.135)

DISCUSS GROWTH WITH OTHERS

Our thinking is shaped and corrected only through the exchange of thoughts with others. To sharpen yourself, communicate with friends who are striving toward the same goals. An intellect which depends entirely upon itself is prone to stagnation, fantasies or erroneous ideas.

(Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch - Wisdom of Mishlei, p.183; Rabbi Pliskin's Gateway to Happiness, p.135)

Halakhah: Jewish Law

In this article the idea of Jewish Law is explored. Next month, in the January issue we will look at the 613 Mitzvot and explore which are possible to be observed now, in the post Temple period and also the concept of 'prohibited' actions for Noachides on Shabbos.

From Judaism 101 ~ www.jewfaq.org/

What is Halakhah?



Judaism is not just a set of beliefs about G_d, man and the universe. Judaism is a comprehensive way of life, filled with rules and practices that affect every aspect of life: what you do when you wake up in the morning, what you can and cannot eat, what you can and

cannot wear, how to groom yourself, how to conduct business, who you can marry, how to observe the holidays and Sabbaths, and perhaps most important, how to treat G_d, other people, and animals. This set of rules and practices is known as halakhah.

The word "halakhah" is usually translated as "Jewish Law," although a more literal translation might be "the path that one walks." The word is derived from the Hebrew root Heh-Lamed-Kaf, meaning to go, to walk or to travel.

Some non-Jews and non-observant Jews criticize this legalistic aspect of traditional Judaism, saying that it reduces the religion to a set of rituals devoid of spirituality. While there are certainly some Jews who observe halakhah in this way, that is not the intention of halakhah, and it is not even the correct way to observe halakhah.

On the contrary, when properly observed, halakhah increases the spirituality in a person's life, because it turns the most trivial, mundane acts, such as eating and getting dressed, into acts of religious significance. When people write to me and ask how to increase their spirituality or the influence of their religion in their lives, the only answer I can think of is: observe more halakhah. Keep kosher or light sabbath candles, pray after meals or once or twice a day. When you do these things, you are constantly reminded of your faith, and it becomes an integral part of your entire existence.

What Does Halakhah Consist of?

Halakhah is made up of mitzvot from the Torah as well as laws instituted by the rabbis and long-standing customs. All of these have the status of Jewish law and all are equally binding. The only difference is that the penalties for violating laws and customs instituted by the rabbis are less severe than the

penalties for violating Torah law, and laws instituted by the rabbis can be changed by the rabbis in rare, appropriate circumstances.

The 613 Mitzvot

At the heart of halakhah is the unchangeable 613 mitzvot that G_d gave to the Jewish people in the Torah (the first five books of the Bible). The word "mitzvah" means "commandment." In its strictest sense, it refers only to commandments instituted in the Torah; however, the word is commonly used in a more generic sense to include all of the laws, practices and customs of halakhah, and is often used in an even more loose way to refer to any good deed.

Some of the mitzvot are clear, explicit commands in the Bible (thou shalt not murder; to write words of Torah on the doorposts of your house), others are more implicit (the mitzvah to recite grace after meals, which is inferred from "and you will eat and be satisfied and bless the L-rd your G_d"), and some can only be ascertained by Talmudic logic (that a man shall not commit incest with his daughter, which is derived from the commandment not to commit incest with his daughter's daughter).

Some of the mitzvot overlap; for example, it is a positive commandment to rest on the Sabbath and a negative commandment not to do work on the Sabbath.

Although there is not 100% agreement on the precise list of the 613 (there are some slight discrepancies in the way some lists divide related or overlapping mitzvot), there is complete agreement that there are 613 mitzvot. This number is significant: it is the numeric value of the word Torah (Tav = 400, Vav = 6, Resh = 200, Heh = 5), plus 2 for the two mitzvot whose existence precedes the Torah: I am the L-rd, your G_d and You shall have no other G_ds before Me. There is also complete agreement that these 613 mitzvot can be broken down into 248 positive mitzvot (one for each bone and organ of the male body) and 365 negative mitzvot (one for each day of the solar year).



The most accepted list of the 613 mitzvot is Maimonides' list in his Mishneh Torah. In the introduction to the first book of the Mishneh Torah, Maimonides lists all of the positive mitzvot and all of the negative mitzvot, then proceeds to divide them up into subject matter categories.

Many of these 613 mitzvot cannot be observed at this time for various reasons. For example, a large portion of the laws relate to sacrifices and offerings, which can only be made in

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the Temple, and the Temple does not exist today. Some of the laws relate to the theocratic state of Israel, its king, its supreme court, and its system of justice, and cannot be observed because the theocratic state of Israel does not exist today. In addition, some laws do not apply to all people or places. Agricultural laws only apply within the state of Israel, and certain laws only apply to kohanim or Levites. The modern scholar Rabbi Israel Meir of Radin, commonly known as the Chafetz Chayim, has identified 77 positive mitzvot and 194 negative mitzvot which can be observed outside of Israel today.

Gezeirah: A Fence around the Torah

A gezeirah is a law instituted by the rabbis to prevent people from accidentally violating a Torah mitzvah. For example, the Torah commands us not to work on the Sabbath, but a gezeirah commands us not to even touch an implement that you would use to perform prohibited work (such as a pencil, money, a hammer), because someone holding the implement might forget that it was the Sabbath and perform prohibited work.

It is important to note that from the point of view of the practicing Jew, there is no difference between a gezeirah and a Torah mitzvah. Both are equally binding; neither can be disregarded on a whim. The difference is generally in the degree of punishment: a violation of the Sabbath was punishable by death under Torah law, while a violation of the gezeirah would result in a less severe punishment.

Another difference between a gezeirah and a mitzvah is that the rabbis can, in rare appropriate circumstances, modify or abrogate a gezeirah. Rabbis cannot change the Torah law that was commanded by G_d.

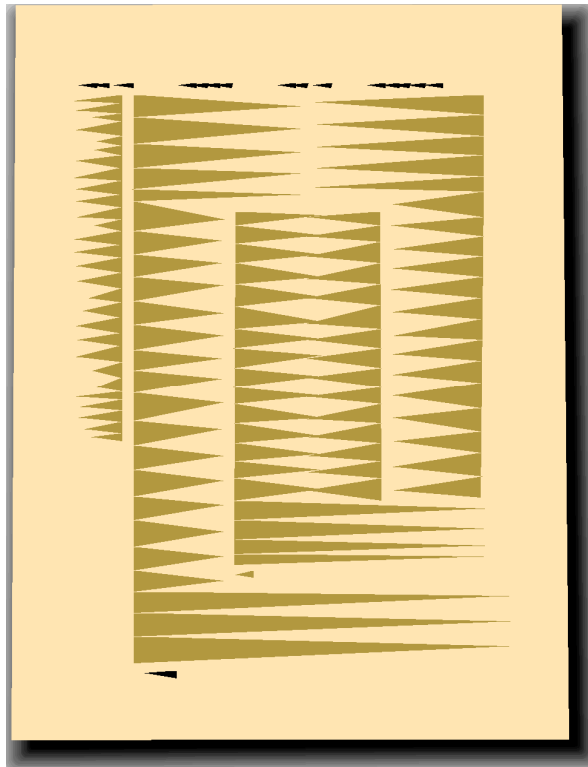
Takkanah: A Law Instituted by the Rabbis

Halakhah also includes some laws that are not derived from mitzvot in the Torah. A takkanah is a law that was instituted by the rabbis. For example, the "mitzvah" to light candles on

Chanukah, a post-biblical holiday, is a takkanah. The practice of public Torah readings every Monday and Thursday is a takkanah instituted by Ezra.

Some takkanot vary from community to community or from region to region. For example, around the year 1000 C.E., a Rabbenu Gershom Me'or Ha-Golah instituted a takkanah prohibiting polygyny, a practice clearly permitted by the Torah and the Talmud. It was accepted by Ashkenazic Jews, who lived in Christian countries where polygyny was not permitted, but was not accepted by Sephardic Jews, who lived in Islamic countries where men were permitted up to four wives.

A takkanah, like a gezeirah, is just as binding as a Torah mitzvah.



Minhag: A Custom with the Status of Law

A minhag is a custom that evolved for worthy religious reasons and has continued long enough to become a binding religious practice. For example, the second, extra day of holidays was originally instituted as a gezeirah, so that people outside of Israel, not certain of the day of a holiday, would not accidentally violate the holiday's mitzvot. After the mathematical calendar was instituted and there was no doubt about the days, the added second day was not necessary. The rabbis considered ending the practice at that time, but decided to continue it as a minhag.

It is important to note that these "customs" are a binding part of halakhah, just like a mitzvah, a takkanah or a gezeirah.

The word "minhag" is also used in a looser sense, to indicate a community or an individual's customary way of doing some religious thing. For example, it may be the minhag in one synagogue to stand while reciting a certain prayer, while in another synagogue it is the minhag to sit during that prayer. Even in this looser sense, it is generally recommended that a person follow his own minhag, even when visiting another community.