

PRIORITIES¹

"This is the **chok** ('decree') of the Torah ... (Numbers 19:3)

There can be no order, no plan, no achievement, without priorities.

Life, as we envision and try to live it, consists of important and less important things, primary and secondary goals, severe and less severe setbacks. **Reason, our compass in the journey through life, is the capacity to make these distinctions-to determine what must give way before what, and what should be reciprocated with what.** Priorities and gradations also exist among the divinely mandated laws of the Torah. The Torah commands, "You shall not kill" but **it also differentiates between premeditated murder (punishable by death), murder resulting from negligent behavior (punishable by exile), no-fault murder (which carries no penalty), and killing in self-defense(permissible and a duty).**⁽¹⁾ It instructs to aid a fellow in need, but it also delineates eight levels of charity,⁽²⁾ advises to whom we should give and in what order,⁽³⁾ and sets the mandatory, ideal, and maximum percentages of our income to be contributed.⁽⁴⁾ It tells us to rest on Shabbat, but it also differentiates between various categories of "work" and the severity of their violation of the day of rest.⁽⁵⁾ It distinguishes between civil and moral laws,⁽⁶⁾ between active and non-active transgressions,⁽⁷⁾ between laws that apply to a specific time and place and laws that have no such prerequisites, and so on. There is, however, a certain category of *mitzvot* that defies such rational structuring. These are the Torah's *chukim*, its suprarational "decrees."

THREE TYPES OF MITZVAHS

Generally speaking, the 613 *mitzvot* of the Torah fall into three categories:

- (a) *Mishpatim* ("judgments"). The Talmud defines *mishpatim* as laws that the human mind would have conceived on its own, even if the Torah had not commanded them. Examples of the *mishpatim* are the prohibitions against murder and theft, or the obligation to honor one's parents.
- (b) *Eidot* ("testimonials"). These are laws whose function and utility are understandable, although we might not have formulated them ourselves. The *eidot* include the *mitzvot* of Shabbat, the festivals observances, *tefillin*, etc.
- (c) Suprarational *mitzvot*, called *chukim* ("decrees"). A prime example of *chukim* are the laws of *tum'ah v'taharah*, ritual purity and impurity. It is not just that these laws cannot be explained by human

reason, but that they defy the priority structure that characterizes the logical *mishpat* and the rational *eid*. If a person touches an impure object, they are rendered ritually impure; it makes no difference whether this contact was deliberate, unintentional, or even against the persons will. Nor is the type of contact consequential—the same degree of impurity is engendered whether the person grazed the impure object with their fingernail or ate it.⁽⁸⁾

TOUCHING THE ABSOLUTE

In other words, the *chok* introduces an element of absoluteness into our lives—an arena in which there are no major and minor things, no primary and secondary levels of involvement. **It brings us in contact with a domain in which life is not divisible into ends and means, but constitutes an integral, singular fulfillment of its Creator's will.**

In truth, every *mitzvah* is a *chok*, an unequivocal expression of divine will.⁽⁹⁾ It is only that many *mitzvot* come dressed in garments of varying rationality, for G-d desired that they be integrated into our rationally structured lives. Then there are the *mitzvot* that reach us unencumbered by such vestments, free of all that quantifies, qualifies, and classifies their divine essence.

We need structure and priorities—it's the only way we know to lead constructive lives. But we also need those moments, actions, and experiences that bring us in contact with the underlying singularity of life. Every so often, we need to enter a reality that enables us to see how, in the final analysis, our every deed and endeavor is of equal, ultimate significance.⁽¹⁰⁾

(1) Exodus21:13-14; Talmud, *Makkot* 7a-8b; *ibid.*, *Sanhedrin* 72a.

(2) *Mishneh Torah, Laws of Gifts to the Poor*, 10:7-14.

(3) E.g.: "The poor of your family come before the poor of your city; the poor of your city come before the poor of another city ... your people come before foreigners. (Talmud, *Bava Metzia* 71a).

(4) Ten percent is mandatory, but "even one who splurges, should not splurge more than a fifth" (*ibid.*, *Ketubot* 50a).

(5) See *Mishneh Torah, Laws of Shabbat*, 1:1-3, 21:1 and 24:1.

(6) Talmud, *Berachot* 19b, et al.

(7) *Ibid.*, *Sanhedrin* 63b, et al.

(8) See also *Midrash Tanchuma, Chukat* 3: "'This is the decree (*chok*) of the Torah' (Numbers 19:2) ... We have learned: A bright, leprous spot the size of ... half a bean on a person, renders them ritually impure; but if it spreads over their entire body, they are ritually pure. Who did so, who decreed so, who commanded so, if not the One, the singular Master of the universe?... **All who are involved in the preparation of the (Red) Heifer, from the beginning to the end, contaminate their garments, but the Heifer itself purifies.** ... But G-d said: I have set a statute, I have decreed a decree, and you are not allowed to transgress My decrees."

(9) Thus, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi interprets the verse (Numbers 19:2) that introduces the laws of the Red Heifer, "This is the *chok* of the Torah"—this

¹ Yanki Tauber, *The Inside Story, Numbers*, (Meaningful Life Center), pp. 147-150.

mitzvah embodies the *chok*-element that is the essence of the entire Torah.
(10) Based on *Likkutei Sichot*, vol. 13, pp. 66-70.

1. **Reason, our compass in the journey through life, is the capacity to make these distinctions-to determine what must give way before what, and what should be reciprocated with what.**

a. Reason is the capacity of consciously applying logic by drawing valid conclusions from new or existing information, with the aim of seeking the truth.

1) Deuteronomy 6:4

“Hear O Israel: The LORD our God, **the LORD is one.**”

a) The *Shema* affirms the indivisible unity of God, often presented **as contrary to Trinitarian theology.**²

2) Ezekiel 18:20

“The soul that sins, it shall die. The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son.”

a) This passage stresses individual responsibility for sin, **complicating concepts of inherited or imputed sin** as understood in some Christian traditions.³

3) Romans 3:19-20 (CJB)

¹⁹Moreover, we know that whatever the *Torah* says, it says to those living within the framework of the *Torah*, in order that every mouth may be stopped **and the whole world be shown to deserve God's adverse judgment.** ²⁰For in his sight no one alive will be considered righteous on the ground of legalistic observance of *Torah* commands, because **what Torah really does is show people how sinful they are.**

a) Deuteronomy 13:1 (13:2 in Christian Bibles)

¹“You shall not add to it or take away from it.”

b) Psalms 119:152

¹⁵²“Long ago I learned from your statutes that **you established them to last forever.**”

c) (In the Bible), the Torah and its commandments are presented as eternally valid. This is cited by Jewish sources to underscore the unchangeability of the Torah’s commandments, which **... conflict(s) with the Christian idea that Jesus’ teachings fulfilled or set aside certain Mosaic laws.**⁴

4) Matthew 5:17-19

(Yeshua says) ¹⁹“**Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets;** I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, **until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.**”

1) This affirms the enduring validity of the Torah’s commandments, **which contradicts later Christian claims that the Law is no longer binding (or relevant).**

5) Matthew 19:16-19 (Mark 10:17-19, Luke 18:18-20)

1) When asked how to attain eternal life, Yeshua responds by citing commandments (“You shall not murder, not commit adultery,” etc.) **rather than emphasizing faith in himself or the cross. This focus on ethical commandments for salvation differs from later doctrine centered on “faith alone.”**

6) Acts 21:20-24

James and the Jerusalem elders urge Paul to prove he keeps the Torah by paying for vows at the Temple, ²⁴“so that everyone will know there is no truth to these reports about you... **but that you yourself also walk orderly, keeping the law.**”

a) (The) early apostles appear to continue Torah observance, **which (is) at odds with later Christian teaching about the irrelevance of Jewish law.**

b) Ironically, CHRISTIAN TEACHING **AFFIRMS THE VERY FALSE “RUMOR” that Paul ²¹(taught) all the Jews who live among the Gentiles to turn away from Moses,** telling them not to circumcise their children or live according to (Jewish) customs.

7) Romans 2:13

“For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, **but the doers of the law who will be justified.**”

a) Paul explicitly values observance of the law, in contrast to the idea of “faith alone.”

b) James 2:26

²⁶As the body without the spirit is dead, so **faith without deeds is dead.**

8) These passages illustrate that ... the (Apostolic Writings) reflects ideas **more closely aligned with ongoing Jewish practice than with later developed Christian doctrines.**⁵

2 www.notion.com

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

2. *The Torah commands, "You shall not kill" but it also differentiates between premeditated murder (punishable by death), murder resulting from negligent behavior (punishable by exile), no-fault murder (which carries no penalty), and killing in self-defense (permissible and a duty).*

a. Exodus 20:13

¹³"You shall not **murder**."

KJV, LXX, NAB, NJB, RSV—"You shall not **kill**."

CJB, NAS, NIRV, NKJ, TNK, YLT—"You shall not **murder**."

OKE—Thou shalt **not kill LIFE**.

PJE—My people, the sons of Israel, **You shall not be murderers; you shall not be companions of or partakers with murderers:** in the congregations of Israel there shall not be seen a murderous people; neither shall your sons rise up after you and teach one another to take part with murderers: for **on account of the guilt of murder the sword cometh forth upon the world.**

1) רָצַח (*ra-tzach*)—murder, slay, assassinate, kill.

2) הָרַג (*ha-rag*)—kill, legally execute, slaughter (an animal).

b. Genesis 9:5-6

⁵And for your lifeblood I will surely demand an accounting. I will demand an accounting **from every animal**. And from each human being, too, I will demand an accounting for the life of another human being. ⁶"Whoever sheds human blood, by humans shall their blood be shed; for **in the image of God has God made mankind** (אָדָם [*adam*]).

1) ... *from every animal*. Interesting, given that "hunting" for an animal is instinctive—**for food—not sport**.

2) And, when an animal acts in a way that is contrary to its nature, *i.e.*, attacks humans, especially when it seems that these attacks are unprovoked, they are usually put to death.

c. Exodus 21:12-14

¹²"Anyone who strikes a person with a fatal blow is to be put to death. ¹³However, if it is not done intentionally, but God lets it happen, they are to flee to a place I will designate. ¹⁴But **if anyone schemes and kills someone deliberately, that person is to be taken from my altar and put to death.**

d. Leviticus 24:17

¹⁷"Anyone **who takes the life of a human being** (אָדָם [*adam*]) is to be put to death.

e. Numbers 35:16

¹⁶"If anyone strikes someone a fatal blow with an iron object, that person is a murderer; the murderer is to be put to death.

f. Numbers 35:30

³⁰"Anyone who kills a person is to be put to death as a murderer only on the testimony of witnesses. But no one is to be put to death on the testimony of only one witness. ³¹" **Do not accept a ransom for the life of a murderer, who deserves to die. They are to be put to death.**

g. Deuteronomy 19:11-13

¹¹But **if out of hate someone lies in wait**, assaults and kills a neighbor, and then flees to one of these cities, ¹²the killer shall be sent for by the town elders, be brought back from the city, and be handed over to the avenger of blood to die. ¹³**Show no pity**. You must purge from Israel the guilt of shedding innocent blood, so that it may go well with you.

3. *(The Torah) instructs to aid a fellow in need, but it also delineates eight levels of charity, advises to whom we should give and in what order, and sets the mandatory, ideal, and maximum percentages of our income to be contributed.*

a. There are eight levels of charity, each greater than the next.⁶

[1] The greatest level, above which there is no greater, is to support a fellow Jew by endowing him with a gift or loan, or entering into a partnership with him, or finding employment for him, in order to strengthen his hand so that he will not need to be dependent upon others.

[2] A lesser level of charity than this is to give to the poor without knowing to whom one gives, and without the recipient knowing from who he received. For this is performing a *mitzvah* solely for the sake of Heaven. This is like the "anonymous fund" that was in the Holy Temple [in Jerusalem]. There **the righteous gave in secret, and the good poor profited in secret**. Giving to a charity fund is similar to this mode of charity, though one should not contribute to a charity fund unless one knows that the person appointed over the fund is trustworthy and wise and a proper administrator ...

[3] A lesser level of charity than this is when one knows to whom one gives, but the recipient does not know his benefactor. The greatest sages used to walk about in secret and put coins in the

⁶ https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/45907/jewish/Eight-Levels-of-Charity.htm—*Mishneh Torah, Laws of Gifts to the Poor*, 10:7-14.

doors of the poor. It is worthy and truly good to do this, if those who are responsible for distributing charity are not trustworthy.

- [4] A lesser level of charity than this is when one does not know to whom one gives, but the poor person does know his benefactor. The greatest sages used to tie coins into their robes and throw them behind their backs, and the poor would come up and pick the coins out of their robes, so that they would not be ashamed.
- [5] A lesser level than this is when one gives to the poor person directly into his hand but gives before being asked.
- [6] A lesser level than this is when one gives to the poor person after being asked.
- [7] A lesser level than this is when one gives inadequately but gives gladly and with a smile.
- [8] A lesser level than this is when one gives unwillingly.

b. Bava Metzia 71a

If thou lend money to any of my people that is poor by thee:⁽⁴⁾ [this teaches, if the choice lies between] my people and a heathen, 'my people' has preference; the poor or the rich—the 'poor' takes precedence; thy poor [sc. thy relatives] and the [general] poor of thy town—thy poor come first; the poor of thy city and the poor of another town—the poor of thine own town have prior rights. The Master said: '[If the choice lies between] my people and a heathen—"my people" has preference.' But is it not obvious?—R. Nahman answered: Huna told me it means that even if [money is lent] to the heathen on interest, and to the Israelite without [the latter should take precedence].

(4) Ex. XXII, 24.

c. Ketubot 50a

So it was also taught: If a man desires to spend liberally⁽⁶⁾ he should not spend more than a fifth,⁽⁷⁾ [since by spending more] he might himself come to be in need [of the help] of people. It once happened that a man wished to spend⁽⁶⁾ more than a fifth⁽⁷⁾ but his friend did not allow him.

(6) In charity.

(7) Of his wealth.

1) Mark 10:20-22

²⁰"Teacher," he declared, "all these I have kept since I was a boy."

²¹Yeshua looked at him and loved him. "One thing you lack," he said. "Go, **sell everything you have and give to the poor**, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." ²²At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.

2) Luke 12:15-21

¹⁵Then he said to them, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions." ¹⁶And he told them this parable: "The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest. ¹⁷He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.' ¹⁸"Then he said ... 'I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain. ¹⁹And I'll say to myself, "You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.'" ²⁰"But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?' ²¹**This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God.**"

3) 1Corinthians 13:3

³**If I give all I possess to the poor** and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, **but do not have love, I gain nothing.**

4. *Every so often, we need to enter a reality that enables us to see how, in the final analysis, our every deed and endeavor is of equal, ultimate significance.*

a. Pirkei Avot 4:3

"Do not be scornful of any person and do not be disdainful of any thing, for **there is no person who does not have his hour and no thing that does not have its place.**"

b. Kiddushin 40b

"A person should always see himself as if the entire world is half meritorious and half guilty; **with one action he can tip his own scale and that of the entire world to merit.**"

c. Matthew 10:42

"And **whoever gives one of these little ones even a cup of cold water because he is a disciple**, truly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward."

d. Luke 21:1-4

¹As Yeshua looked up, he saw the rich putting their gifts into the temple treasury. ²He also saw a poor widow put in two very small copper coins. ³"Truly I tell you," he said, "this poor widow has put in more than all the others. ⁴All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth; but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on."

e. **Value is placed on the intent and heart behind an action, not its perceived scale ...** we should sometimes stand back and sense the ultimate significance of even the smallest parts of our daily lives.⁷