בס"ד

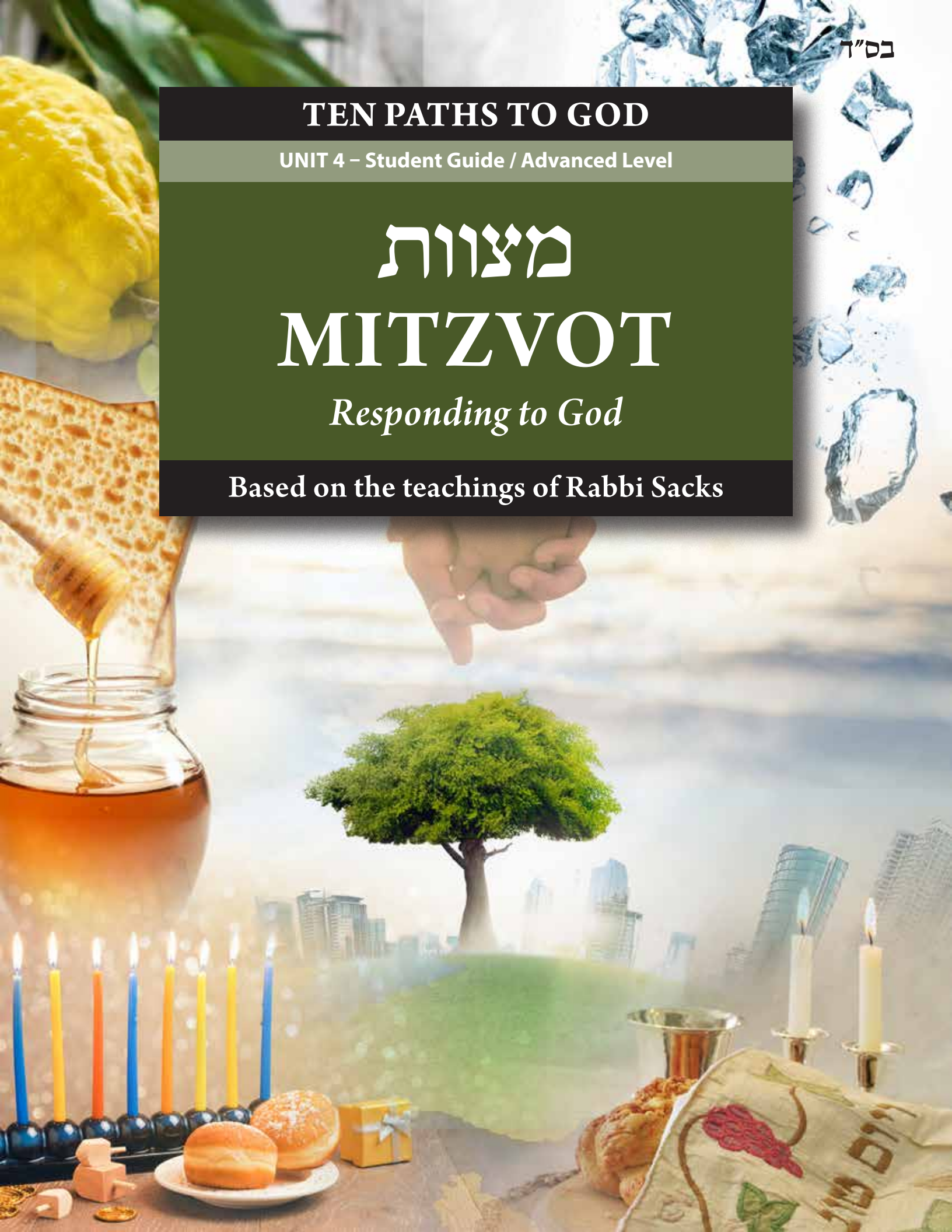
TEN PATHS TO GOD

UNIT 4 – Student Guide / Advanced Level

מצוות
MITZVOT

Responding to God

Based on the teachings of Rabbi Sacks



"Among the fine people it has been my privilege to know, Chaim (Harry) and Anna Schimmel hold a special place. Their life has been built on a love of Torah, which they have learned, taught, supported, and in Harry's case written brilliantly about. They epitomized it for our community; they have communicated it to everyone they know, and especially to their children and grandchildren. I always counted Harry as my benchmark. If he agreed with an interpretation I had given, I was confident I was on the right lines. Now that Harry and Anna have made *aliyah* to *Yerushalayim Ir ha-Kodesh*, I count it as a special delight that this curriculum project has been sponsored in their honor. They inspired me; I hope these materials inspire others."

RABBI SACKS

Introduction

Watch: The opening video for Unit 4

First Reading: Read through the text from the video. Highlight each word or phrase that you are unsure of, whether it is the meaning of the language or the meaning of the concept.

Judaism's genius was to take high ideals and translate them into life by simple daily deeds: the way of *mitzvot*, acting in accordance with God's will. We do not just contemplate truth: we live it.

We don't contemplate creation by studying theoretical physics. We live it by making a blessing over what we eat and drink, acknowledging God as the creator of all we enjoy. We don't think about our responsibility for the environment. We keep Shabbat, setting a limit, one day in seven, to our exploitation of the world. We don't just study Jewish history. On the fasts and festivals, we re-enact it. Truth becomes real when it becomes deed. That is how we transform the world.

There are those who see the world as it is and accept it. That is the stoic way. There are those who see the world as it is and flee from it. That is the mystic, monastic way. But there are those who see the world as it is and change it. That is the Jewish way. We change it through *mitzvot*, holy deeds that bring a fragment of heaven down to earth.

Every *mitzvah* is a miniature act of redemption. It turns something secular into something holy. When we keep *kashrut* we turn food for the body into sustenance for the soul. When we keep Shabbat we sanctify time, making space in our life to breathe and give thanks, celebrating what we have instead of striving for what we do not yet have. When we observe the festivals we sanctify history by turning it into personal memory, forging a connection between our ancestors' past and our present. When we keep the laws of *taharat hamishpacha*, family purity, we turn a physical relationship into a sacred bond of love.

The *mitzvot* bring God into our lives through the intricate choreography of a life lived in accordance with God's will. They are the poetry of the everyday, turning life into a sacred work of art.

Mitzvot teach us that faith is active, not passive. It is a matter of what we do, not just what happens to us. Performing a *mitzvah*, we come close to God, becoming His "partner in the work of creation." Every *mitzvah* is a window in the wall separating us from God. Each *mitzvah* lets God's light flow into the world.

Jonathan Sacks

Analysis in *Chavruta*: Now in *chavruta* (pairs), take a look again at the text. Discuss and answer the questions on the key terms and phrases that are highlighted for you.

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We do not just contemplate truth: we live it.

1. Who does "just contemplate truth"?
2. What does it mean to "live truth"? How do Jews "live truth"?
3. What are the truths that we live? Can you think of some examples?

That is the Jewish way.

1. What is the stoic approach to injustice in the world? (Stoicism is a school of philosophy that believes man should be without passion, accepting nature/natural law the way it is.)
2. What is the mystical/monastic approach to injustice in the world? (Monasticism is the way monasteries, and monks who live a life without physical pleasure in order to immerse themselves in purely spiritual and mystical ways of being.)
3. What is the Jewish approach to injustice in the world?

miniature act of redemption

1. To redeem something is to change for the better. How are the examples of *mitzvot* that Rabbi Sacks gives "miniature acts of redemption"?
2. How can *mitzvot* lead to a much larger act of redemption? How can *mitzvot* redeem our world?
3. Which *mitzvah* can you do today as a miniature act of redemption that will make a small contribution to the ultimate redemption of the world?

The *mitzvot* bring God into our lives

1. How do the *mitzvot* bring God into our everyday lives?
2. What do you think "intricate choreography of a life lived in accordance with God's will" means?
3. Which *mitzvot* do you do on a regular basis that give your life a rhythm and "choreography" through which you can connect to God?

"partner in the work of creation"

1. Was the world complete after the seven days of creation?
2. What still needs completing today?
3. How does performing *mitzvot* create a partnership between us and God in the work of creation?

Share your analysis: Come together as a class and share your answers to the questions. Listen carefully to the perspectives of your classmates. Did anyone take a different approach to the text from you? Does their approach resonate with you?

Categorizing the *Mitzvot*

Analysis: Together with your *chavruta*, read the following quote from Rabbi Sacks that describes the three different categories of *mitzvot*. Use the questions below to help you fully understand each of the three categories.

Most of the commandments fall into one of three categories. There are those loosely called *mishpatim*, judgements. These include all the detailed provisions of civil and criminal law, the rules of reciprocal altruism and distributive justice that make up Judaism's social legislation. Then there are *chukim*, statutes, such as the laws against eating milk and meat together, or wearing clothes of mixed wool and linen. These are sometimes thought of as commands that have no reason. Rambam rightly dismisses this idea. Essentially, *chukim* are "laws embedded in nature", and by keeping them we respect the integrity of the natural world. So we do not combine animal (wool) and vegetable (linen) textiles, or mix animal life (milk) with animal death (meat). Behind these and other such commands is the idea that God is the creator of biodiversity rather than hybrid uniformity. By observing them we acquire the habits of treating animals with kindness and the environment with care. Judaism's ecological imperative is a delicate balance between "mastering and subduing" nature (Bereishit 1), and "serving and protecting" it (Bereishit 2). So we have laws against needless waste, the destruction of species and the despoliation and overexploitation of the environment. The general principle is that we are the guardians of the world for the sake of future generations.

The other cluster of commands – known as *edot*, or "testimonies" – have to do with our identity as part of a people and its story. So on Pesach we return to Egypt, eating the bread of affliction and the bitter herbs of slavery; on Shavuot we are at Sinai, hearing the Ten Commandments and sharing in the covenant; and on Sukkot we re-enact the Israelites' journey across the desert with only a hut for a home. The festivals are the supreme transformation of history into memory, from events in the distant past into a personal experience of the present. When I observe the festivals I know, more powerfully than in any other way, that I am not a disconnected atom: I am a letter in the scroll, not yet complete, written by my ancestors, whose past lives on in me.

A Letter in the Scroll, p. 164–165

1. *Mishpatim* include civil and criminal law. Can you give some examples of civil and criminal laws from both the laws of the country where you live and from the Torah?
2. Which *mitzvot* do you think can be described as "distributive justice"?
3. How do the examples of *chukim* "respect the integrity of the natural world"?
4. How do you think the laws of *kashrut* fit into this category?
5. Testimony is when you declare something to be true. What testimony are we giving when we celebrate the biblical festivals?
6. How do the festivals connect us to the Jewish people, past and present?

Share your analysis: Join another *chavruta* to form a *chabura* and share your answers to the questions.

Mitzvot Further Explored

Further analysis: Below is an example of a *mitzvah* from each of the three categories. In your *chabura*, choose one of the examples to explore in more depth. If you have more time, look at the other *mitzvot* presented here also.

MISHPATIM: THE *MITZVAH* OF *TZEDAKAH*

The word *Tzedakah* is usually translated as "charity," but in fact it means social or distributive justice. In biblical law it involved a whole series of institutions that together constituted the first ever attempt at a welfare state. The corners of the field, the dropped sheaf and grapes and olives left from the first picking were to be left for the poor. A tithe was to be given to them in certain years. Every seventh year, debts were cancelled, slaves went free, no work was done on the land, and the produce of the fields belonged to everyone. In the fiftieth year, the jubilee, anyone who had been forced through poverty to sell ancestral land was given it back. *Tzedek*, the Bible's welfare legislation, is built on the premise that freedom has an economic dimension. Not only does powerless enslave, so too does poverty. So no one is to forfeit his independence or dignity. One may not take a person's means of livelihood as security for a loan or hold on to items of clothing they need, nor may one delay payment to an employee.

A Letter in the Scroll, p. 120

1. What is the meaning of the root of the word *tzedakah* (*tz-d-k*)?
2. The *mitzvah* we call *tzedakah* actually includes a number of biblical *mitzvot*. What are they?
3. How is *tzedakah* an example of a *mitzvah* from the category of *mishpatim*?
4. Does the country in which you live achieve distributive justice in the same way that the *mitzvah* of *tzedakah* does? How?
5. According to Rabbi Sacks how does *tzedakah* guarantee freedom?

CHUKIM: THE *MITZVAH* OF *KILAYIM* (NOT MIXING DIFFERENT SPECIES)

Another group of commandments is directed against interference with nature. The Bible forbids crossbreeding livestock, planting a field with mixed seeds, and wearing a garment of mixed wool and linen. It calls these rules *chukim* or "statutes." The thirteenth-century scholar Ramban understood this term to mean laws which respect the integrity of nature. To mix different species, he argued, was to presume to be able to improve on the order of creation, and thus an affront to the Creator. Each species has its own internal laws of development and reproduction, and these must not be tampered with: "One who combines two different species thereby changes and defies the work of creation, as if believes that the Holy One, blessed be He, has not completely perfected the world and he now wishes to improve it by adding new kinds of creatures."

The Dignity of Difference, p.168

1. What is the mitzvah of *kilayim*?
2. Does it have any practical ramifications for us today?
3. How does it fit into the category of *chukim*?
4. How is this part of Judaism's environmental ethic?
5. Does your country have any similar laws that protect the environment? Can you think of any examples?

EDOT: THE *MITZVOT* OF *LEIL PESACH*

[F]rom the very outset the Bible seems to sense that the journey from slavery to freedom is one we need to travel in every generation. So we were commanded to gather our families together every year at this time and tell the story of what it was like to be a slave and what it felt like to go free. Not just tell the story but act it out as well. We eat *matzah*, the unleavened "bread of affliction." We sample *maror*, the bitter herbs, so that we can experience the taste of suffering. And we drink four cups of wine, each one a stage on the road to liberation. We tell the story in such a way that each of us feels as if we had lived through persecution and come out the other side as free human beings – as if history had been lifted off the page to become recent memory. That is how we learn to cherish freedom.

Faith in the Future, p. 139

1. Why do we need to make the same journey from slavery to freedom in every generation? How do we do that?
2. How do the *mitzvot* of *Leil HaSeder* help us to experience the story of the Exodus from Egypt?
3. Why is it important to experience the story rather than just learn about it?
4. Why is celebrating Pesach a great example of a *mitzvah* from the category of *edot*?
5. What testimony are we giving when we celebrate Pesach?

Share your analysis: Come together as a class, and present what you learnt about Rabbi Sacks' explanation of the *mitzvah* you chose. Describe the category it falls into, and how the *mitzvah* fits that category.

Judaism: a religion of belief or action?

Your class will hold a debate on the following motion:

"Judaism is a religion of thought and belief rather than practice and action."

Your teacher will divide the class into two groups, the team supporting the motion (the proposition) and the team against (the opposition). Prepare your arguments using the sources below. Think about your content (what you will say and what examples/proof you will give), and how you will respond to your opponent's position.

PRINCIPLES OF FAITH

1. I believe with perfect faith that the Creator, Blessed be His Name, is the Creator and Guide of everything that has been created; He alone has made, does make, and will make all things.

2. I believe with perfect faith that the Creator, Blessed be His Name, is One, and that there is no unity in any manner like His, and that He alone is our God, who was, and is, and will be.

3. I believe with perfect faith that the Creator, Blessed be His Name, has no body, and that He is free from all the properties of matter, and that there can be no (physical) comparison to Him whatsoever.

4. I believe with perfect faith that the Creator, Blessed be His Name, is the first and the last.

5. I believe with perfect faith that to the Creator, Blessed be His Name, and to Him alone, it is right to pray, and that it is not right to pray to any being besides Him.

6. I believe with perfect faith that all the words of the prophets are true.

7. I believe with perfect faith that the prophecy of Moshe our teacher, peace be upon him, was true, and that he was the chief of the prophets, both those who preceded him and those who followed him.

8. I believe with perfect faith that the entire Torah that is now in our possession is the same that was given to Moshe our teacher, peace be upon him.

9. I believe with perfect faith that this Torah will not be exchanged, and that there will never be any other Torah from the Creator, Blessed be His Name.

10. I believe with perfect faith that the Creator, Blessed be His Name, knows all the deeds of human beings and all their thoughts, as it is written, "Who fashioned the hearts of them all, Who comprehends all their actions" (Tehillim 33:15).

11. I believe with perfect faith that the Creator, Blessed be His Name, rewards those who keep His commandments and punishes those that transgress them.

12. I believe with perfect faith in the coming of Mashiach; and even though he may tarry, nonetheless, I wait every day for his coming.

13. I believe with perfect faith that there will be a revival of the dead at the time when it shall please the Creator, Blessed be His name, and His mention shall be exalted for ever and ever.

Rambam's *13 Principles of Faith*

1. What is this a list of?
2. Written in the 12th century this is one of the earliest statements of Jewish dogma. Why do you think it took so long for a set of Jewish beliefs to be formulated?
3. What happens to a Jew who does not believe these things? How do we relate to him?
4. From a Jewish perspective is there a difference between having doubt in these beliefs and denying them outright?
5. Does this source prove that Judaism is primarily a religion of belief or action?

THE FIRST OF THE TEN COMMANDMENTS AND RAMBAN'S EXPLANATION

ב אָנֹכִי ה' אֱלֹקֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבֵּית עֲבָדִים:

"I am Hashem your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage"

Shemot 20:2

"I am Hashem your God:" This statement is a positive commandment, as it says, "I am Hashem, who teaches and commands you that you should know and believe that there is a Hashem, and He is your God," that is to say, He existed before, from Him came everything by means of his desire [i.e., He created the world because He wanted to, not by accident] and capability, and He is your God, so you are required to serve Him.

Ramban on Shemot 20:2

1. What do you think the first verse of the Ten Commandments means?
2. What is the problem the commentaries must deal with in this verse?
3. How does Ramban deal with this problem?
4. Can belief be commanded?
5. Does this source prove that Judaism is primarily a religion of belief or action?

MITOCH SHELO LISHMA, BA LISHMA

Even a *mitzvah* performed with ulterior motives garners reward, as Rav Yehuda said that Rav said: A person should always engage in Torah study and performance of *mitzvot*, even if he does so not for their own sake, as through the performance of *mitzvot* not for their own sake, one gains understanding and comes to perform them for their own sake.

Talmud Bavli, Pesachim 50b

1. Can you give an example of a "*mitzvah* performed with ulterior motives"?
2. What is the value of performing a *mitzvah* if you do not believe in the *mitzvah*?
3. According to this source, do your *mitzvot* have any value if you do not believe in God?
4. What value does this source give to *mitzvot* performed for any motivation other than because it is a *mitzvah*?
5. Does this source prove that Judaism is primarily a religion of belief or action?

DO *MITZVOT* NEED *KAVANA* (INTENTION)?

Rava teaches us that the absence of intent (*kavana*) does not invalidate fulfillment of the *mitzvah*, even in the case of *shofar*. The Gemara concludes: Apparently, Rava maintains that the fulfillment of *mitzvot* does not require *kavana*. That is to say, if one performs a *mitzvah*, he fulfills his obligation even if he has no intention of doing so.

Talmud Bavli, Rosh Hashana 28b

1. Why would mitzvot need to have "intention" (*kavana*)?
2. Why do you think Rava says they do not need *kavana*?
3. Why do you think the gemara says "even in the case of *shofar*"? Why would you think *shofar* is different?
4. Do you think there is value in doing *mitzvot* without *kavana*?
5. Does this source prove that Judaism is primarily a religion of belief or action?

The Great Debate: Come together as a class and debate the motion. Did both teams present convincing arguments? Was there a clear winner?

Conclusion: Now that you have considered both sides of the debate, let's look at Rabbi Sacks' view. Read the following text together, and answer the questions below.

THE COMMANDMENTS: NOT TRUTH THOUGHT BUT TRUTH LIVED.

Mitzvot mark a fundamental difference between Judaism, the life of faith, and the civilization of ancient Greece and its supreme expression, philosophy. Philosophy represents truth thought; Judaism represents truth lived. The Greeks sought knowledge of what is. Jews sought knowledge of what ought to be. So, though Judaism is a set of beliefs, it is not a creed. Instead it is a series of truths that only become true in virtue of the fact that we have lived them. By living them we turn the 'ought' into the 'is.' We make a fragment of perfection in an imperfect world and create a living truth, a life of faith. By keeping *mitzvot,* following the commandments, we help transform the world that is into the world that ought to be.

The great principles of Jewish faith are *creation*, *revelation* and *redemption*. But these are not truths we discover; they are truths we make real by living them. On Shabbat we live creation. Learning Torah we live revelation. Performing acts of *chessed* and *tzedakah*, we live redemption. We do not philosophize about these things, we enact them. Judaism is not faith thought but faith lived.

Edited extract from *A Letter in the Scroll*, pp. 163–165

1. What does "truth (or faith) thought" mean as opposed to "truth (or faith) lived"?
2. How does keeping *mitzvot* mean we are living the truth of Judaism?
3. Where did the Greeks seek knowledge of "what is"? Where do Jews find knowledge of "what ought to be"?
4. How do we "turn the 'ought' into the 'is'"?
5. Would Rabbi Sacks be for or against the motion you debated?

The Assignment

Final Thoughts: In this unit we have considered the role and importance of *mitzvot* in Judaism, and how they fall into three categories: *Mishpatim*, *Chukim* and *Edot*.

However, there is one *mitzvah* that doesn't seem to fit into any category, and according to *chazal* it is equal to all the other *mitzvot*:

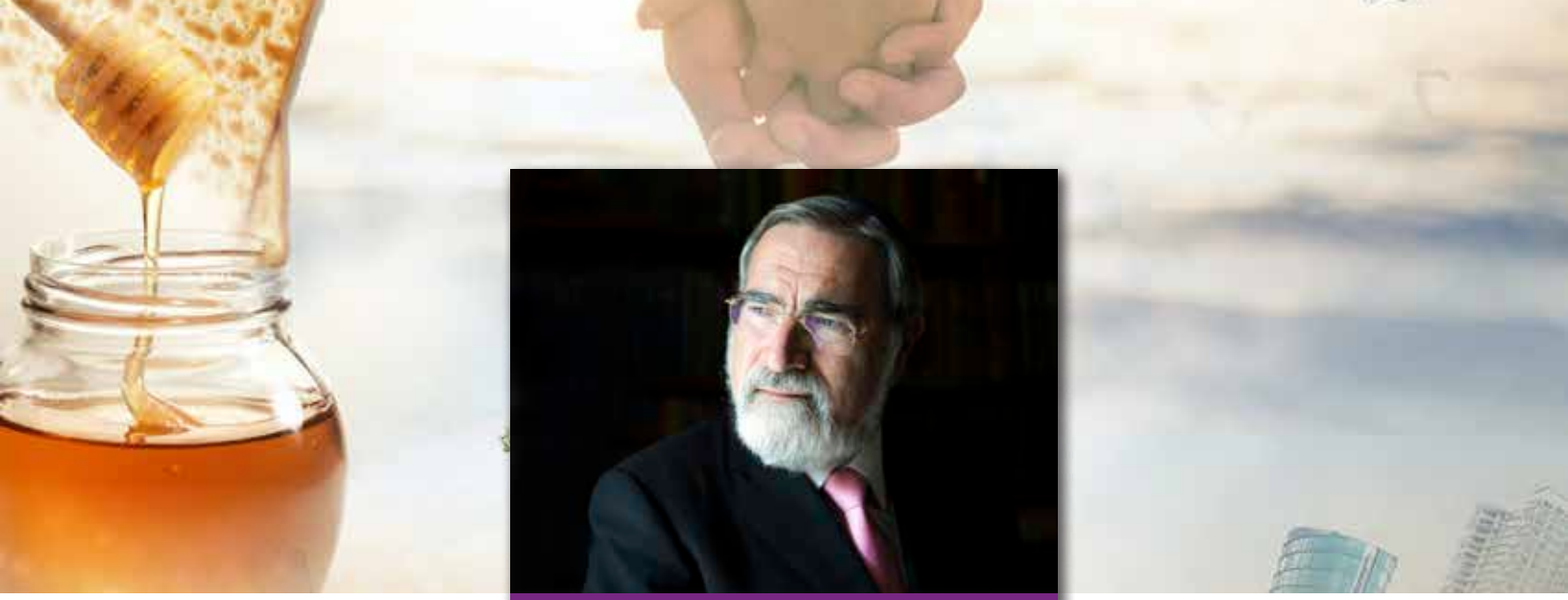
> We find in the Torah, Nevi'im, and Ketuvim that Shabbat is the equivalent of all the *mitzvot*.
>
> Talmud Yerushalmi, Nedarim 3:9

Why is that? Many answers can be given, but Rabbi Sacks explains here that Shabbat falls into **all three** categories of *mitzvot*. (You may find it helpful to refer back to the quote from *A Letter in the Scroll*, where Rabbi Sacks defines the three categories of *mitzvot*.)

> Shabbat reminds us that the universe is created – meaning that ultimately it belongs to God and we are merely its guardians. Adam was placed in the Garden to "serve and protect it," and so are we. One day in seven we must renounce our mastery over nature and the animals, and see the earth not as something to be manipulated and exploited, but as a thing of independent dignity and beauty. It too is entitled to its rest and protection. More powerfully than any tutorial or documentary, Shabbat makes us aware of the limits of human striving. It is a day, if you like, of ecological consciousness.
>
> But it is also a day of history and politics. The Bible tells us to rest because of the exodus from Egypt and liberation from slavery. It is a time of freedom, and the greatest freedom is the freedom to be masters of our own time. On Shabbat we may not work, meaning that one day in seven we are no one's servant except God's. Nor may we force anyone to work for us. Even our servants should be able to rest the way we do.
>
> Tyrannies make people slaves by making them forget the taste of freedom. But no one who observes Shabbat can ever forget what it is to be free. Jews know more than most what it is to have spent long centuries in homelessness and persecution. Yet every week, for a day, however poor they were, they gathered their possessions and celebrated like royalty. Shabbat was their political education, a regular reminder of liberty.
>
> *Faith in the Future*, p. 136

Part 1: Together with your *chavruta*, plan a *Shabbaton* for your class and write a detailed itinerary for the day. Include short descriptions of the activities that will take place that demonstrate how Shabbat falls into each of the three categories of *mitzvot*: *Mishpatim*, *Chukim*, and *Edot*. Support your explanation with quotes from Rabbi Sacks' texts that we have studied.

Part 2: For bonus points, prepare a list of questions for Rabbi Sacks on any of the topics we have studied in this unit. Send your questions to your teacher, who will forward a number of insightful questions from the class to Rabbi Sacks. Rabbi Sacks will respond to a selection of the questions he receives for each unit from students around the world. Visit www.RabbiSacks.org/TenPaths to see his responses.



Jonathan Sacks

The Office of Rabbi Sacks

www.RabbiSacks.org/TenPaths
TenPaths@RabbiSacks.org
@RabbiSacks

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Developed by Daniel Rose Ph.D.
together with Dan Sacker, Joanna Benarroch and Debby Ifield

Videos filmed and edited by Dan Sacker

Design by Natalie Friedemann-Weinberg
Typesetting & layout by Raphaël Freeman, Renana Typesetting
Edited by Kate Gerstler

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