

THE JEW AND HIS JUDAISM

*The Commandments, the Commander
and the Commanded*

RABBI NORMAN LAMM



EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

ההתאחדות העולמית של הסטודנטים היהודים
WORLD UNION OF JEWISH STUDENTS

59 RUSSELL SQUARE, LONDON, W.C.1.

The contents of this booklet is the author's individual viewpoint.

The World Union of Jewish Students hopes to continue this series of publications with other peoples views of Judaism, based on source texts.

THE JEW AND HIS JUDAISM

The Commandments, the Commander and the Commanded

By Rabbi Norman LAMM

The fundamental concept that captures the whole essence of Judaism - the idea of God, the obligations of man to Him, the interdependence of human beings - in one word, is that of mitzvah, commandment. The noun, in its different forms, appears about 180 times in Scripture ; in its various verbal forms, perhaps twice that number. This is, of course, only a minor indication of the vast significance of what is apparently so simple an idea.

The term mitzvah implies the existence of a Metzaveh, One who commands. The divine Metzaveh must obviously be theistic, i.e. a personal God, not an impersonal deistic or pantheistic deity ; only a personal God is sufficiently concerned with men to command them. Mitzvah additionally implies that man lives under obligation to the Metzaveh, and that his life must be regulated in accordance with His express will. Furthermore, the very existence of mitzvah tells us that the will of Metzaveh formulated in the mitzvah was made known to man ; hence, some form of revelation had to take place.

The derivation of mitzvah from Metzaveh rules out the identification of mitzvah with generalized virtue, which may be self-motivated, a utilitarian ethic, or merely a reflection of contemporary mores. Similarly, it is a distortion of the concept of mitzvah to define it as religious folkways or customs. Folkways may be charming, even very valuable, but they do not presuppose an origin external and transcendent to man ; on the contrary, their source is the folk, not God. The Jewish tradition cherishes customs and folkways - at least it values most of them - but takes pains to distinguish between mitzvah and minhag, custom. Despite the prominence given to the latter, it does not supersede the former ; at most, it helps guide us to a proper interpretation of the mitzvah.

The Mitzvah as Response

Positively speaking, mitzvah may be understood under two aspects : response and summons. As response to God, the performance of mitzvot (plural of mitzvah) in their totality is the acceptance of divine discipline in all of life. Because the mitzvot cover almost all aspects of existence, the result is a way of life disciplined by these mitzvot and geared to the attainment of

kedushah, holiness. (The total number of biblical commandments is technically 613, but the number applicable today under normal circumstances is far less ; nevertheless, these and the rabbinic legislation affect all of life.) This holiness, or self-transcendence, is in imitation of God who is holy : "Ye shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy" (Lev. 19 : 2).

Now discipline is more than regularity ; it is an act of will which prevails even in absence of rational understanding or emotional participation. If my act of mitzvah is my response to God, then I must discipline myself to act in that manner even if I fail to see the specific reason for it, to derive moral edification from it, or experience any spiritual elevation through it. It is needless to emphasize that the mitzvot are tremendous repositories of wisdom and intellectual and moral insight : "For this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples" (Deut. 4:6). A consequence of the mitzvot is the purification of one's inner life : "The mitzvot were given in order to purify man" (Lev. R. 13:3). The experiential value of the performance of the mitzvah is too well known to require elaboration. The rabbinic emphasis on Kavvanah, the kabbalistic meditations, and the Hasidic ecstasy all highlight various aspects of the mitzvah as a religious experience. Yet all of these do not exhaust the primary quality of the mitzvah-act as a response to a God who transcends human wisdom, moral aspirations, or religious experience, and therefore a response which expresses itself in discipline and the willingness to follow even when no spiritual enlightenment is immediately apparent.

For this reason, I cannot accept Franz Rosenzweig's eclecticism with regard to mitzvot. To choose to observe only those commandments which I feel are addressed to me personally is, in effect, to command myself ; by interpreting the Torah autonomously instead of theonomously, I have effectively done away with the Metzaveh and, hence, cut the ground from under the mitzvah. This is not to say that a certain spirituality cannot be attained by such a selective approach ; but cannot the same end be achieved, for instance, by the dedicated practice of Zen ? The ultimate goal of the mitzvot is, as was stated, holiness, which requires renunciations, yielding my autonomy to God.

"Relevance"

By the same token, the cry for "relevance" heard often nowadays even in some Orthodox circles must not be accepted uncritically. Of course the insights of Judaism must be applied in as relevant a manner as possible to the concerns of contemporary men. No doubt we have largely failed to do this in an adequate and authentic manner. But to cast away that which does not appeal to us as relevant to our immediate situations is to be guilty of spiritual provincialism. Isaiah's vision of world peace, for instance, is much more relevant to our contemporary Atomic Age and its threat of global extinction than it was to the period in which the rabbis of the Talmud flourished. Should they, therefore have consigned this vision to limbo on the grounds of impracticality and irrelevance ? Judaism is a religion for all ages, and not

every age responds equally to every mitzvah or every insight. But a truly religious personality accepts the divine discipline, the response to the Metzaveh, even in the absence of what he considers relevance or personal involvement. Paradoxically, a certain amount of irrelevance is highly relevant.

Ethical and Ritual Commandments

Given the above, it is clear that all of Torah, in both its "ritual" and "ethical" aspects, is absolutely binding upon the Jew. To submit the mitzvot to any extraneous test - whether rational or ethical or nationalistic - is to reject the supremacy of God, and hence in effect to deny Him as God. The classification of the mitzvot into rational and revelational, or ethical and ritual, has descriptive-methodological but not substantive-religious significance. Saadia Gaon, who a thousand years ago proposed the dichotomy between rational and non-rational commandments as the cornerstone of his philosophy of law, maintained that even the apparently pure revelational laws were fundamentally rational, although man might not, now or ever, be able to grasp their inner rationality.

At the same time, far greater and more genuine spirituality inheres in the acceptance of those laws that apparently lack ethical, rational, or doctrinal content. It is only these performances, according to R. Hai Gaon, that are prefaced by the blessing, "Blessed art Thou...who hast sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us to..." Holiness, the supreme religious category, contains an essential non-rational core; and this state of the "numinous" can be attained only when man bows his head and submits the totality of his existence to the will of God by performing His Mitzvah for no reason other than that this is the will of the Creator. R. Nachman of Bratzlav recommended to his followers that they observe the "ethical" laws as though they were "ritual" commandments. In this manner, the ethical performance is transformed from a pale humanistic act into a profound spiritual gesture. The ceremonial laws do not, therefore, by any means, have any lesser status than the others. On the contrary, while confident that these mitzvot shimiyyot are more than divine whim in that they are ultimately of benefit to man and society, we accept even the mitzviyyot, the rational and ethical, as "ritual" in an effort to attain holiness, the ultimate desideratum of religious life.

Mitzvah as Summons

But mitzvah may be understood not only as a response to God, but also, somewhat more boldly, as a summons or search for the Metzaveh. This point is made with stunning clarity by one of the chief exponents of rabbinic Judaism in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, R. Chayyim of Volozhin, the most eminent disciple of the famed R. Elijah, the Gaon of Vilna.

In viewing his approach, it is important to describe, albeit briefly and inadequately, how the Jewish tradition formulates its belief in God. It holds that there are two aspects of man's understanding of the Creator. The first is known to us from the Bible and Jewish history. It is the belief in a personal God, one who reacts to man, who seeks man out, and who wants man to seek Him out. This belief is a fundamental of Judaism.

At the same time, the great sages of Judaism, in both the kabbalistic and philosophic traditions, have taught that God is also beyond man, beyond all the universe. In His essence, His infinity (*En Sof*), God is totally unknowable, even naked. In His absoluteness, the Kabbalists taught, the world does not even exist for Him. In this respect God is the "great mystery" and man must forever despair of being able to understand Him.

A Personal and Transpersonal God

God, then, is both personal and transpersonal, both related to man and totally unconcerned with him. He is infinitely personal, closer to man than his own mother and father, and yet infinitely absolute, terribly distant and incomprehensible. God is related and withdrawn, involved and aloof, exceedingly close and immensely remote.

What does this mean for man? If he succeeds in feeling God to be close to him, to be personal with him, then his life is fulfilled, it has purpose, and man achieves happiness. But if man lives so that his God is distant, impersonal and aloof, then man despairs, he shrivels in cosmic loneliness and universal solitude. Man cannot survive the terror of God's remoteness. If God is not alive for man, then man as man must die.

The stakes, then, are monumental. Life or death, meaningfulness or aimlessness, fulfillment or frustration, all depend on whether God is personal or impersonal, related or absolute.

What can we do about it? Can we, indeed, do anything about it?

The answer of R. Chayyim of Volozhin is: Whether God is personal or impersonal to us depends upon us. If we are personal to Him, He will be personal to us. Whether God concerns Himself with us or ignores us depends on whether we concern ourselves with Him or ignore Him.

But how can man become personal with God? All of Judaism, all of Torah and mitzvot, is the answer to this question. Judaism, in its totality, is the way in which man makes the great gesture of turning his own personality and humanity to God. The purpose of the mitzvot is to summon God out of His absoluteness into relatedness and personality by making man more personal, more authentically human. If we prove our human creatureliness under God by performing the mitzvah, in offering our personality - in its warmth and humanity and concern - to God, we may trust that He will respond by emerging from His infinitely mysterious depths and turning to us. There is, of course, no guarantee of results;

religion is not magic. But it is the supreme act of faith, of which mitzvah is the classical Jewish expression. This act of mitzvah as a summons is independent of the nature of the particular mitzvah - whether ethical or ritual, whether practical (as are most of the mitzvot) or intellectual (as is the study of Torah) or purely spiritual (as is prayer).

Halakhah : "The Jewish Way"

Now the observance of these various mitzvot as an obligatory part of man's relationship ("dialogue") with God leads to a very special kind of life, a style or way of living. This "way" is the Halakhah, normally translated as "Jewish Law" but, as its root indicates, more closely allied to the idea of "the Jewish way." If the mitzvot are taken seriously, then the Halakhah must be comprehensive and precise. It must also provide for its own interpretation and reinterpretation to meet new conditions of society and the times. The Halakhah does just that. The Oral Law, as expressed primarily in the Talmud and its literature, is the major vehicle of this accommodation. It must be understood that the means for interpreting and applying the Halakhah are halakhic, even as the means for amending a secular national Constitution must be constitutional. The Halakhah, indeed, is more a method than it is a corpus of law. To discard this method and use some extra-legal means for deciding problems is to abandon the Halakhah even while ostensibly conforming to it. There is a tremendous abyss that separates a "return to more traditional Jewish practices" from genuine halakhic living.

Decisors of the Law

Who is authorized to decide halakhic problems by the use of halakhic means ? The question of authority is not an easy one to answer in a brief essay. Suffice it to say that Scripture itself provided for authoritative decision-making : "If there arise a matter too hard for thee in judgment... thou shalt come unto the priests, the Levites, and unto the judge that shall be in those days ; and thou shalt inquire and they shall declare unto thee the sentence of judgment... and thou shalt observe to do all that they shall teach thee... thou shalt not turn aside from the sentence which they shall declare unto thee, to the right hand nor to the left." (Deu. 17:12). In the course of time, halakhic authority was transferred from the priest to the Chakham, the Sage. With the end of the Sanhedrin, authority became more diffuse, but authority there certainly was - and certainly is. The acknowledged decisors of every age attained their influence not by official appointment but by consensual recognition of their credentials and reliability.

What, briefly, are the conditions for such authority nowadays ? Three items stand out boldly. First, thorough knowledge of the Halakhah is indispensable ; this is almost too obvious to have to state. Yet it is necessary because all too often, in the chaos of our times (often erroneously lauded as an expression of democracy), even semi-literates in the great and complex halakhic literature have arrogated to themselves the right to decide on questions of vast import. Second, the authority in Halakhah must be aware of the conditions to which he seeks to apply the judgment of Halakhah. By this I mean more than the obvious idea that one must know what he is talking about. Rather, I refer to an intuition or insight into prevailing conditions and the effects of alternative decisions, rather than practical socio-political knowledge as such. While the Halakhah is a consistent system of law, its application is not automatic, and cannot be computerized for instantaneous decisions. The decisor, in addition to a knowledge of the halakhic principles and the realia of the situation, must be possessed of the kind of spiritual insight and religious over-view which derives from a life absorbed in Judaism and thoroughly permeated by Torah, and which can therefore express not only the technical results of halakhic cogitation but the higher wisdom of halakhic Judaism as well. Once God revealed the Torah, the rabbis of the Talmud averred, it became the property of men to apply in accordance with their deepest and finest insights. Finally, following from this, the third requirement for authority is piety, or total commitment to Halakhah. The authority must himself accept the postulates of Halakhah ; no judge can be acceptable who does not himself respect the law. Valid halakhic authority, therefore, must fully believe in revelation, in the Metzaveh, in the covenant between God and Israel - in short, in all that the Halakhah, which he authoritatively interprets, requires of all its communicants. Knowledge of Judaism alone is necessary but not sufficient, for Halakhah, as has been stated above, is more than "law", it is a "way" of life.

Who is a Jew

It is in terms of this halakhic commitment that the question of Jewishness must be considered. The basic criteria for being a Jew are quite simple ; the requirements for being a special kind of Jew are far more complicated. Technically, the Halakhah considers the child of a Jewish mother as Jewish. In the case of a proselyte, Jewish law demands a sincere commitment to the practice of the mitzvot, immersion in a mikvah, and, for males, circumcision.

Within the Jewish fold, Halakhah differentiates between various groups, as well. The Kohen, or priestly descendant of Aaron, for instance, is heir to certain privileges and subject to certain infirmities ; this was more pronounced in the days of the Temple, but some features persist to this day as well. Illegitimacy imposes certain marital restrictions ; it has, alas, become a widespread phenomenon as one of the consequences of the modernist rejection of the Halakhah of marriage and the acceptance of civil divorces as "religiously" valid.

However, beyond these technical halakhic considerations, certain other desiderata are of enormous significance. To be born a Jew is one thing ; to fulfill one's Jewishness is something else again. Perhaps this might best be explained, at the risk of inordinate brevity, by reference to the doctrine of chosenness and its centrality in Jewish thought.

Chosen People

It should be unnecessary to have to clarify to sophisticated readers, at this late date, that the Jewish doctrine of the election of Israel is not one of racial or ethnic superiority. The chosenness of Israel relates exclusively to its spiritual vocation embodied in the Torah ; the doctrine, indeed, was announced at Sinai. Wherever it is mentioned in our liturgy - such as the blessing immediately preceding the Shema, or the benediction over the Torah-reading - it is always related to Torah or mitzvot. This spiritual vocation consists of two complementary functions, described as goy kadosh, that of a holy nation, and mamlekheth kohanim, that of a kingdom of priests. The first term denotes the development of communal separateness or differentness in order to achieve a collective self-transcendence. The Halakhah is the method par excellence for the attainment of this goal. The second term implies the obligation of this brotherhood of the spiritual elite toward the rest of mankind ; priesthood is defined by the prophets as fundamentally a teaching vocation. The election of Israel "because all the earth is Mine" was understood by Seforno (to Ex. 19:5) to mean, "because I love all the peoples of My world, I have elected you to teach all mankind to call upon the Name of the Lord and serve Him in unison."

These two functions, the tension between which is inherent in the concept of chosenness, are not antonyms, mutually exclusive, but supplementary ideas. In a study of how this doctrine was treated in Tannaitic times, a contemporary scholar has discovered that the greater the emphasis by an individual sage on chosenness and its inescapable particularism, the greater the breadth of his universalism. This separateness of Israel, its "holiness" function, may both result in and be fostered by a sense of alienation. But to assert, as some have done, that it is exhausted by the experience of alienation is to misread the whole meaning of election by eliminating its clear telos, that of holiness. There is no virtue in alienation, or particularism, or an inclination for dissent, for their own sake. They may be characteristic, respectively, of modern man's psychological condition, or the aspirations of Jewish secular nationalism, or the liberal credo ; but they are not Judaism. And, ultimately, they cannot nourish the soul or provide an answer for the spiritual yearnings of men.

Can the idea of chosenness give birth to the wild Herren-volk theories that have proved so catastrophic in our times ? Of course it can, and possibly has (although it never has with Jews).

But such noxious notions are not legitimate children of the biblical doctrine of election ; they are monsters, genetic mutations. Any idea contains the risk of distortion - and the nobler the idea the greater the danger and the uglier the perversion. The concept of government can be reduced to tyranny ; must we, therefore, all be anarchists in order to avoid such dangers ? Religion can become superstition ; democracy, mobocracy ; liberty, libertinism ; respect subservience ; love, lechery. Shall we abandon the former because they can and often do degenerate into the latter ?

The Community of the Commanded

The same holds true for the chosenness of Israel. It is a teaching of service and a service of teaching. It is concerned with the attainment of spirituality. Its particularistic aspect, the development of Israel as a "community of the commanded", is propaedeutic ; its universalist element remains the ultimate telos. Israel may be a reluctant teacher, and the world an unwilling pupil. But the methodology of divine pedagogics is rarely directly didactic. The teaching occurs on many levels and is expressed in many ways : by word, by sublime example, and most notably by the very mystery of Jewish history. That Israel is the chosen agent for this education of mankind does not reflect either on the superiority or inferiority of this people - although intimations of both may be found in Jewish literature. The nearest that any major Jewish thinker has come to a biological interpretation of this spiritual elitism is the highly ethnocentric "historiosophy" of Judah Halevi. But only a deliberate misreading of the Kuzari, the work in which this idea is proposed, can mistake it for a precursor of modern racialism. The whole of the argument is addressed by the rabbi in the book to the pagan king of the Khazars in an endeavor to convince him of the truth of Judaism. At the end of the book, the king converts to Judaism - surely an astonishing conclusion to a tract supposedly elaborating an exclusive doctrine of Jewish racialism !

The nature of Israel's priesthood, its teaching to all of mankind, can be divided into two : the social-ethical and the spiritual-metaphysical (the two, of course, are ultimately interrelated). The Halakhah articulated the first in the form of the "Seven Noahide Laws" which, in effect, mean Civilized behavior. (Nachmanides considers these as seven categories of law, rather than as individual commandments.) These are essentially negative : the rejection of immorality and brutality and lawlessness. The only "religious" one of the seven laws is also negative : the proscription of idolatry. To this the prophetic tradition adds a second element - the spiritual- metaphysical content of priesthood, positively formulated : the recognition and service of God. This is the vision of a day when "the Lord will be King over all the earth", and the redemptive future when "the knowledge of the Lord" will fill the earth as the waters cover the seas. This acceptance of God, of course, comprehends the good life. Maimonides distinguished between the first and the second of these two elements - the humanitarian-humanistic and the profoundly theistic ethos - by referring to the practitioners of the first as wise Gentiles, and to the second by the more honorific term, pious Gentiles.

That a number of these ideas are shared by the major religions, some as a result of Jewish influence and some independently, cannot and ought not be denied. But this by no means relieves Israel of the obligation to pursue its vocation without relaxation. Surely this post-Auschwitz era needs education in civilized conduct as much as did the Canaanites of antiquity ; and contemporary man - whose avant-garde theologians have killed what he had of God and directed his religious concerns solely to the worship of a man - needs , no less than the fetishistic primitive, the constant reminder that "the Lord (and not an apotheosized human) is God" and that the Lord is One. And perhaps the most significant teaching, the uniqueness of Judaism, is the coalescence of these very elements - the spiritual and the practical, the theological and the ethical, agadah and halakhah. Judaism has always resisted the effort to foist on it - as metaphysical truth rather than as merely analytical device - the bifurcation of body and soul, of letter and spirit, of ritual and social, of cultus and ethos. The restriction of religion to worship and cult was accepted quite naturally by the ancient pagans ; the confinement of the spirit to cult in modern times, despite all gallant attempts at developing a "social gospel", is one of the sad triumphs of secularism. We have cornered God, locked Him up in little sanctuaries, and now complain that we cannot find Him in "the real world". Judaism's unique contribution to modern man may well lie in its insistence that God is very much alive, that He is not absent from society (even "secular" society) for those who invite Him in, and that the best way to achieve this goal is to release Him from His incarceration in our barren and desiccated temples. In a word : Halakhah ! Through a sanctifying of all of life, meaning and purpose return to man, God is once again accessible, and human spirit can be affirmed in the very midst of life in all its existential tensions and the wealth of its variegated phenomena. It is through Halakhah that a new relationship is established between the sacred and the secular (Rabbi Kuk referred to them as the holy and the not-yet-holy), and that man can reorient himself toward nature in a manner that affirms joyously the development of technology.

Who Chose Whom ?

Now the Talmud records two apparently contradictory traditions about this election. According to one, we are indeed the Chosen People. At Sinai we were given the Torah without right of refusal ; we literally had no choice. But the other tradition has God pleading with many nations to accept His Torah. Only Israel did. Hence, it is Israel which elected God, and it is He who is chosen.

Now these traditions are not irreconcilable. The encounter at Sinai involved a dialectics of choosing. By God's choice, we are each of us born into this separated community of the commanded, for better or for worse. Indeed, most of the negative features of Jewish distinctiveness flow from this choice : envy and hatred of the Jew, and the Jew's own resentment at his involuntary differentness. Were it to remain a one-way choice, one would indeed be

forced to consider chosenness a burden and an historic injustice. But there is the other element to consider : our free, voluntary decision to choose God as our King. When this is done, and life is lived and experienced accordingly, chosenness becomes an unparalleled blessing, and the infirmities are transcended.

My membership in the Chosen People is, therefore, simply defined by the Halakhah. My choice in return is, however, an inestimable, unquantifiable, and immensely personal act of the greatest magnitude. Hence, I am a Jew by virtue of God having chosen the people into which I was born. What kind of a Jew I am depends upon my subjective response to that choice as I choose God.

We are "different" by virtue of God's choice. But we fulfill our destiny as a holy nation and kingdom of priests by virtue of our choice. Upon this latter choice depends the fulfillment of the prophetic prediction that "the Lord shall be King over all the earth, and on that day shall the Lord be One and His name One".