

**Shabbat Hol HaMoed Sukkot 5780**  
**Why Does Judaism Have So Many Rules?**  
**Rabbi Alex Freedman**

Growing up I was best friends with my next door neighbor, Peter, who was Russian Orthodox Christian. One night Peter came over while my family was in the Sukkah about to shake Lulav and Etrog.

“How do you do this?” Peter asked.

So I explained: “You take the Lulav in your right hand, with the myrtle on the right side. You hold the Etrog in your left hand, Pitom tip down. Then you say the blessing in Hebrew. Then you turn the Etrog rightside up. Then you shake it three times in front and then around clockwise, then up then down. That’s it.”

“That’s it? That’s just for this? Then you have rules for eating and holidays and Sabbath, right? Why do you have so many rules anyway?”

“Doesn’t your family have lots of rules too?” I asked.

“Nope. Just ‘Be Nice.’ And put your dishes in the dishwasher. Uh oh. Today I’m 0 for 2.”

I bet many of you have wondered this yourselves. Why do we have so many rules? 613 in all. Isn’t ‘Be Nice’ enough?

You’re right, the Golden Rule is ours. It’s the Torah that says we should love our neighbor as ourselves.

You’re right, that’s the answer to the famous story in the Talmud. A convert approaches Hillel and asks to be converted while standing on one foot. Hillel agrees and paraphrases the Golden Rule - What is hateful to you do not do to another.”

But don’t forget the end of the story. Hillel tells him, “The rest is commentary. Go and study.” That is, the details and rules still matter.

So why do we have so many rules anyway?

I love the way Rabbi Ed Feinstein answers this question.

He talks of joining a gym and meeting a trainer named Bobby. Bobby asked him a really simple question, “How often can you get to the gym?”

I paraphrase: “5 days a week?”

“No, that’s too hard.”

“OK, four days a week.”

“Sorry, my job is really busy.

“Three days?”

“Umm, I have kids too that need me to get them ready for school every morning.”

“Two days?”

“I just signed up to volunteer, and I can’t back out of that now.”

“One day a week?”

“Maybe.”

“Look, you’re not ready to be serious about exercise, are you? And if you’re not serious, you can’t do this right. You can’t just wish yourself a new body. Come back when you’re ready to be serious.”

Bobby was right. Rules show we’re serious about something.

I think physical health is a great metaphor for spiritual health. To be an ethical person, to be the best person we can be, we have to follow rules. And we have to follow them every day. It’s not always easy, it’s not always fun. But when we are disciplined and follow these rules, we become better people. And that’s the goal.

Our rules are called Mitzvot. Mitzvot are the spiritual exercises we do, the sets and reps. The Talmud teaches that Mitzvot are there “*LeShaper Et Habriyot* - to improve ourselves.” When we ask ourselves every day, “What does G-d expect of me right now? What is the right thing to do here?” then we strengthen our ethical muscles. Because doing the right thing is often not a matter of mind but of muscle. It’s not knowing what to do that is most challenging but having the strength, the courage to actually do it.

Let me give you an example:

Scenario A.

Let’s say you get a call from your younger brother one day. He says that he dented another car while parking. The other driver was away. Nobody was around to see. What should he do?

What do you tell your brother? You probably tell him to write a note with his name and number and leave it on the windshield so the other driver can reach him and your brother can thus pay for the damage. *Knowing* the ethical thing to do here is pretty simple.

Scenario B.

*You’re* parking your car and you misjudge the distance to the next car. *You* dent another car. The other driver is away. Nobody is around to see. What do you do? Not What is the right thing to do here? What do *you* actually *do*? You know the right thing to do is leave a note and pay for it yourself. But, honestly, do you do that or do you drive away? The difference is not one of knowledge but courage, of strength to do the right thing even when it hurts.

I think of this situation because I’ve been there. When I was in college I was parking somewhere, and I should have backed up one more time instead of trying to squeeze in. But I didn’t, and I made a nice dent in the next car. After being angry with myself I had to figure out what to do. I knew I should leave a note.

But then these other ideas popped into my head. *It’s not that big a dent. He may not even notice. Nobody saw, I can get out of here if I leave now. They probably have car insurance for this. I’m just a poor college kid.*

And after a while I stopped myself. I really couldn't believe I was straight-up lying to myself. The dent was obvious. Maybe somebody else saw. G-d certainly did. I'm a religious Jew, and I really don't have a choice here. I have to do the right thing because that's what it means to really believe in G-d.

So I left a note, and later she called me and I covered the damage. To this day I feel like an idiot for hitting that car. But at least I know I did the right thing when it wasn't easy.

The Mitzvot we do on a daily basis - prayer, eating Kosher food, being honest - strengthen our spiritual muscles because we are used to asking ourselves, "What is the right thing to do here? What does G-d expect of me now." The more Mitzvot we do, the easier it is to do the right thing because we've practiced it so many times.

Being an honest, ethical person requires that we be seriously committed. Like every day. It's not like anyone will forget they're Jewish. But there's a huge gap between not forgetting we're Jewish and having it top of mind.

By Sukkot, we've finally caught our breath after coming down the mountain of Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur. It's the chance to start the year off right, since it immediately follows Yom Kippur. How do the rules of Sukkot move us in the right direction?

First, the timing of Sukkot demonstrates our faith in G-d. The fact that we live in the Sukkah *precisely* as it gets cold outside is significant. For that is *precisely* when everybody else goes inside for good. We go outside because we trust that G-d will provide.

Next, the rules of building a Sukkah reinforce our belief that the foundation of our home is not four walls and roof. Because we live for a week without them. It's family, friends, community, and G-d. What's most important in life is not *what* we have, it's *who* we have.

Third, Sukkot affords us the chance to start the year with Mitzvot and a renewed perspective of communal solidarity. With the shaking of the Lulav and Etrog, as intricate and detailed as its procedure is - as my friend Peter learned well - we do so because it teaches us something worth remembering every day. We take these four disparate plants and we bring them together. The Mitzvah counts only when we hold them together. The Etrog possesses taste and a pleasant smell while the willow has neither. The palm has a nice taste in its dates while the myrtle smells lovely.

The Rabbis famously tell us that these represent the different types of Jews: some have both learning and deeds, others neither, and still others one but not both. But just as the Mitzvah of Lulav and Etrog counts only when we physically hold them together, we are a real Jewish community only when we come together. That means with Jews who do seemingly nothing, Jews who do everything, and everyone in the middle. Jews to the right and Jews to the left. We need everybody. Because we're a family. And in a family, everybody counts. And all families have rules.