

Yom Kippur 5784  
Why So Many Rules?  
Rabbi Alex Freedman

*Gmar Hatimah Tovah.*

Have you heard of the Craigslist Rabbi? And no, it's not a rabbi available for purchase on the website, but an inspiring story about Rabbi Noach Muroff. Ten years ago, this young rabbi bought a desk on Craigslist for \$150. The desk wouldn't fit through the door, so he and his wife took it apart. They discovered a shopping bag hidden away, and inside the shopping bag was \$98,000 in cash.

What did he do? He called the original owner and told her. She said that she had obviously forgotten that her inheritance was there. He returned the sum in full the next day.

Muroff said that right away he and his wife knew they had to give it back. That it was an obligation. That it wasn't even for them to decide. He said, "Both my wife and I were raised as Orthodox Jews. We feel strongly that honesty is always the way to go. We're commanded to do so in the Torah. In addition to that, there's the idea of putting yourself in the other person's shoes. How would you feel if you were the one losing the money?"

Obviously, the original owner was most grateful. She wrote a note saying, "Dear Noah, I cannot thank you enough for your honesty and integrity. I do not think there are too many people in the world that would have done what you did by calling me. I do like to believe that there are still good people left in this crazy world we live in. You certainly are one of them."

I think one thing that's really interesting about this is that the rabbi felt he didn't even have a choice here. The rules of the Torah that command honest and ethical behavior were so ingrained in him that this amazing act was, for him, a simple reflex. That's the power of these rules, Mitzvot, and the answer to a question many of us have wondered: Why does Judaism have so many rules? Not even ten commandments but 613 in all. How about one? Isn't 'Be Nice' enough?

It's nice to be nice, and indeed it's a good start. After all, the Golden Rule is ours. It's the Torah that says we should love our neighbor as ourselves.

Also ours is a famous story in the Talmud. A convert approaches the great rabbi Hillel and asks to be converted while standing on one foot. In other words, he wants the elevator pitch. Hillel agrees and paraphrases the Golden Rule - "What is hateful to you do not do to another." Hillel continues, "The rest is commentary. Go and study." That is, the details and rules still matter because they reinforce the Golden Rule.

So why do we have so many rules anyway?

I love the way Rabbi Ed Feinstein answers this question. This contemporary Conservative rabbi in LA wrote a book called "Tough Questions Jews Ask" that I use when I teach.

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 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."

Bobby continues: "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 stronger. Come back when you're ready to be serious."

Bobby was right. Rules show we're serious about something. Wherever we create rules for ourselves, *that's* where our values are. Whenever we have rules for something, *that's* something we know is important.

I think physical health is a great metaphor for spiritual health. Healthy living is a daily task, and there are opportunities for us to make healthy choices every day, from morning until night. A one-word catchphrase "Make healthy choices" is often not enough to lead us to our goals. Many of us need more specific directions, lots of them. Often it's specific rules that help us get to our goal: exercise; eat nutritious foods; drink enough water; get enough sleep; etc. We create rules for ourselves around these daily activities

to achieve a discipline that leads to healthy living. Rules lead to discipline, to habits, and to results. (Tomorrow Rabbi Schwab will give his own take on the purpose of Mitzvot).

To be an ethical person, to be the very best person we can be, we have to go beyond “Be nice.” We must follow rules, and we have to follow them every day. It’s not always easy, not always fun. Kids don’t like to be told what to do. Adults don’t like to be told what to do. *I* don’t like to be told what to do. But in the gym, I’ll follow a trainer’s instructions because they know more than I do and will help me achieve my fitness goals. I want specific instructions there, lots of them. Likewise, when we are disciplined and follow the Torah’s rules, we become better, more ethical people. And that’s the ultimate goal.

We do that by following the Mitzvot, commandments. Mitzvot are the spiritual exercises we do, the sets and reps that really get us in shape ethically. The Talmud teaches that Mitzvot are there “*LeShaper Et Habriyot* - to refine ourselves.” Rabbi Elliott Dorff, another contemporary Conservative rabbi in LA, writes: “[The Mitzvot] are seen as an expression of a moral G-d’s call that we be moral and holy. ‘You shall be holy for I, the L-rd your G-d, am holy’ Leviticus 19:2 proclaims, and what follows is a list of both ritual and moral commands that spell out what it means to be holy.”

Mitzvot prompt us to ask ourselves every day, “What does G-d expect of me right now? What is the right thing to do here?” And the more we do that, the more we strengthen our ethical muscles. If rules show we’re serious about something, the plethora of Mitzvot demonstrate that Judaism is incredibly serious about ethical living. On one foot, *that’s* why we have so many rules.

Doing the *right* thing is often not a matter of mind but of muscle. By that I mean what is most challenging is often *not* a matter of *knowing* what to do. Rather, it’s having the strength, courage, and discipline 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, and he is in a panic. He says that he dented another car while parking. The other driver is away. Nobody is around to see. He wants your advice here. What should you tell your brother to do?

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 pay for the damage. That’s only fair. *Knowing* the ethical thing to do here is pretty simple.

Scenario B.

*You* are parking your car and *you* accidentally 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 - be honest with yourself - do you actually 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, because sometimes it does.

This is the real ethical test, which I paraphrase from legendary basketball coach John Wooden: What do you do when nobody is watching? What do you do when doing the right thing brings pain? It might be hitting a car, or finding a bag of money, or it might be something else entirely. This doesn't happen to each of us every day, but I bet it will happen to all of us at some point this year.

I think of this car situation because I've been there myself. When I was in college I was parking in a lot 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. My first thought was...actually, I can't say that here! After being angry with myself I had to figure out what to do. I knew I should leave a note. That popped into my head quickly.

But then these other ideas entered my head, like a relentless series of waves that knocks you down and doesn't let you stand up. *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 - longer than I'm proud of - 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 think of myself as an honest person. In that case, 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 and to really be honest. Otherwise I'm a fraud. Honestly, it was when my being Jewish crossed my mind that those other voices went quiet.

So I left a note, and later the woman called me and I covered the damage. You're welcome, Geico. 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. Even if I tried to talk myself out of it.

---

The Mitzvot we do on a daily and weekly basis - prayer, keeping Kosher, being honest, Shabbat - strengthen our spiritual muscles because it's a spiritual discipline. The more

Mitzvot we do, the easier it is to do the right thing because we've practiced it so many times. Just like working out gets easier over time.

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.

As I mentioned earlier, being nice is a great start, but it's not enough. Sometimes it's really easy to be nice, like when you are around other nice people. Like my first semester of college, when everybody was friendly to each other. But what about when things are tough and we are just not feeling nice? It's really hard to be nice then, I know.

But just because we don't *feel* like being nice, it doesn't excuse our behavior toward other people. That's why more important than being nice is *doing the right thing*. We must *always* do the right thing whether we feel like it or not, because others deserve our fully ethical behavior all the time. And because G-d calls on us to create a society grounded in honesty and ethics, all the time. The Torah famously instructs "*Tzedek Tzedek Tirdof* - Justice, justice shall you pursue" (Dt. 16:20). *This* is what the Torah seeks from us, nothing more and nothing less. Do the right thing.

Rabbis are curious why the Torah's verse repeats the word *Tzedek*, justice. After all, we get the point if the verse simply says, "Justice shall you pursue." Why repeat the word? The 19th century Rabbi Simcha Bunim of Pesischa answers: you must pursue justice *through just means*. If one pursues an ethical end through deception or dishonesty, this is not true righteousness. The end *and* the means must both be just.

Others are curious why the verse uses the word "*Tirdof* - *pursue* justice," instead of some more common verb like "*follow* justice." The 20th century Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel teaches that the Torah wants us to go *beyond* passively respecting justice or even following justice. Instead, we must *actively* make it happen ourselves. In other words, justice isn't just for a court to decide, but for us to make happen ourselves. Not being a vigilante, of course, but being a role model.

Speaking of role models, the Midrash directs us to follow the model of Abraham, who demonstrates this magnificently. Recall the story in Genesis 18 of the three strangers walking by his tent in the heat of the desert day. Abraham literally *runs out* to greet them - talk about pursuing - and offers magnificent hospitality, not realizing they are actually G-d's angels. This hospitality is not strict justice, as we would use the term today, but welcoming others is still very much doing the right thing. It's a key Mitzvah. As a reward for Abraham's pursuing this hospitality, G-d rewards Abraham's descendents, the

Jewish people, measure for measure. Abraham brought the strangers to his tent and gave them water, food, and shade in the withering heat. In turn, following the Exodus, G-d gave the Israelites in the same desert heat water to drink, manna to eat, and a cover of clouds to protect them from the stifling desert sun. Doing the right thing has a boomerang effect.

Doing the right thing on an everyday basis, is a sort of marathon. It's a grind, it's challenging, and sometimes it hurts. Fortunately, we have been gifted a training program, the daily, weekly, and yearly Mitzvot that strengthen our ethical muscles and build discipline.

Today is Yom Kippur, which brings with it its own very challenging set of rules. Today is a 25-hour marathon unto itself. But this day also prompts us to look backward at last year and forward to next year. It's the opportunity to pause and reflect on really important questions: Are we in fact as honest and ethical as we can be? What is the next step in that direction for us? And how do we take that step?

Judaism has so many rules because the Torah is downright serious about doing the right thing. By constantly asking ourselves, What is the right thing to do here? we prepare ourselves for those moments when we are truly tested when we might be alone - when we bump a car, when someone at school asks us for our answers on a test, when we may be tempted to cheat on our taxes, when we find a wallet with cash on the ground. We never know when that test may come so we had best prepare today for tomorrow. As Martin Luther King Jr. said, "The time is always right to do what is right."

*Gmar Hatimah Tovah.*