



# New Consolation: Conservative/Masorti Judaism Faces Forward

A STUDY PROGRAM

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**JTS** The Jewish  
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# Sh'mirat Mitzvot – Actions that Give Life Purpose, Strength, and Joy

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The Torah teaches us that life is enriched immeasurably by the intentional practice of mitzvot. Mitzvot govern ethical conduct such as respect for the life, property, and dignity of other people. They also form rituals that mark our devotion to God, including, among many others, daily prayer, kosher diet, and the sanctification of time through observance of Shabbat and the festivals. Mitzvot bind individuals and families into spiritual communities, creating a rich religious life that cannot be experienced alone. Conservative scholars have for over a century examined diverse topics of Jewish practice (*halakha*) and taught how best to integrate traditional values and practices within the setting of contemporary life. Our understandings of gender, sexuality, and human rights have changed dramatically from the views of our ancestors. Yet, the pursuit of holiness remains central to our understanding of Torah and our practice of mitzvot. Each sacred gesture provides purpose to our journey, strengthening us when we falter and infusing our lives with joy.

## A. Key Biblical Texts on the Mitzvot:

### 1. Deuteronomy 10:12-13

וַעֲתָה יִשְׂרָאֵל מָה ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ שֹׁאֵל מֵעַמּוֹךְ כִּי אִם-לִירְאָה אֶת-ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְלַכֵּת בְּכָל-דִּרְכָיו  
וּלְאַהֲבָה אֹתוֹ וְלַעֲבֹד אֶת-ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל-לִבְכֶּךָ וּבְכָל-נַפְשְׁךָ: לְשֹׁמֵר אֶת-מִצְוֹת ה' וְאֶת-  
חֻקֹּתָיו אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי מֵצִוְךָ הַיּוֹם לְטוֹב לָךְ:

And now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God demand of you? Only this: to revere the Lord your God, to walk only in His paths, to love Him, and to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and soul, keeping the Lord's commandments and laws, which I enjoin upon you today, for your good.

### 2. Psalms 19:9

פְּקוּדֵי ה' יִשְׁרִים מְשֻׁמְחֵי-לֵב מִצְוֹת ה' בְּרָה מְאִירַת עֵינִים:

The precepts of the Lord are just, rejoicing the heart;  
the instruction of the Lord is lucid, making the eyes light up.

### 3. Proverbs 30:5

כָּל-אִמְרַת אֱלֹהִים צְרוּפָה מִגֵּן הוּא לְחֹסִים בּוֹ:

Every word of God is pure, a shield to those who take refuge in Him.

## QUESTIONS:

### 1.

Consider each verb in the verse from Deuteronomy. Some refer to concrete actions, while others anticipate internal experiences. What links the realms of physical action and of spiritual or emotional feeling? Can one be had without the other? How about in your life — how does Jewish identity lead to Jewish action, and how does Jewish action itself shape identity? The Torah claims that guarding the mitzvot will be good for you. How so?

### 2.

Psalm 19 praises the divine commands as just, joy-giving, lucid, and enlightening. Awesome! But what shall we do with commandments which do not fulfill these promises? Some may seem obscure, depressing, or even unjust. Shall we adapt or abandon them? Retain but reinterpret them? Can this verse's identification of the mitzvot with justice and joy become not just a pious promise but also a prod to keep working until our mitzvah practice can also reach its ideal? What's your plan?

### 3.

Proverbs 30:5 asserts that every divine word is pure. The sage Rav claimed that the mitzvot were designed to purify people, much as iron is purified by heat and pressure (Ber. Rabba 44:1). This verse also asserts that God's words may become a shield for those who seek refuge in them. Have you ever felt yourself to be changed by the practice of a mitzvah? In what way? Can you relate to the mitzvot as a shield or refuge? From what do they protect you?

## B. Key Rabbinic Texts on the Mitzvot:

### 1. Mishnah Avot 4:2

בן עזאי אומר הוי רץ למצוה קלה כבחמורה ובורח מן העבירה שמצוה גוררת מצוה ועבירה גוררת עבירה ששכר מצוה מצוה ושכר עבירה עבירה:

Ben Azzai teaches, you should run to perform a minor mitzvah as much as a major one, and flee from transgression; for one mitzvah leads to another mitzvah, and one transgression leads to another transgression. For the reward of a mitzvah is a mitzvah, and the reward of a transgression is a transgression.

### 2. Yerushalmi Hallah 1:5

א"ר הילא [ויקרא כז לד] אלה המצוות אם עשיתן כמצותן הן מצוות ואם לאו אינן מצוות:

Rabbi Hilla explained the verse, "These are the commandments [that the Lord gave Moses for the Israelite people on Mt. Sinai]" (Leviticus 27:34) — if you do them as they have been commanded, then they are mitzvot, but if not, then they are not mitzvot.

### 3. Bavli Makkot 23b

ר' חנניא בן עקשיא אומר: רצה הקדוש ברוך הוא לזכות את ישראל לפיכך הרבה להם תורה ומצות, שנאמר: ה' חפץ למען צדקו יגדיל תורה ויאדיר.

Rabbi Hannania b. Akashia says, The Holy One desired to give merit to Israel. Therefore He made numerous for them Torah and mitzvot, as it says, “The Lord, desiring that he become righteous, made the Torah great and glorious” (Isaiah 42:21)

## QUESTIONS:

### 1.

Which commandments do you suppose Ben Azzai considered to be major and minor?  
Which ones do you value more than others?  
Would it be worthwhile to recalibrate your practice by paying more attention to mitzvot you are apt to neglect? What does it mean that the reward of a mitzvah is a mitzvah?  
Isn't the reward supposed to be admission to heaven?  
What reward do you most desire, and what penalty do you most dread?

### 2.

What exactly is Rabbi Hilla's point? Is he saying that if mitzvot are not done *precisely* — *just like this* — then they are not mitzvot? Or does he mean that they must be *intended as mitzvot* — *commandments* — or else they may not count?  
Either way, we fallible beings are not always precise, and we are not always intentional.  
Is Rabbi Hilla being unrealistic, or is he challenging us to try a little harder, to become true guardians of the commandments (*shomrei mitzvot*)?

### 3.

JTS Chancellor Arnold Eisen writes that, “Mitzvah — because it is comprehensive — provides precious wholeness to life that would otherwise be unavailable.”  
(*Conservative Judaism Today and Tomorrow*, p. 16)

Rabbi Hannania sees the vast array of Torah teachings and mitzvot as a gift to Israel, a comprehensive map of merit. Sometimes, however, the vastness can be overwhelming, making us feel inadequate rather than whole. In this new year, how can we give and receive forgiveness for failure, so that the mitzvot can provide precious wholeness to our lives?

What, then, is a mitzvah? In good rabbinic fashion, we shall answer with a question: what is a marriage? Two people can be in love without being married. They might live together, share property and even co-parent without making any durable commitment to one another. What is a marriage? It is an acknowledgment of obligation. The couple commits to become a family, offering each other not only love but service, and receiving not only affection but support. Likewise, mitzvot are a mechanism for creating committed relationships. They bind us into religious communities, and covenant us with God. They demand heroic commitment, and infuse life with deep meaning and joy. No Jew is perfect in his or her practice; the high holidays arrive each year with the message that God, like a loving parent, is eager to forgive us for our flaws, and that God believes that we are capable of being responsible partners in the covenant. In this season of return and renewal, we find in the mitzvot ample opportunities to live a life of purpose, of dedication, and of joy.