



THE 613 COMMANDMENTS

By RABBI MENDEL WEINBACH

The Jew was given 613 commandments (*mitzvot*), according to the Talmud, which contain 248 positive commands and 365 negative ones. The positive *mitzvot* equal the number of parts of the body; the negative *mitzvot* correspond to the number of days in the solar year.

Thus are we introduced to 613, the magic number of Torah scholarship and Jewish living. Its source is the Babylonian Talmud; its importance is echoed in a vast body of scholarly literature spanning a millennium; its potential as an aid to studying and remembering Torah deserves our careful analysis.

The Talmud refers to this number as "*taryag mitzvot*." Classical Jewish sources assign a numerical value to each letter of the Hebrew alphabet, which is treated not as a mere utilitarian collection of word components but as a conveyor of esoteric information through the Kabbalistic medium of gematriya. Thus the gematriya (numerical equivalent) of *taryag* is 613 (*tav* = 400, *raish* = 200, *yud* = 10, and *gimel* = 3). The tradition of *taryag mitzvot* was developed by Rabbi Simlai of the Talmud, reasoning as follows: Scripture tells us that Moses commanded the Torah (Pentateuch) to the Children of Israel. The gematriya of the four Hebrew letters of the word Torah is 611. Add to this the two commandments which all of Israel heard from God Himself at Mt. Sinai and you have a total of 613 — *taryag*.

Before any ambitious Bible student goes plunging into the five books of the Torah in search of a list of these commandments, he should be warned that the task is more formidable than it seems. The Torah is a fascinating complex of prophetic history and Divine guidance, encompassing the entire human and universal experience, and the commandments contained therein represent but one of its dimensions. Tradition has it that God used the Torah as His blueprint for creating the world and that all of its letters can be combined to form the different sacred names of the Deity. Attempting to approach the Torah superficially is therefore as safe as negotiating an iceberg. One unfamiliar with the Talmudic ground-rules for calculating the *mitzvot* is likely to come up with a number far below or beyond the 613 total. In actuality the Torah contains thousands of rules and the *taryag mitzvot* are only the broad classifications.

The First Shorthand

The first recorded attempt to develop scholarly criteria for counting the commandments was made close to 1,000 years ago by Rabbi Shimon Kaeira, whose classic *Halachot Gedolot* (The Great Laws)

Produced by the Ohr Somayach Office of Information and Communication

General Editor: Rabbi Moshe Newman

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Production Design: Eli Ballon

This article first appeared in *Shma Yisrael* magazine, published by Ohr Somayach.

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became the pacesetter in this field. The famed medieval Spanish scholar, Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra, suggests that something along the lines of Rabbi Kaeira's work had been written more than two millennia earlier by Joshua and the Children of Israel when entering the Land of Israel. Commanded by God to record the entire Torah in 70 languages on 12 great stones after crossing the Jordan, they faced the apparently insurmountable task of inscribing millions of words. Ibn Ezra concluded that they only listed the 613 commandments in each language, rather than the whole Torah.

Even if Ibn Ezra was correct in his assumption, later generations had no record of which commandments were indeed inscribed on those stones. Kaeira's work won wide acceptance but by no means went unchallenged. There has probably been no single item of the Talmud which has been the subject of so much critical analysis as Rabbi Simlai's statement. Rav Saadia Gaon's listing differed from Rabbi Kaeira's, and Maimonides challenged them both. His own compilation laid the groundwork for his *Sefer Hamitzvot* (Book of the Mitzvot) and the classic Mishneh Torah codification which followed. Dozens of volumes and epic poems have been authored throughout the generations of the *taryag* theme, with earlier generations favoring Rabbi Kaeira's system and the later ones following the pattern of Maimonides.

But on one thing there was consensus: The usefulness of the listing of the *mitzvot* as a medium for gaining a perspective of all the Divine commandments included in the Torah's message to Jewry. The great French Torah authority and itinerant preacher, Rabbi Moshe of Coucy, memorized all of the 613 *mitzvot* as a personal checklist when he set out in 1235 on a tour of Jewish communities in France and Spain for the purpose of strengthening their fulfillment of Torah commandments. French Jewry was then suffering from the decree of Crusader King Louis IX (who was later canonized by the Catholic Church) on the burning of the Talmud, and these talks on the *mitzvot* filled a serious intellectual void. In one community after another he was besieged by information-hungry audiences asking him to expand his lectures into a full-fledged book.

Modesty prevented the sage of Coucy from undertaking a work of such magnitude for the public. Then one night he was commanded in a dream to write a book on the *mitzvot* which was to be divided into two sections: The positive commandments and the negative ones. The response to this prophetic dream was the compilation of the classic *Sefer Hamitzvot Hagadol* (The Great Book of Mitzvot).

Not long afterwards, another French sage, Rabbi Yitzchak of Couerville, compiled a more concise listing of the *mitzvot*, *Sefer Mitzvot Katan* (The Small Book of Mitzvot), which he dispatched at his own expense to Jewish communities in western Europe so that they might copy its contents as a record of the commandments they were obligated to fulfill.

The Night-Long Vigils

The situation in Spain was different. There was no need for mitzvah listings as a replacement for banned literature. But even here the need was felt for providing at least a periodical review of the commandments in order to refresh the Torah perspective of both scholar and layman. An ingenious method, typical of the character of medieval Spanish Jewry, was developed. Scholar-poets wove all 613 commandments into long poems to be recited once a year. The time chosen for this unique sort of review was the long sleepless night with which Jews traditionally usher in the Shavuot festival. As they celebrate this holiday, known as "the season of the giving of our Torah," the People of the Torah recall with shame that on a summer morning in the year 2448 (1312 BCE) in the Sinai Desert, they had to be roused from their sleep by God, anxious to give them His Torah. As an atonement for this ancestral lack of enthusiasm, they stay awake all Shavuot eve studying Torah. The most renowned of these poetic compilations which became part of the *tikkun* (order) of Shavuot eve are the *Azharot* (warnings) of Rabbi Shlomo Ibn Gvirol, and it is his version which so many Oriental Jews still recite during their all-night holiday vigil.

There is an apocryphal tale of how Ibn Gvirol's masterpiece was inspired. Once, when he was still an 18-year-old student in the yeshiva, he heard the master announce that he would offer the hand of his exceptional daughter in marriage to the disciple who would present him with some new scholarly creation. That night the young scholar-poet went without sleep, pouring all of his energies into the writing of his *Azharot* and tossing the finished manuscript into his master's home through an open skylight. The following morning the master found the papers, recognized Ibn Gvirol's handwriting, and immediately made arrangements for taking him as his son-in-law.

The once-a-year recital of *taryag mitzvot* through *Azharot* poetry did not satisfy religious leaders in other lands who felt a need for a more frequent review. Rav Moshe of Couerville recorded his listing of relevant commandments on seven pages so that a Jew could complete the entire listing each week through daily review. Rabbi Aharon Halevi of Barcelona, a contemporary of the sages of Coucy and Couerville, arranged his *Sefer Hachinuch* (Book of Education) according to weekly Torah portions to encourage his son and other youths to reflect upon the *mitzvot* contained in each chapter. The motivation for this effort, as explained in his introduction, has a ring of contemporary significance: "To familiarize them with the *mitzvot* and to occupy their minds with pure thought and meaningful calculation lest they take into their hearts calculations of amusement, insignificance and meaninglessness; and even when they grow older these *mitzvot* shall not depart from them." The weekly portion system of listing the *mitzvot* for review was utilized a few centuries later by Rabbi Yeshaya Halevi Horowitz in his *Shnei Luchot Habrit* (Two Tablets of the Covenant).

Daily Review

The idea of a comprehensive review each week was revived by Rabbi Shabtai Hacohen (1621-1663), author of the classical *Siftei Cohen* on the *Shulchan Aruch*. His *Poel Tzedek* (Worker of Righteousness) was a listing of the 613 *mitzvot*, each identified by a one-line scriptural source. He divided them into seven sections to enable readers to easily complete a total review each week. Rabbi David Arel of Volozhin made the same time breakdown in his elaboration of the *Keter Torah* (Crown of Torah) compilation of *mitzvot* authored by Rabbi David Vital.

Even a week was too long for some authors. Rabbi Shabtai considered a daily review of all the *mitzvot* as the ideal fulfillment of the prophetic command: "This book of the Torah shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall study therein day and night." He submitted his weekly plan only as a concession to those who couldn't keep the daily pace.

Somewhere in between the ideal and practical paces discussed by his predecessors is the quota suggested by a Torah giant of the last generation. Rabbi Yisrael Meir Hacohen Kagan (1838-1933), known as the Chafetz Chaim because of a Torah classic by that name which he authored, wrote *Sefer Hamitzvot Hakatzar* (Abridged Book of *Mitzvot*) in which he offered brief descriptions of the commandments relevant to our own times. He advised reviewing half the positive commands on Monday and half on Thursday, repeating the same pattern the following week in regard to negative commands.

Almost a millennium is spanned by all these efforts, from the pacesetting, comprehensive *Halachot Gedolot* till the Chafetz Chaim's concentration on relevance. The common denominator of all these works is their authors' conviction that it is vital for a Jew to regularly review the commandments as a means of refreshing his sense of duty and his general Torah perspective.

In this age of the information explosion, there is still very little available for the uninformed Jew curious about his heritage, but too impatient to read lengthy works at the outset of his investigation. The

experience of 1,000 years teaches us that *taryag mitzvot* may well provide both the medium and the message for the student in search of an introduction to the vast wealth of Torah knowledge.