

The importance of the 10 commandments

The 1st Commandment states “I am the Lord your God” which reminds Jews of the covenant made between God and Moses and that the Jews are His chosen people. The Shema States that “Hear Oh Israel the Lord your God the Lord is One” which both relates to the first Commandment and the second to “Have no other God but Me”. Jews take the Name of God very seriously and use it sparingly even writing it as G_D to comply with the third commandment to not take the Lord’s name in vain. The fourth Commandment to “Keep the Sabbath day holy” is important to both Orthodox and Reform Jews but here is a difference in how they interpret this. Orthodox Jews refrain from all work as defined in the Talmud in the 39 Melachot. This means no tying or untying knots, no tearing, no making fire all of which have practical effect on their day from ripping up toilet paper, to what shoes they wear. Reform Jews still want to mark the day as holy but do so recognising that this is a modern world so don’t start at sunset which varies but at 8pm and would drive a car on the Shabbat. The next 6 commandments begin with “Honouring your father and mother” and in Judaism the respect for the elderly who have kept the faith going is vital. Parents also bless their children on the Shabbat so that respect works both ways. The first commandment in the whole of the Torah is to “Go forth and Multiply” go and have children, and sex is seen as important in Judaism with an extensive list of who you can and cannot have sex with, in the book of Leviticus in the Torah. This however should be within a marriage and the 6th commandment “You shall not commit adultery” makes that clear. “Do not steal, the 7th Commandment makes for a safe and ordered society. The next Commandment “You shall not kill” is reinforced by the principle of PIKUACH NEFESH the obligation to save a life. So sacred is life, which Jews believe is given by God, that a Jew can break the Shabbat law of the 4th Commandment if it will save a life.

Jewish belief about Life

Jewish attitude about life stems from their belief that God is the Creator who gives life. Jews therefore should respect life and live life to the full and they will be judged by the way they live their life and they are told in the Torah “those who perform good deeds will be blessed”. The term L’Chaim is used during festivals and celebrations meaning “to life”.

Pikuach Nefesh

The term Pikuach Nefesh refers to the belief that the most important Mitzvot is the preservation of life. God is the one creator of life and therefore is sacred, only he can give and preserve life. The Torah says “God says let us make man in our own image” Psalms says about God “You created my veins and covered me in my mother’s womb” Therefore the saving of life should take priority over all other Mitzvot in the Torah even if it means breaking a mitzvot. God says in the Talmud Jews will “live by the Torah not die by it”. This includes breaking the 4th Commandment to “keep the Sabbath day Holy” and breaking one’s fast at Yom Kippur if you are saving a life.



The 613 Mitzvot

The term Mitzvot means to keep the duties given by God to Moses, doing good deeds and being given an honour like reading the Torah in the synagogue.

Jews are reminded that there are 613 Mitzvot in the Torah each time they wear their Tallit (prayer shawls) with the 613 strands around the edge of the Tallit. Some are impossible to keep as they refer to the Temple which was destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD. Orthodox Jews try and keep all the laws to the letter, and although Reform Jews also try to keep them they may consider some not compatible with modern life. The keeping of the Mitzvot help Jews build a close relationship with God. These Mitzvot need some interpretation as they may not speak about modern situations. One Mitzvot states “thou shall not kill” but how does this fit with issues such as abortion, contraception, self defence, nuclear attacks turning off life-support machines.



Mitzvot Day

Mitzvah day was established to encourage Jews to make a positive impact on their environment. Good deeds are done not because its one of the 613 mizvot but because it’s a kind action.

3 Jewish concepts are important on Mitzvot day.

Tikkun Olam—means healing or perfecting the world

Gamilut Hasadim—means the giving of loving kindness without an expectation of anything in return.

Tzedakah—is that righteousness and justice is shown through social action and acts of loving kindness.