

# **To Be Commanded – A Talmudic Challenge to Free Will**

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These materials have been created by **KOACH** for the enhancement of your on-campus programming. They are designed to be adjustable based on your interests and the available time. This packet contains: background materials, a facilitator guide and list of additional resources. The background materials and facilitator guide will help you build conversations around the text and create connections between the text and contemporary life.

## 1. Overview and Objective

What happens when Judaism clashes with our personal value systems?

Judaism is a religion of *mitzvot* (commandments), whose goal is to serve God by living a lifestyle regulated by *halakhah* (Jewish law). Rabbinic tradition holds up as an ideal not a person who lives a good or religious life as a result of a free decision, or because that's the kind of person she is, but rather someone who behaves correctly despite their own desires, purely because they understand that they are subject to an outside source of authority.

For modern Jews, brought up on the ideas of autonomy and personal responsibility as the basis of morality, these teachings are problematic. Are the only options personal freedom on one hand and 100% halakhic Judaism on the other? Or is there a middle ground which might enable us to combine the value of autonomy with serious commitment to Jewish tradition?

These study materials will enable you to explore these questions as discussed by Talmudic thinkers.

## 2. Facilitator Guide

The Facilitator Guide is designed to direct you through several discussion options. Although it is presented as a progression, you need not follow the format from beginning to end. Use the packet in its entirety or choose components based on the time you have available and the interest of the students in your group. For example, you might use the texts and questions as the basis for a *D'var Torah*. Or, use the sources as table cards for discussion at *Shabbat* dinner. Be as creative as you wish—just enjoy the experience of learning!

### Discussion questions:

1. **Before studying the texts**, try to recall an incident in which you did a good deed of some sort. What were your motivations? Did you act entirely voluntarily or did you feel obligated in some way to behave the way you did? In principle, do you think it's better to do a good deed because you want to or because you're compelled to? What might be the advantages and disadvantages of each kind of ethical action?
2. Study **text 1**. What opinions does the Talmud present on the question of whether it's better to act out of free-will or out of a sense of being commanded? Which side does the text come down on in the end?
3. What might be the rationale of the Talmud's position? How do **texts and 2 and 3** answer this question? Which of the opinions presented do you find more convincing? Are there other possible ways of explaining why it's better to be commanded?
4. To what extent do you personally feel commanded or obligated, and which areas of your life does this sense of obligation extend to, if any? Does being a good person and a good Jew depend on feeling obligated, or can personal freedom form the basis of our commitment to Jewish and moral values?

## Text 1

*The Talmud relates a story which exemplifies the mitzvah of honoring parents: Dana ben Natina, a non-Jew from Ashkelon, refused to sell precious stones for an enormous profit so as to avoid disturbing his father who was asleep with the key to the safe under his pillow. God rewarded Dana: the following year a red heifer (an incredibly rare animal which was required for certain purification rituals in the Temple) was born in his herd; by selling the animal he was able to recoup the financial loss he had suffered as a result of honoring his father.*

*The text continues:*

ואמר רבי חנינא: ומה מי שאינו מצווה ועושה כך מצווה ועושה על אחת כמה וכמה. דאמר רבי חנינא: גדול מצווה ועושה ממי שאינו מצווה ועושה.

אמר רב יוסף: מריש הוה אמינא: מאן דהוה אמר לי הלכה כרבי יהודה דאמר סומא פטור מן המצוות עבידנא יומא טבא לרבנן דהא לא מיפקידנא והא עבידנא. השתא דשמעיתא להא דאמר רבי חנינא גדול מצווה ועושה יותר ממי שאינו מצווה ועושה, אדרבה: מאן דאמר לי דאין הלכה כרבי יהודה עבידנא יומא טבא לרבנן ... מאי טעמא? דכי מפקדינא אית לי אגרא טפי.

Rabbi Hanina observed thereon: if one who is not commanded [to honor his parents] yet does so is thus rewarded, how much more so is one who is commanded and does so! For Rabbi Hanina said: one who is commanded and fulfills the command is greater than one who fulfills it though not commanded.

Rabbi Yosef [*a blind rabbi*] said: originally I thought that if anyone would tell me that the law agrees with Rabbi Yehuda, that a blind person is exempt from the commandments, I would make a banquet for the rabbis, seeing as I am not obliged yet fulfill them. Now, however, that I have heard Rabbi Hanina's principle that one who is commanded and fulfills the command is greater than one who fulfills it though not commanded, the opposite is true: if anyone should tell me that the law does not agree with Rabbi Yehuda I would make a banquet for the rabbis ... What is the reason? Because I am commanded I receive a greater reward.

*Babylonian Talmud Kiddushin 31a and Bava Kama 87a*

**Text 2**

נראה דהיינו טעמא דמי שמצווה ועושב עדיף – לפי שדואג ומצטער יותר פן יעבור, ממי שאין מצווה – שיש לו פת בסלו, שאם ירצה – יניח.

It seems that the reason why a person who is commanded and fulfills the commandment is greater is that he is likely to be more concerned and anxious lest he sins than a person who is not commanded – who is likened to someone who has a loaf of bread in his basket which, if he wishes, can be thrown away.

*Tosafot Kiddushin 31a*

**Text 3**

מפני שהוא דואג תמיד לבטל יצרו ולקיים מצוות בוראו.

Because he is always concerned to negate his desires and fulfill the commandments of his creator.

*Tosafot Avoda Zara 3a*

### **3. Definitions and Biographies**

#### **Tosafot**

Lit. “Additions” – comments on the Talmud written by the Tosafists (Heb. “*Baalei ha-tosafot*”) in 12<sup>th</sup> century France. In traditional editions, the commentaries are printed alongside the text of the Talmud.

#### **4. Additional resources**

Neil Gillman, *Sacred Fragments*, JPS, 1990 (see chapter 2)

Isadore Twersky, *The Maimonides Reader*, Behrman House Publishing, 1976

Yeshayahu Leibowitz, Judaism, *Human Values, and the Jewish State*, Harvard University Press 1992 (see chapter 1, “Religious Praxis”)

Martin Buber, *On Judaism*, Schocken, 1996 (see chapter 8, “Herut: On Youth and Religion”); *I and Thou*, Free Press, 1971