

The Nature of Halacha – 19 Letters

(1) תורות. Instructions or doctrines. The historically revealed ideas concerning God, the world, the mission of humanity and of Israel, not as mere doctrines of faith or science, but as principles to be acknowledged by mind and heart, and realized in life.

(2) משפטים. Judgments. Statements of justice towards creatures similar and equal to yourself, by reason of this resemblance and equality, that is, of justice towards human beings.

(3) חקים. Arbitrary statutes. Statements of justice towards subordinate creatures by reason of the obedience due to God; that is, justice towards the earth, plants, and animals, or, if they have become assimilated with your personality towards your own body and soul.

(4) מצות. Commandments. Precepts of love towards all beings without distinction, purely because of the bidding of God and in consideration of our duty as men and Israelites.

(5) עדות. Symbolic observances. Monuments or testimonies to truths essential to the concept of the mission of man and of Israel. These testimonies are symbolic words or actions which bear a lesson for the individual Jew, collective Israel, or mankind in general.

(6) עבודה. Service or worship. Exaltation and sanctification of the inner powers by word-or-deed symbols to the end that our conception of our task be rendered clearer, and we be better fitted to fulfil our mission on earth.

As basal principles to these grand divisions of religion we have three concepts, justice, love, and education.

(1) Justice, that is, consideration for every being as creature of God, for all possessions as arrangements willed by God, of all governments and systems as ordained by God and fulfilment of all duties towards them incumbent upon us.

(2) Love, that is, kindly acceptance of all beings as children of God, as brethren; promotion of their welfare, and the endeavour to bring them to the goal set for them by God, without motive or benefit, but simply to fulfil the Divine will and command.

(3) Education, that is, the training of oneself and others to such work by taking to heart these truths as life-principles, by holding them fast and preserving them for oneself and for others, and by endeavouring to regain them whenever the influences of worldly life have torn them from our possession. – *Rav Hirsch Letter 10*

A discussion on Halacha based on 19 Letters, Letter 10

Some Textual Questions to ask Chanichim:

- What is unique about the way Rav Hirsch classified the mitzvot? How does it differ from other ways you've heard about classifying the mitzvot.
- What does this piece hint about the purpose of mitzvot and Halacha in general?
- How does Rav Hirsch's definition of a mitzvah fly in the face of its common usage?
- Rav Hirsch originally wrote this in German. Why do you think he did this?
- Why does the Rambam emphasize in the additional sources (green box) that laws with no reason should not be treated lightly? What is the danger in insisting on reasons for mitzvot?

Some General Questions to ask Chanichim:

- Why do you think we rarely hear about big ideas and philosophies backing up each mitzvah?
- What do you think is more important believing or doing? Why does Judaism put such an emphasis on doing?
- What is the deeper meaning of the phrase "naaseh venishma"?
- Do you think Halacha will still apply when Moshiach comes?
- How does Halacha in the written law relate to Halacha in the oral law?
- Was there Halacha before the giving of the Torah?

Some Personal Questions to ask Chanichim:

- Do you feel Halacha is restrictive? Enticing?
- How do you relate to the categories of laws Rav Hirsch talks about above? Are there any you connect to more than others?
- How do you relate to freedom? What is the difference between "freedom from" and "freedom for"?

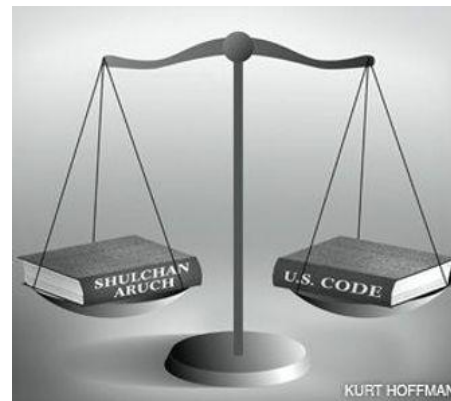
Some Interactive Resources:

Youtube – BimBam – "Where Do Jewish Laws Come From? Intro to Torah, Talmud, Halacha"

Article – "Do we worship Hashem or Halacha" – Jerusalem post.

Art – How do halacha and societal law interact?

Poem by Zelda - How can the Sabbath
plant a huge and shining flower
in a blind and narrow heart?
How can the Sabbath
plant the bud of angels
in a heart of raving flesh?
Light a candle! Drink wine!
Slowly the Sabbath descends
and in her hand the flower,
and in her hand
the sinking sun.



Other sources and quotes to bring into discussion:

Rav Kook, Ein Ayah:

The giving of the 7 Noachide laws was accompanied by a rainbow – it is when the pure Godly spiritual light was literally "refracted" into seven more tangible wavelengths – things we can do practically to relate to the original Godly light.

Rambam Mishneh Torah Meila 8:8:

"It is appropriate that one meditate, according to his intellectual capacity, regarding the laws of the Torah to understand their deeper meaning. Those laws for which he finds no reason and knows no purpose should nevertheless not be treated lightly."

Rambam on Devarim 22:6

The purpose of the mitzvah of chasing away the mother bird before taking her eggs or chicks is that we internalize feelings of compassion.

"The Laws of Kashrut" – Artscroll:

It is for this reason that the Hebrew word taam has a dual meaning: taste and reason. The reason makes the mitzvah appetizing and "tasty" to the heart and mind so that not only the body but the totality of the Jew – body, mind, soul and emotions – serve God.

Rabbi Sacks:

"Sa'adia Gaon.. stated that only halakhah, Jewish law, joined Jews together into a people.

What then becomes of peoplehood once the majority of Jews worldwide – some 80 per cent... no longer see themselves as bound by halakhah?"

"Halachah aims at creating an ideal society, but it must always be workable within a real society"

A Related Story:

A family in Canada were unsure about whether to send their son to a Jewish high school or not. They debated it endlessly – it was the decision between a better education or a better Jewish education. They went to their Rabbi for advice and he strongly pushed them to send him to a Jewish high school. Ultimately they didn't listen. The boy went to the non Jewish high school and ended up getting into a great university. In the university he fell strongly in love with a non-Jewish Argentinian girl and wanted to marry her. His parents were deeply distraught about his decision and absolutely refused to give him permission to marry her. The argument went on and on for 3 years until eventually the parents gave in and reluctantly gave him permission to marry her. The first thing to do was fly to Argentina to meet the girl's family. So the boy and his parents reluctantly boarded the plane from Canada to Argentina to spend a fully vegetarian weekend away with the girl's parents. The two sets of parents got on with each other and were able to put their cultural differences aside for the sake of their children. Before everyone tucked into dinner the Argentinian parents of the girl asked if they could be excused from the table for a second. They returned 3 minutes later. The boy politely asked where they had gone. They said they went down to the basement to do a family tradition. They didn't know why they did it but it was something that their parents did and they just continued to do it. That tradition was lighting two candles. It was Friday night dinner. And that family ended up being Morano Jews whose ancestors kept Judaism in secret. Even though they had no idea what they were doing, why they were doing it or even that they were Jewish – the tradition still got preserved.