

Naso - Midrash on the Purpose of Being Commanded and the Importance of Receptivity
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צו-tzav means **command, instruct, charge, order**. God does most of the commanding in the Torah. We learn that at the very beginning from God's command to Adam not to eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge (Gen. 2:16-17). Yet in a few instances, including one in our parasha pertaining to the purity of the camp, **God gives Moses the power to issue commands**.

וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר. **צו** אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל... (במדבר ה:ב)
God spoke to Moses saying: [You] Command the children of Israel... (Num. 5:1-2)

The rabbis took a very close look at this. They wanted to understand the ramifications of such power.

צו - הצווי מיד בשעת מעשה ולדורות. (ספרי במדבר א:ב)
צו-tzav, [that is, an order issued by Moses] such a **command** applies to an immediate circumstance and for generations, [that is for all time]. (Sifrei Bemidbar 1:2)

In other words, commands or orders issued by Moses may be limited or broad in scope. They may be temporary or permanent. The order that is Moses is told to give in this parasha is limited to a specific place and time: the sojourn of Israel in the desert.

צו אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וישלחו מן המחנה כל צרוע וכל זב וכל טמא לנפש.
 (במדבר ה:ב)
Command the Children of Israel to remove from the camp anyone who is afflicted with the scale disease, or a discharge and anyone defiled by a corpse. (Num. 5:2)

The purpose of this command was to maintain the purity of the Israelite camp.

וַיַּעֲשׂוּ כֵן בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וישלחו אותם. (במדבר ה:ד)
And the Children of Israel did so and they sent them forth. (Num. 5:4)

But there are other examples of commands where the duration of the command is open ended. The command to collect olive oil for the lighting of the menorah is such a command:

צו אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל ויקחו אליה שמן זית זך כתית למאור להעֲלֹת נֵר תמיד. מחוץ לפרכת העֲדַת באהל מועד יַעֲרֹךְ אֹתוֹ אֶהְרֹן מַעֲרֹב עֵד בֹּקֶר לִפְנֵי ה' תמיד חֲקַת עֹלָם לְדֹרֹתֵיכֶם. (ויקרא כד:ב-ג)
Command the Israelite people to bring you clear oil of beaten olives for lighting, for kindling lamps regularly. (Lev. 24:2-3)

The order to remove impure persons expired after the desert sojourn. But the command to collect olive oil was to last forever. Indeed, the Hanukah story illustrates this. According to the rabbis, when the Hasmoneans cleansed the Temple, they wanted to relight the menorah but they had no pure oil, since all the existing jars of oil had been defiled by the Greeks (Shabbat 21b). When they eventually found one jar of pure oil sealed by the High Priest, **they lit the menorah not only an act of rededication, but as a re-enactment the permanence of Moses' biblical order**. When the Temple was destroyed, the order could not be carried out. However, as a symbolic reminder of this order, synagogues from antiquity until today keep a Ner Tamid (Eternal Light) burning at the synagogue near the Ark. Orders are fascinating legal tools. The midrash presents us with three different opinions as to their purpose:

רבי יהודה בן בתירא אומר: אין צווי בכל מקום אלא **זריו**.
Rabbi Yehuda ben Beteira said: In every instance of an order, its sole purpose is to spur you to act.
 רבי שמעון בן יוחאי אומר: אין צווי בכל מקום אלא **חסרון כיס**.
Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai said: In every instance of an order, its sole purpose is to cause you a financial outlay.
 רבי אומר: אין צווי בכל מקום אלא **אזהרה**.
Rabbi (Judah the Prince) said: In every instance of an order, its sole purpose is to warn you.

Each rabbi supports his opinion with an example.

R. Yehudah ben Beteira	צו אֶת יהושע וְחִזְקִיָּהוּ וְאַמְצִיָּהוּ כִּי הוּא יַעֲבֹר לִפְנֵי הָעָם הַזֶּה וְהוּא יַנְחִיל אוֹתָם אֶת הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר תֵּרְאֶה. But command Yehoshua; make-him-strong, make-him-courageous, for he will cross over before this people and he will cause them to inherit the land that you see. (Deut. 3:28)	In this instance Moses commands to Joshua to be his successor his main objective in the command is to spur him to act.
R. Shimon ben Yochai	צו אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם אֵת קָרְבָּנִי לִחְמִי לֹאֲשִׁי רִיתָ נִיחָחִי תִשְׁמְרוּ לְהַקְרִיב לִי בְמוֹעֲדוֹ. Command the Israelite people and say to them: Be punctilious in presenting to Me at stated times the offerings of food due Me, as offerings by fire of pleasing odor to Me. (Num. 28:2)	Here, Moses is laying out the schedule of the various sacrifices that are to be brought daily, weekly, and at appointed festival times.
Rabbi Judah the Prince	וַיֹּצֵא ה' אֱלֹהִים עַל הָאָדָם לֵאמֹר מִכָּל עֵץ הָגֵן אָכַל תֹּאכַל. וּמִעֵץ הַדַּעַת טוֹב וְרָע לֹא תֹאכַל מִמֶּנּוּ כִּי בְיוֹם אֲכָלְהָ מִמֶּנּוּ מוֹת תָּמוּת. And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, "Of every tree of the garden you are free to eat; but as for the tree of knowledge of good and bad, you must not eat of it; for as soon as you eat of it, you shall die." (Gen. 2:16-17)	God's commandment to Adam prohibiting him from eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge

Thus, the three different rabbinic opinions represent three different philosophies of **commandment** and being **commanded**.

The purpose of the זריו commandment is to get you to do something. The realm of action and behavior.	The commander functions as a coach, mentor or motivator, someone who lights the spark and inspires you to take action.
The purpose of the חסרון כיס commandment is to get you to give something. The realm of character and disposition.	The commander functions as a charismatic demander of sacrifice, someone who sternly orders you give of yourself, to sacrifice of yourself.
The purpose of the אזהרה commandment is to prevent	The commander functions as a parent, teacher, or spiritual guide who

you from failure or sin and its consequences.	prevents you from sin and shapes your life.
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We can extrapolate from this discussion and ask a larger question which is a constant theme in Jewish philosophy: what is the purpose of the commandments? Or, in a more contemporary iteration of this question, *how do the commandments help us to attain meaning?* According to R. Yehuda ben Beteira, we get meaning through what we do. According to R. Shimon ben Yochai, we get meaning through sacrifice. According to Rabbi Judah the Prince, we get meaning by living a life guided by moral principles. ☆ In the course of the discussion in the midrash, we find the following fascinating statement:

לפי דרכנו למדנו שאין מחזקין אלא המחזקין, ואין מנזרין אלא המנזרין. (במדבר רבה ז:ז)

According to our method of inquiry, we have learned that one should only strengthen those who are able to be strengthened, and one should only spur-on those who are capable of being spurred-on. (Bemidbar Rabbah 7:7)

The midrash is referring specifically to Moses command of Joshua, who evidently had demonstrated to Moses that he was a person with the *right stuff*, a person who was receptive, if we take all three of the above positions, to being mentored, to self-sacrifice and to moral guidance. This kind of wisdom is not uncommon. We have several examples in rabbinic sources. For example, these words are familiar to us from Pirke Avot 4:18:

רבי שמעון בן אלעזר אומר: אל תרצה את חברך בשעת כעסו, ואל תנחמונו בשעה שמתו משל לפניו, ואל תשאל לו בשעת נדורו, ואל תשתדל לראותו בשעת קלקלתו:
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Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar said: Do not try to appease your friend during his hour of anger; Nor comfort him at the hour while his dead still lies before him; Nor question him at the hour of his vow; Nor strive to see him in the hour of his disgrace.

In each of these cases there has to be receptivity. The person who is in a fit of rage, is not able to hear words of calm. The individual who is in a state of shock in the moment of loss is not receptive to words of comfort. Likewise, when someone is so focused in a moment of resolution, such as a vow, one should not interfere with questions that raise doubt as to intent or purpose. And finally, it is obvious that a person who has been humiliated will not be receptive to an ordinary visit. ☆

Receptivity to Reproach

אין מדברים אלא למי שהוא שומע. (מדרש תנחומא בובר יתרו טו:א)
One should only speak to one who listens. (Tan. Bub. Yitro 15:1)

The talmud formulates this in even stronger terms:

ואמר רבי אילעא משום רבי אלעזר ברבי שמעון: כשם שמצוה על אדם לומר דבר הנשמע — כך מצוה על אדם שלא לומר דבר שאינו נשמע. רבי אבא אומר: חובה, שנאמר: "אל תוכח לין כן ישנאך הוכח לתכם ויאהבך". (יבמות סה:)

Rabbi Ile'a said in the name of Rabbi Elazar, son of Rabbi Shimon: Just as it is a mitzva for a person to say that which will be heeded, so is it a mitzva for a person not to say that which will not be heeded. One should not rebuke those who will be unreceptive to his message. Rabbi Abba says: It is obligatory for him to refrain from speaking, as it is stated: Do not reprove a scorner lest he hate you; reprove a wise man and he will love you. (Proverbs 9:8). (Yevamot 65b)
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Again, the message is receptivity. If a person is open to a message of reproach, then according to Rabbi Abba, one is obligated to reproach them. Conversely, if they are not receptive to a message of reproach, one should keep quiet. This applies to Torah as well. Maimonides states it this way:

אין מלמדין תורה אלא לתלמיד הגון נאה במעשיו.
Torah should be taught only to a student who is worthy and proper - one who is defined by his/her beautiful deeds. (Laws of Torah Study 4:1)

Evidently, receptivity and openness are not the only prerequisite for Torah study, but also character. The reason for this is obvious: the goal of teaching Torah is to perfect a human character and perpetuate the Torah. If a person is not receptive to the Torah's values, then the endeavor is pointless. A person who studies Torah and is defined by ugly deeds ends up bringing disgrace to Torah. Maimonides quotes the rabbis who say that it is a waste of time to teach someone like that:

אמרו חכמים כל השונה לתלמיד שאינו הגון כאלו נרק אבן למרקוליס (חולין קלג).
The Rabbis said, Anyone who teaches Torah to an unworthy student is considered like one who throws a stone to Markulis (i.e. a wasted effort). (Hullin 133a)

And yet, Maimonides simultaneously undermines that idea by introducing the antidote:

אבל אם היה הולך בדרכי לא טובה מחזירין אותו למוטב ומנהיגין אותו בדרכי ישרה ובדקין אותו ואחר כך מכניסין אותו לבית המדרש ומלמדין אותו.
However, [a potential student] who follows bad ways should be influenced to correct his behavior and trained to follow a straight path. [After he repents, his deeds] are examined and he is allowed to enter the house of study to be instructed.

On the one hand, if you are not receptive to Torah, or do not have an appropriate character to be shaped by Torah and thereby become an exemplar of Torah in the future, then you should not be taught in the first place. On the other hand, because teshuva is so fundamental to Maimonides' philosophy, he does not rule out the possibility of change. We should always try, even with such a person. And of course, that requires willingness and effort.

Let us conclude with an often-cited rabbinic teaching about openness and receptivity:

כל מי שאינו עושה עצמו כמדבר, הפקר, אינו יכול לקנות את החכמה והתורה, לכך נאמר: במדבר סיני. (במדבר רבה א:ז)
Anyone who cannot make themselves like a wilderness, open (receptive to its teaching) is unable to acquire wisdom and the Torah. That is why it is stated: "In the wilderness of Sinai." (Bemidbar Rabbah 1:7)

Receptivity is something we pray for all the time when we take the Torah out of the Ark: יהא רענא קדמך דתפתח לבאי - יהא רענא קדמך דתפתח לבאי - May it be your will (God), to open my heart to your Torah. Amen. Shabbat Shalom.

Today is Day 610. We continue to pray for the return of the hostages. May God comfort the bereaved, protect the IDF, heal the wounded and shield Israel from continued Houthi missile terror. Amen!