

# FROM PHILO THROUGH SE`ADYAH

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From the second century onward, Christian attacks on "the law" provoked many Jewish replies stressing the importance of the *mitzvot*.

The commandments were given for the sole purpose of purifying man; they strengthen man's holiness; they enable Israel to acquire merit.

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## בראשית רבה פרשת לך לך פרשה מד

After these things the word of Hashem came to Abram in a " etc. ([Psalms 18:31](#)) "As for God — His ways are "vision, saying, perfect; the Word of Hashem is tried; a shield is He for all who take refuge in Him." If His way is perfect, how much more is He Himself!

Rav said: Were not the mitzvot given so that man might be refined by them? Do you really think that The Blessed Holy One of cares if an animal is slaughtered by front or by the back of the neck? Therefore, mitzvot were given only **to purify people.**

Rabbi Hananya ben Akashya says:

The Holy One, Blessed be He, sought **to confer merit upon the Jewish people**; therefore, He increased for them Torah and mitzvot, as it is stated: "It pleased the Lord for the sake of His righteousness to make the Torah great and glorious" (Isaiah 42:21).

טו (א) [אחר הדברים האלה היה דבר י"י אל אברם במחזה] וגו' "האל תמים דרכו, אִמְרַת י"י צְרוּפָה" (שמואל ב' כב לא) אם דרכו תמים הוא על אחת כמה וכמה.

רב אמר לא נתנו המצוות אלא לצרוף את הביריות בהם. וכי מה איכפת לו להקב"ה מי ששוחט מן הצואר ומי ששוחט מן העורף?

**הוי לצרוף את הביריות.**

משנה מסכת מכות פרק ג

רבי חנניה בן עקשיא אומר:

רצה הקדוש ברוך הוא **לְזַכּוֹת את ישראל**, לפיכך הרבה להם תורה ומצוות.

שנאמר (ישעיה מ"ב) "ה' חפץ למען צדקו יגדיל תורה ויאדיר".

Kaufmann Ms. (10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> century)

יֵט רַחֲמֵיךָ בְּנֵי עֵקֶשׁתִּי אֲוֹמְרֵי  
הַמִּקְדָּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא לְזָכוֹת אֶת־לִפְיֶיךָ  
הַיְבֵה לָהֶן תְּוִדָּה וּמִצִּוֹת שְׁנֵי חֹפֶץ לִמְעַן  
עֲדֶיךָ יִגְדֵל תְּוִדָּה מֵאֲדָמָה



The *ta'amei ha-torah* ("reasons of the commandments") are not revealed and should not be revealed.

The "yoke of the commandments" is to be cherished without probing its reasons.

No detailed rationalization of the commandments is to be found in the rabbinic sources.

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## תלמוד בבלי מסכת סנהדרין דף כא עמוד ב

R. Isaac also said: **Why were the reasons of [some] Biblical laws not revealed?** — Because in two verses reasons were revealed, and they caused the greatest in the world [Solomon] to stumble. Thus it is written: “He shall not multiply wives to himself,” whereon Solomon said, ‘I will multiply wives yet not let my heart be perverted.’ Yet we read, “When Solomon was old, his wives turned away his heart.”

Again, it is written: “He shall not multiply to himself horses;” concerning which Solomon said, ‘I will multiply them, but will not cause [Israel] to return [to Egypt].’ Yet we read: “And a chariot came up and went out of Egypt for six [hundred shekels of silver].”

ואמר רבי יצחק: **מפני מה לא נתגלו טעמי תורה** - שהרי שתי מקראות נתגלו טעמן נכשל בהן גדול העולם.

כתיב “לא ירבה לו נשים”; אמר שלמה: אני ארבה ולא אסור. וכתיב “ויהי לעת זקנת שלמה נשיו הטו את לבבו.”

וכתיב “לא ירבה לו סוסים”, ואמר שלמה: אני ארבה ולא אשיב. וכתיב “ותצא מרכבה ממצרים בשש” וגו’.

תלמוד בבלי מסכת ראש השנה דף טז עמוד א

R. Isaac said: Why do we sound the horn on New Year? — [You ask], why do we sound? **The All-Merciful has told us to sound!—**

What he means is, why do we sound a *teru'ah*? [You ask] why do we sound a *teru'ah*? **The All-Merciful has proclaimed** 'a memorial of *teru'ah*!

[אמר] רבי יצחק,  
למה תוקעין בראש  
השנה? —  
למה תוקעין? **רחמנא**  
**אמר תקעו!** —

אלא: למה מריעין? -  
מריעין? - **רחמנא אמר**  
זכרון תרועה!

## **Seneca (b. 65 CE): Letters**

I condemn Plato because, not content with specifying the law, he added general principles. The law should be like a voice addressing us from heaven.

It should command, not discuss.

Tell me what I must do.

It is not for me to learn, but to obey.



## טור יורה דעה הלכות גילוח סימן קפא

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With regard also to shaving the head or beard, Maimonides wrote that their prohibition is due to their practice by idolaters—although this is not explicit [in the Torah].

We have no need to seek reasons for mitzvot, because they are royal decrees that are incumbent upon us even if we do not understand them.

- הקפת הראש והשחתת הזקן גם באלו כתב הרמב"ם שאסרם הכתוב מפני שעושין כן עובדי כוכבים ע"כ וזה אינו מפורש.

- ואין אנו צריכים לבקש טעם למצות, כי מצות מלך הם עלינו אף לא נדע טעמן.

# PHILO

(ALEXANDRIA; B. 25 BCE)

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Philo offered the first systematic exposition of the reasons for the commandments in several of his works. He presented the law of Moses as the ideal law envisaged by the philosophers, that is, the law that leads men to live according to virtue.

The laws of Moses are divided into **positive and negative laws** and into **those relating to man and those relating to God**, and they are all **subsumed under the Decalogue**.

Philo also tended to assign **allegorical** meaning to commandments, as well.



**The Special Laws: The Fourth Commandment (39-222).**

<http://www.earlyjewishwritings.com/text/philo/book28.html>

Philo begins with a sketch of the way in which he proposes to treat the subject, followed by some remarks on the sacred number seven, and a list of the 10 feasts.

**The first feast is the feast of every day.** This conception, that the ideal life of the true philosopher is one continuous feast, is worked out with much eloquence.

The second feast, the Sabbath itself, after some further remarks on the mystical properties of seven, is set forth partly as a necessary respite from toil, but still more as a time for exercising the soul in contrast to the body. The prohibition of fire, and the extension of the rest to servants, and to cattle are noted. With the Sabbath we may associate other institutions which bear witness to the sanctity of seven: (a) the cancellation of debts in the seventh year, and this leads to a denunciation of lending money on interest in general; (b) liberation of slaves in the same year, which provides an occasion for the lesson of treating slaves humanely; (c) the same lesson, that consideration should be shewn not only by masters to servants, but by rulers to subjects is taught by the "sabbatical year," which leaves the land fallow in the seventh year, and also by throwing the fields open encourages generosity to the poor; (d) the same applies to the fiftieth year, in which estates return to the original owners, with special regulations about houses and debtors and purchased slaves. This is followed by some general remarks about the laws of inheritance, and the right of primogeniture.





The third feast is the New Moon, and some observations on the place of the moon in the system of things is subjoined. Fourth is the Passover, a feast in which each layman acts as priest, interpreted by Philo as the "Crossing" from the passions to wisdom. Fifth is "Unleavened Bread," and reasons are given for the time at which it occurs and the nature of the food enjoined. Sixth, the offering of the "Sheaf," is combined with the two just mentioned. Philo takes this first offering of the harvest in the double aspect of a thank-offering, (a) for the whole world, and (b) for Israel, acknowledging how much the harvest owes to nature rather than man.

Seventh is the Feast of Weeks or Pentecost. Eighth is the opening of the sacred month, or Feast of Trumpets. Ninth the Fast or Day of Atonement. Tenth the Feast of Tabernacles.



SE`ADYAH GAON

(EGYPT & BAGHDAD; 882-942)

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Saadia Gaon was the first Jewish thinker to divide the commandments into those **obligatory because they are required by reason** (*sikhliyyot*) and those **given through revelation** (*shimiyyot*). In making this distinction he followed the parallel teachings of the Mu'tazilite Kalām but also added a Platonic account.

According to the Mu'tazilite exposition, the rational laws are divided into three kinds: gratitude, reverence, and social conduct; and from these three categories he derived many special laws.

In his Platonic exposition, he showed the rational character of certain laws by pointing out the damaging effects of the acts prohibited: theft and robbery, for example, undermine the economic basis of society, and untruthfulness destroys the harmony of the soul.



Discussing the revelational laws, Se`adyah held that while they are primarily an expression of God's will, they have some rational aspects or "usefulness," although he repeatedly reminds himself that God's wisdom is superior to man's.

For example, the holy seasons enable man to pursue spiritual matters and human fellowship; the priesthood guides and helps people in time of stress; and dietary laws combat animal worship (*Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, 3:2 ff.).



## CHAPTER II

Now it is fitting that I proceed first to the discussion of the rational precepts of the Torah. I say, then, that divine Wisdom imposed a restraint upon bloodshed among men, because if license were to prevail in this matter, they would cause each other to disappear. The consequence would be, in addition to the pain experienced by the victims, a frustration of the purpose that the All-Wise had in mind with regard to them. For their murder would cut them off from the fulfillment of the function for which He had created them and in the execution of which He had employed them.

Finally, [divine] Wisdom has made it one of its first injunctions that we speak the truth and desist from lying. For the truth is an assertion about a thing as it really is and in accordance with its actual character, whereas telling a lie is making an assertion about a thing that does not correspond to what it really is or to its actual character. Then when the senses, perceiving it, find it to be constituted in one form whilst the soul, reasoning about it, asserts that it is constituted otherwise, these two contrary views set up in the soul will oppose each other, and, on account of their mutual exclusion, the thing will be regarded by the soul as something grotesque.<sup>3</sup>

Let me proceed further now and discourse about the second general division of the laws of the Torah. This division consists of acts which from the standpoint of reason are optional. Yet the Law has made some of them obligatory and others forbidden, and left the rest optional as they had been. They include such matters as the consecration of certain days from among others, like the Sabbath and the festivals, and the consecration of certain human beings from among others, such as the prophet and the priest, and refraining from eating certain foods, and the avoidance of cohabitation with certain persons, and going into isolation immediately upon the occurrence of certain accidents because of defilement.

Now among the benefits accruing from the consecration of certain seasons, by desisting from work on them, there is first of all that of obtaining relaxation from much exertion. Furthermore it presents the opportunity for the attainment of a little bit of knowledge and a little additional praying. It also affords men leisure to meet each other at gatherings where they can confer about matters of their religion and make public announcements about them, and perform other functions of the same order.



Se`adya should be regarded as a trailblazer. He does resemble Philo, with whom he was unacquainted... but he departs from the view of the Hellenists in that he defends the Torah as divine commandments and that the source of our obedience is the relationship of a servant to his master. Therefore, he admits explicitly that the reasons of all mitzvot are not apparent to mortals.

He **follows** in the footsteps of the Sages in distinguishing between those mitzvot which deserved to be given even were they not written down, and those that are incumbent only because that Torah prescribes them. However, he does not rely [exclusively] on their opinions and does not even cite them explicitly. This is not an accident. The **difference** in their respective formulations indicates a significant difference of opinion. The Sages did not call the first category of mitzvot “rational,” nor did they say that it is our intellect [alone] that establishes them, while Se`adya reiterates the matter time and again in his desire to indicate that there is an autonomous source to our obligations. Se`adya also attempted, and succeeded, to maintain **the balance between heteronomous and autonomous reasons.**