

The Azharot of Rav Sa'adiah Gaon- An Exercise in Ta'amei Hamitzvot¹

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Preface

This lesson, while planned for *Shavu'ot*, is also intended to be an exercise in categorical thinking, in general, as well as in *ta'amei ha-mitzvot* in particular. As such, it can fit into a Jewish philosophy or *mahshevet yisrael* curriculum, as well as into *humash* ('asseret ha-devarim) or even medieval Jewish history (apropos of Rav Sa'adiah Gaon) and literature (*piyyut*).

We have once again tried to organize the material in a proven didactic format, and have provided two appendices and a bibliographical note. The first appendix summarizes the Azharot of Sa'adiah Gaon, which are the focus of the lesson, and the second contains the concluding remarks of a very recent essay on the role of *ta'amei ha-mitzvot* in religious education.

Introduction

In Exodus 24:12, we read:

“And the LORD said to Moshe:	ויאמר ה' אל משה
‘Come up to Me on the mountain	עלה אלי ההרה
and wait there;	והיה שם
and I will give you the stone	ואתנה לך את
tablets,	לוחות
with the teachings and	האבן
commandments,	והתורה והמצוה
which I have inscribed to	אשר כתבתי להורותם
instruct them.”	

Rashi, in his commentary, discusses the phrase *ha-torah ve-hamitzvah* in its relationship to the *luhot* as if to ask: How can the two stone tablets be described as *ha-torah* when they only contain ten *mitzvot*? He answers:

All 613	כל שש מאות ושלוש עשרה
<i>mitzvot</i>	מצוות
are contained in the ten <i>dibberot</i>	בכלל עשרת הדברים הן
And Rav Sa'adiah detailed	ורבינו סעדיה פירש
In the <i>azharot</i> he composed	באזהרות שיסד
for each and every <i>dibbur</i>	לכל דיבור ודיבור
the <i>mitzvot</i> it contains.	מצוות התלויות בו :

Step One: What Are Azharot?

The *azharot* (literally, “warnings”) to which Rashi refers are a form of *piyyut*, liturgical poetry, which was reserved for poems composed for the *musaf* service of *Shavu'ot* and which dealt with the *taryag mitzvot*. One such poem was composed by R.

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Sa'adiah Gaon (882-942), one of the most outstanding halakhists, exegetes, philosophers, and philologists of the Middle Ages.

The complete text of his *azharot* was published in *Siddur R. Sa'adiah Gaon*, edited by Simcha Assaf and Israel Davidson (Jerusalem, 1970) and is still recited on *Shavu'ot* by some Oriental Jewish communities (e.g., Yemenite). Other Sephardic communities (e.g. Syrian, Spanish and Portuguese) recite the *azharot* of another outstanding poet-philosopher, R. Shelomo Ibn Gabirol.

Here are the opening stanzas of Sa'adiah's *azharot* (p. 191 of the *siddur*):

A blazing fire	אש אוכלה
brighter than the most brilliant light;	ונוהרות מכל הנוהרות
and my words are like fire.	ודברי כאש
In its sparks – there are many <i>mitzvot</i>	וניצוצית הרבה מצוות
Shining from every <i>dibbur</i>	בכל דיבור זוהרות
With wisdom I gathered	בחכמתי כללתי
in my ten <i>dibberot</i>	בעשרת דברותי
Six hundred thirteen <i>mitzvot</i> ,	שש מאות ושלוש עשרה מצוות
Demonstrating that the LORD's utterances	להורות אמרות ה'
are recited in purity.	אמרות טהורות

Sa'adiah then proceeds, in rhymed Hebrew verse, to match every one of the 613 *mitzvot* to one or another of the *asseret ha-dibberot* according to their sequence on the *luhot*.

Note: For a detailed, albeit incomplete, distribution of these *mitzvot*, see Appendix A.

Step Two: Objective and Purpose

The objective of this lesson is to challenge the students to sort through selected *mitzvot* and to classify them according to one or another of the ten categories provided by the *'aseret ha-dibberot* – with the *azharot* as an illustration.

Note: We are reluctant to translate *'aseret ha-dibberot* as “the ten commandments,” that is – to use the same English word for *dibberot* which we customarily use for *mitzvot*, because R. Sa'adiah's purpose here is precisely to show how all 613 *mitzvot* are contained herein, and not only 10! A more appropriate translation in this context would be “articles” (as in: *The Articles of Confederation*), but for the sake of clarity and consistency we shall continue to use the Hebrew words: *dibbur* and *dibberot*.

The primary purpose of this lesson is to stimulate the students to study and analyze *ta'amei ha-mitzvot*—that is to say, to evaluate *mitzvot* from the perspective of their philosophical purpose, along with their practical performance. An additional, concurrent purpose is to provide them with an opportunity to show their abilities to organize according to logical categories, and to find adequate and appropriate verbal articulation for those organizing principles.

As *Sefer Mishlei* puts it so eloquently (Proverbs 25:11):

“Like golden apples	תפוחי זהב
in silver showpieces	במשכיות כסף
is a phrase well turned.”	דבר דיבור על אפניו

That is to say: Golden apples, like well-chosen words, are valuable in and of themselves. When they are said at a particularly propitious moment, however, they become even more valuable – set, as it were, in silver showpieces.

Step Three: Didactics

There are several alternative didactic approaches which can be taken to this lesson. We will describe them briefly, and then illustrate the entire lesson by means of the *azharot*. All the approaches recommended here are designed to stimulate active learning and interchanges among the students.

Remember! One of the 48 ways to acquire Torah (as enumerated by hazal in the beraita of kinyan torah) is pilpul ha-talmidim- the give-and-take of students among themselves and with their teacher.

A. The Deductive Approach

One approach is deductive (drawing a specific conclusion from a general proposition), and it consists of: (a) defining the categories represented by each of the *dibberot*, and (b) identifying the additional *mitzvot* that belong in each category.

For instance:

1. *anokhi*, the first *dibbur*, can be defined as a public testimony of faith; a perpetual readiness to acknowledge God. Which other *mitzvot* have that goal?
2. *lo yiheyeh lekah* is a stern admonition against idolatry or, if we look at it from another angle, a strenuous reinforcement of the uniqueness and exclusivity of monotheism. Which other *mitzvot* provide that reinforcement?
3. *kabbed* confirms and secures the rights and prerogatives of parents, and – by extension – affirms the need to maintain useful hierarchical social structures (i.e. “Authority”). Which other *mitzvot* address the just regulation of an orderly society?
4. *lo tirtzah* can be extended from the prohibition against murder to all regulations whose goal is the elimination of bloodshed, or the prevention of unnecessary or unwarranted loss of life. Can you think of other *mitzvot* whose objective is to avert such destruction?
5. *lo tin'af* forbids not only adultery, but all forms of public and even private lewdness.
6. *lo tignov* encompasses all the safeguards of private property, along with (perhaps?) the social and ritual obligations which the acquisition of private property imposes.

7. *lo tahmod* can be extended to all *mitzvot* which attempt to impose a discipline upon the senses.

B. The Inductive Approach

An alternate approach is inductive (deriving the general proposition from individual examples), and it consists of: (a) providing a ready-made division of select *mitzvot* according to the *dibberot*, and (b) having the students identify the organizing principles, or categories, which govern the division.

For instance:

1. If we include *tefillin* and *korbanot* under *anokhi*, what category does it represent?
2. What principle is represented by *lo tisa* if it includes *bal tosif* and *sin'at hinam*?
3. Why is *leshon hara'* included in *lo ta'aneh* rather than in *lo tisa*?

C. The Rhetorical Approach

Or, have the students try to relate select *mitzvot* to each of several *dibberot* categories, until they find the one to which they think it is particularly suited.

For instance:

1. Where would you include *keri'at shema*? In *anokhi*, *lo yiheyeh lekha*, or *zakhor*?
2. Where do the following belong: *yoveil*? *kashrut*? *keli gever*? *Terumot u-ma'asrot*?
3. Which category of the ten *dibberot* do you think contains the most *mitzvot*? The least?

Note: Whichever method you choose, or develop on your own, your objective and purpose remain – as described above – to stimulate your students into creative and reflective analysis of as many mitzvot or categories as your class time will allow.

Appendix A: The Azharot of R. Sa'adiah

The following is a partial listing of *mitzvot*—according to *dibberot*, as they are classified by Sa'adiah.

Note: The rhymed Hebrew verse of the Azharot (see the example we cited in Step One), typical of medieval piyyut, is unusually complex and abstruse, and will challenge the linguistic skills and ingenuity of even the most erudite reader. Take a stab at it yourself (we cited the publication data earlier) and see how many mitzvot you can identify from Sa'adiah's cryptic poetic allusions to them.

<i>anokhi</i>	80 mitzvot	<i>tzitzit, tefillin, mezuzah, tefillah, korbanot</i>
<i>lo yiheyeh</i>	60	<i>molekh, kishuf, tum'at met, nisu'ei ta'arovet</i>

<i>lo tisa</i>	48	<i>dinim, hakhel, bal tosif, sin'at hinam, tokhehah</i>
<i>zakhor</i>	75	<i>shalosh regalim, shemitah, yoveil, arei leviyim</i>
<i>kabbed</i>	77	<i>milah, pidyon ha-ben, shilu'ah ha-ken, melukhah</i>
<i>lo tirtzah</i>	50	<i>nezikin, ketoret zarah, navi sheker, ma'akeh, bal tashchit, ir ha-nidahat, goneiv nefesh</i>
<i>lo tin'af</i>	58	<i>sotah, yibbum ve-halitzah, geirushin, keli gever, hupah ve-kiddushin</i>
<i>lo tignov</i>	59	<i>sekhar sakhir, shemittat kesafim, moznei tzedek, terumot u-ma'asrot, hasagat gevul, hashavat aveidah</i>
<i>lo ta'aneh</i>	52	<i>derishah ve-hakirah, leshon hara', metzorah ve-tahorato</i>
<i>lo tahmod</i>	54	<i>kashrut, neveilot u-tereifot, oto ve-et beno, gid ha-nasheh, kil'ayim, nazir</i>

Additional Bibliography

The *Encyclopedia Judaica* has an informative article on *ta`amei hamitzvot* entitled: "Commandments; Reasons for," in vol. 5, p. 783 ff. It also lists, in Scriptural order, all *mitzvot`aseh* and *lo ta`aseh* on pp. 763-782. The article closes with a substantial bibliography whose principal entry is an exhaustive 2-volume study by Yosef Heinemann, entitled *ta`amei hamitzvot be-sifrut yisrael* (Jerusalem, 1966).