

Title: What does “Mitzvah” mean?

Authors: Matt Plen and Eloise Gluckman

Age Group: Years 3-4

Format: Lesson Plan

Categories/Topics: Texts/Written Torah, Weekly Torah Portion/Yitro, Bible Stories/Moses, Festivals and Fast Days/Shavuot, Mitzvot/General

Description: Through discussing ways to resolve personal dilemmas and conflict situations, pupils explore the importance of rules, learn that *mitzvah* means commandment, and understand the ten commandments as the foundation of the Jewish system of rules.

Goals

Pupils will

- understand that the concept ‘*mitzvah*’ means ‘commandment’
- explore why we follow rules and what the advantages and disadvantages are of doing this.
- explore what kinds of rules we need
- understand the ten commandments as the foundation of the Jewish system of rules
- learn that Shavuot celebrates the giving of the ten commandments

Activity

1. In small groups, pupils receive a dilemma or conflict situation. Their task is to come up with a rule to help resolve the situation. Each group presents its situation and rule by acting it out for the rest of the class.

Conflict situations and dilemmas

You are playing football and the ball is kicked out of the pitch. What happens now?

You are playing a skipping game and can't agree who should go first. What do you do?

You are working really hard on your project and the child next to you is making a really loud noise and distracting you. How do you carry on with your work?

You find a top trump card outside on the playground. What do you do with the card?

You are playing a game with friends and two people begin to talk about a person in your class. They are saying things that are quite hurtful about this person. What should you do about this?

You are playing a board game and the other person decides that they can move their counter three spaces forward. Can they do this? Why should they be able or unable to do this?

You need to help all the children go and have lunch. All the children run down the corridors. How do we ensure that everyone stays safe?

You have a fight with your friend and are feeling really angry. What do you do with these feelings and what don't you do with these feelings?

You are in assembly and you would like to tell the teacher leading some information about the topic of the day. What do you do about this?

2. Each group writes its rule on a card; the cards are gathered and stuck on a poster board. The teacher sums up the collection of rules the class has made up and discusses/evaluates them with the class: what rules would need to be added to make this a good set of rules for our community?

3. The teacher discusses with the class the advantages and disadvantages of living according to rules, as opposed to everyone doing as he or she sees fit. The class learns that the Hebrew word *mitzvah* means commandment – ie. a rule.

4. Introduce the following Talmudic idea:

Text - Babylonian Talmud, Kiddushin 31a

גדול המצווה ועושה ממי שאינו מצווה ועושה.

Gadol ha-metzuveh ve-oseh mi-mi she-eino metzuveh ve-oseh.

Greater is one who is commanded and acts than one who acts without being commanded.

According to the Talmud, it is better to obey rules than to do good deeds of your own volition. Discuss why this might be the case, and relate it to the previous discussion (in 3, above).

5. Read the story of the giving of the Torah from the book of Shemot/Exodus and explain the context of the ten commandments and the connection to Shavuot.

Text – The Giving of Torah (Shemot 19)

19:1 On the third new moon after the Israelites had gone forth from the land of Egypt, on that very day, they entered the wilderness of Sinai. 2 Having journeyed from Rephidim, they entered the wilderness of Sinai and encamped in the wilderness. Israel encamped there in front of the mountain, 3 and Moses went up to God...

7 Moses came and summoned the elders of the people and put before them all that the Lord had commanded him. 8 All the people answered as one, saying, "All that the Lord has spoken we will do!" And Moses brought back the people's words to the Lord. 9 And the Lord said to Moses, "I will come to you in a thick cloud, in order that the people may hear when I speak with you and so trust you ever after." Then Moses reported the people's words to the Lord, ...

16 On the third day, as morning dawned, there was thunder, and lightning, and a dense cloud upon the mountain, and a very loud blast of the horn; and all the people who were in the camp trembled. 17 Moses led the people out of the camp toward God, and they took their places at the foot of the mountain.

18 Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke, for the Lord had come down upon it in fire; the smoke rose like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled violently. 19 The blare of the horn grew louder and louder. As Moses spoke, God answered him in thunder. 20 The Lord came down upon Mount Sinai, on the top of the mountain, and the Lord called Moses to the top of the mountain and Moses went up. 21

The Lord said to Moses, "Go down, warn the people not to break through to the Lord to gaze, lest many of them perish. 22 The priests also, who come near the Lord, must stay pure, lest the Lord break out against them." 23 But Moses said to the Lord, "The people cannot come up to Mount Sinai, for You warned us saying, 'Set bounds about the mountain and sanctify it.'" 24 So the Lord said to him, "Go down, and come back together with Aaron; but let not the priests or the people break through to come up to the Lord, lest He break out against them." 25 And Moses went down to the people and spoke to them.

20:1 God spoke all these words, saying

6. Working in small groups, pupils study and evaluate the ten commandments by ordering them by importance (in the personal opinion of the pupils) and then comparing this to the actual text. Follow this exercise with a concluding discussion in which each group presents its version of the ten commandments and explains the rationale for their decisions.

Text – The Ten Commandments (Shemot 20)

I am the Lord your God who brought You out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage.

You shall have no other gods besides Me. You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image....

You shall not swear falsely by the name of the Lord Your God....

Remember the sabbath day and keep it holy....

Honour your father and your mother...

You shall not murder.

You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not steal.

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.

You shall not covet your neighbour's house. You shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or his male or female slave, or his ox or his ass, or anything that is your neighbour's.