



by Rabbi Dr Raymond Apple z"l

HARD TO BE A JEW

"This commandment which I command you this day," says the Almighty, "is not too hard for you, neither is it far off" (D'varim 30:11).

Not too hard? It feels that way.

The Rambam's calculation is that there are less than a hundred commandments which apply to the ordinary person living an ordinary life.

Put to one side those commands that apply only to rare categories of people or in rare situations or at rare times, and we are actually left with far less than the famous figure of 613.

Then analyse the commandments that do apply to us, and most of them are not so-called "rituals" but ethical commands - loving one's neighbour, honest weights and measures, keeping far from a falsehood.

Yet, whether it is ritual or ethical duties that devolve upon us, it is often a difficult task. To keep kashrut or Shabbat correctly is not easy, nor is living a decent, moral, modest, truthful life.

The important thing is to remember that it can be done, not by constantly obsessing about our duty but by

developing a mind set which says, "I am training myself to act instinctively in the way I am commanded to"... and to use this method in matters of ethics and not just ritual.

The Jew who has a well-honed ethical instinct will automatically avoid shameful or questionable modes of conduct.

Their instinct will also tell them what to say and what to do when it comes to making decisions, whether they appear great and world-shattering or small and almost insignificant.

THE HAKHEL ASSEMBLY

Every seven years the whole populace gathered for the HAKHEL ("Assemble!") convocation, in order to hear the king read the Torah (31:12).

Everyone had to attend: "men, women, children, and the strangers in your communities". Rabbi Elazar ben Azariya says that the men came to learn, the women to listen and the children to secure a reward for those who brought them (Chagiga 3a).

According to Rambam (Hilchot Chagiga 3:4), the assembly was in the EZRAT NASHIM, the women's court of the Temple, which was apparently used for general meetings.

It is not clear whether the text means that the men and women stood together or were separated on gender lines. The latter seems more likely because social mores kept the sexes apart on public occasions in order to prevent inappropriate behavior.

We are not certain what the situation was with the children - did the boys stay with their father and the girls with their mothers?

There was probably a regulation that said that up to a certain age the mother had the children with her, boys as well as girl, but thereafter the boys stood with the men.

We are not told how family members found each other again afterwards in view of the massive numbers of the Children of Israel. -OZ

Y'HI ZICHRO BARUCH