

## Theme 2D: Religious concepts and religious life – The diversity of views within Judaism with regards to mitzvot (commandments)

### Key words

**Mitzvot**

**Halakhah**

**Hasidic**

**Devekut**

### Key concepts

Orthodox Judaism takes the view that the Torah is the direct revelation of God. As a result of this, Orthodox Jews consider it their duty to continue to obey the mitzvot which are contained within it. The mitzvot set the Jewish people apart, and through their observance, Orthodox Jews demonstrate their belief in God and the demands of the covenant.

Generations of Orthodox rabbis have continued to discuss the original mitzvot and adapt them in order to meet the needs of a changing world. The halakhah has enabled Orthodox Jews to practise their religion right up to the present day.

Reform Judaism sets out its attitude to the revelation of the law on Mount Sinai in clauses 3 & 4 of the Pittsburgh Platform. Reform Jews believe that although the Torah contains many divine truths, it remains the foundation of their religion, they consider it to be a product of human minds. God **did** reveal the law to Moses, but that revelation was not dictated word for word to him. Rather, the revelation from God inspired others to write.

There is diversity within Reform Judaism itself, and it is considered to be up to each family or individual to decide which rules to follow at home, work and in the synagogue.

Hasidic Judaism require rigid obedience to the mitzvah at all times, and this even extends to personal appearance. Such strict obedience allows Hasidic Jews to fulfil their duty to God through personal religious devotion. Through the practice of devekut, God is kept constantly in the mind and every thought and action become expressions of attachment to the Creator. This allows a person to worship God continuously as they go about their daily lives. Through this, the Hasid achieves Jewish identity, clear direction in religious life and the fulfilment of their sense of duty, all of which are a cause for great joy.

### Key quotes

‘When God gives commandments, they are universally applicable in every age and at every time.’ (Boteach)

‘You shall therefore keep my statutes ... which if a man do, he shall live by them.’ (Leviticus 18:5)

‘... and today we accept as binding only the moral laws, and maintain only such ceremonies as elevate and sanctify our lives ...’ (Pittsburgh Platform)

‘The biblical writers were men inspired by God, but they were not superhuman and there can be no guarantee that they were equally inspired in everything they wrote.’ (Close)

‘Everything must be done for the sake of Heaven.’ (Kotzker Rebbe)

‘Do not cut the hair at the sides of your head or clip off the edges of your beard.’ (Leviticus 19:27)

### Issues for analysis and evaluation

#### Key questions, arguments and debates

##### To what extent is the concept of mitzvot divisive within Judaism?

It could be said that ‘divisive’ is quite a harsh term when referring to the concept of mitzvot. Perhaps it is better to see the concept as one that raises meaningful discussion and a division of views rather than one that leads to aggressive divisions between communities. Nevertheless, it could be argued that Reform and Hasidic Jews have distorted the purpose of the mitzvot, although the fact that they are still a focus means that they have not been invalidated.

##### Does mitzvot contribute effectively to spirituality in Judaism?

The mitzvot are used invariably as an aid to spiritual development. Hasidic Jews would claim that fulfilment of one’s duty to God through keeping the mitzvot can bring great spiritual joy. However, some might perceive them to be so restrictive that they have a negative impact upon spiritual development. There is also a danger that they might become merely a part of one’s routine, thus losing the spiritual element.