

Rosh Hashanah 5778  
Mitzvah as Opportunity  
Rabbi Michael Pont

I am in my 18th year as a rabbi, or chai! Over time and with experience, I've come to understand the kind of Jewish leader I want to be. Namely, my goal is to express to people that Judaism is life affirming and positive. I thank you for your faith in me, which has furthered my confidence. But I didn't always feel so empowered.

On Simchas Torah my first year of rabbinical school, at the Jewish Theological Seminary or JTS in Manhattan, we were dancing with the Torahs. I saw a student who wore his tzitzit or tallis fringes out, and when he danced with passion they flailed about, not unlike an ultra-Orthodox Jew in Borough Park or Jerusalem. I watched in amazement, and then with apprehension. I thought, "Am I a good

enough Jew to be here? Am I religious enough? Do I know enough Hebrew, Torah, and Talmud?" Those little fringes became a source of anxiety for me! I was at the very beginning of my rabbinic training, and doubt was creeping into my consciousness.

A Seminary professor, who was also a rabbi, asked the student, "Why do you wear your tzitzit out?" The student replied, "Well, it's a commandment, a *mitzvah*. And it's a symbol of my identity, showing that I'm proud to be Jewish." The rabbi said, "So is a bris, why don't you wear that out!?"

I think the professor meant that there are many ways to show Jewish pride – overtly ritual behaviors make up only one such category. But some twenty years later, this exchange says something about being an American Jew today.

There is a sense that most Jews, including us, are not “Jewish enough.” Many Jews do not come to shul often, nor do they keep kosher, and I regularly hear them say, “I’m not that religious.” We think that if we’re not doing EVERYTHING we’re not genuine. As if being Jewish was an all-or-nothing proposition, we tell ourselves, “I don’t want to do a lot of that ritual stuff, so I’ll never be a good Jew.” Dr. Arnold Eisen, the Chancellor of JTS, claims that this sentiment stems in part from our perception of God. Comparing our view to that of Christians, he wrote, “Their God ... instructs humanity, and does so out of love and elicits love in return. Our God sets forth laws in anger, and we obey these commandments in fear of God’s wrath. The Torah and the gospels are of course more complicated than that. But the complexities are lost on all too many Jews who, I fear, are distanced from the life of *mitzvah* because they

see it as mere servitude. Their loss and ours is immense.” (HHD MESSAGE 5768)

Rosh Hashanah is also called *Yom HaDin*, the Day of Judgment. There is only One True Judge, who shows mercy in the face of our shortcomings. Ultimately God is compassionate, and Judaism is about love, not judgment.

All of us do *mitzvot* every day: ritual ones like attending services and lighting Shabbat candles, and ethical ones like feeding the hungry and giving tzedakah. Both categories are critical for living a full life, and both are equal before God.

Now if I stopped here, you could tell your friends, “My rabbi said I’m a good Jew and I don’t have to change a thing.” Sorry, but I’m not saying that. *Every* Jew, indeed every person, should regularly review their behavior and ask, “What else

*could* I do to make my life more whole? What else *could* I do to make the world a better place?"

When we ask ourselves these questions with sincerity, that is *teshuvah*. *Teshuvah* means return, in the sense that we revert to our truest selves, the people we are meant to be and hopefully want to be. We should wrestle with ourselves and strive to do good and to bring more positive energy into the world; doing a *mitzvah* is how we bring that positive energy. So yes, all of us are good Jews, if we push ourselves to grow.

*Mitzvot* allow us to maintain standards which unify us as a community. We should do as many as we can because we realize that every act will add holiness to our lives, and joy to the world. A *mitzvah* is a chance to feel fulfilled as a human being.

Rabbi Harold Kushner articulated this type of thinking. He wrote that the clear majority of non-Orthodox Jews perform the *mitzvot* we *choose* to perform; living in America, a democracy, we expect to have freedom of choice. Many people see Jewish rituals as arbitrary and irrelevant, and don't believe that God will reward unquestioning obedience. Kushner wrote, "Obedience is a child's definition of being good; our adult congregants deserve something more." (Conservative Judaism in an Age of Democracy, Conservative Judaism, Summer 2007, p.6) He suggested a redefinition of the term *mitzvah*, from "commandment" to "...opportunity, the opportunity to be in touch with God by transforming the ordinary into the sacred." ibid. p.9) I believe that this ability, to create holiness, is what it means to be made in God's image.

In Genesis, we read that after forming the animals, God spoke to them saying, "Let's make a human being in our image." (1:26) In other words, God wanted to make a new creature: part animal and part divine. Like other animals, this being will eat, sleep, and procreate. But it will also make room for its divine side when it asks for forgiveness, acts with compassion, or chooses to fast when hungry, showing restraint. These behaviors are *mitzvot*, and doing a *mitzvah* is a chance to experience holiness and to fill one's life with deep meaning.

If I tell you to do Jewish acts solely because they're in the Torah, or simply because God said so, I feel disingenuous. We all know that we don't *have* to do mitzvot, rather we choose to do what we wish. But, when I implore you to do *mitzvot* because I know they will enrich your life, I feel most alive as a Jewish leader and more connected as a member of the community. I know how

powerful it is, to be able to take an ordinary moment and to make it holy. As Jews, we do not find God in places; we find God in moments; this is the teaching of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. To be human is to *choose* to transform an ordinary moment into one where God is found. When you say *Hamotzi* over a sandwich, God is there with you; and when you share some of that sandwich with a homeless man in NYC, God is there too. To do a mitzvah is to encounter the divine. I believe this is what Moses meant when he declared, "These mitzvot ... are not too hard for you, neither are they far off. They are not in heaven ... neither are they beyond the sea ... but they are very close, in your mouth, and in your heart, that you may do them." (See Deuteronomy 30:11-14). *Mitzvot are the system to be holy and to meet God.*

I'd like to suggest a few *mitzvot* that can bring us together as a community and allow us to make room for God.

The first *mitzvah* will take you less than one minute - lighting candles on Friday night. We begin Shabbat by lighting candles, which reminds us of the first light of Creation. For many, it reminds us of watching their mothers and grandmothers light. Knowing that generations of Jews performed this transformative ritual is part of what makes it so powerful.

In fact, I am so convinced of its power that next month, I am going to send two candles to every Temple family – MJC's gift to you! At home, I want you to take an ordinary moment and make it special with two simple acts – lighting candles and saying a blessing. Don't worry about how you're dressed, or what's for dinner, or what time you

start – just allow the light into your home and into your life, literally and spiritually!

We have many Shabbat meals and programs here at MJC. But I'm still mailing the candles because I want you to feel the joy of Shabbat in your home, where you're probably most comfortable. Again, you don't *have* to, but I'm urging you to seize this *opportunity* for goodness.

I have a few suggestions for ethical *mitzvot* you can do with MJC. Please donate generously to the Corners of Our Fields food drive. There are bags on your seats with a list of what's needed for Fulfill NJ, formerly known as the Monmouth and Ocean Counties Food Bank. No one should be hungry and this is a way to help right here in our community. Please donate blood at our annual Fall blood drive on Tuesday, October 10: give the gift of life. We are helping Texas and Florida rebuild, by collecting

gift cards – you can bring them to the marked boxes here and at the Chai building. Please be generous in all your donations. Our Men’s Club is considering a trip to Texas to help - watch for details. In my family, we are helping as well – we’re fostering a dog from Houston named Buster! Finally, we are exploring ways to stand together against hate, affirming the Torah’s teachings, that every person is created in God’s image and has great potential. This will be a theme of this year’s Interfaith Thanksgiving service.

When all is said and done, this sermon is a sales pitch. I’m urging you to buy my product because I know it will change your life, and I would never tell you that you’re a bad person if you don’t buy it! I much prefer to dip your apple in honey, instead of vinegar. *Mitzvot* are opportunities to excel and to achieve holiness – they are not a source of guilt. On behalf of Natalie, Gabe, Emma, Dani, and our

dogs Tommy and Buster, may all of us try our best  
this year, shanah tovah!

