

## Mitzvah

*Erev Rosh Hashana 2007/5768  
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A discussion in a recent Wednesday morning class following morning minyan, prompted a member to ask why God gave us the mitzvot. He wanted to understand what Judaism believes to be God's purpose and intent in giving us rules and regulations and things He expects us to do.

An analogy might help to answer the question. I would put it this way: Mitzvot are for Judaism what Jesus is to Christianity. Allow me to explain. The opening words from the Gospel of John say: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son..." Well in Judaism, we say, God so loved us he gave us the Torah which contains the mitzvot. It is a sign of God's love for us, the Jewish people, a notion expressed in several of our prayers, especially the ones immediately preceding the shema.

This speculation may lead to asking the converse, why do we do a mitzvah? Is it because it is the right thing to do, or is it because we feel good when we do a mitzvah? Is it because we feel commanded to do so, or is it because we feel a sense of loyalty to God, the Jewish people, or Jewish teachings?

These questions get to the essence of what it means to be a Jew in the twenty first century. In fact, the recently installed chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, Dr. Arnold Eisen has asked conservative rabbis across the country to address the question of mitzvot in one of our High Holiday sermons this year. He invited us to enter with members of the synagogues of the conservative movement to explore this issue. So for all of you who have asked over the years if there is some kind of "central clearing house" for rabbi's sermons, and I have explained there is not: this year don't be surprised if you hear that many conservative rabbis are speaking about mitzvot.

I would like to suggest we begin the conversation with the most fundamental of questions, for I think it is important to never take anything for granted. What does the term mitzvah mean? Once we know what it is, we can ask: What role does it play in our lives? Do we have any notion of feeling called or compelled to act? How does performing a mitzvah bind us to each other, to a community, to the Jewish people – past and present? These are important matters for us to consider.

Those who take Judaism seriously grapple with how individual Jews can make judgments and decisions about which mitzvot to do and which to ignore or reject. If they are divine in origin, then we might ask, who are we to decide what to do, and what not to do?

The mitzvot are the guideposts of our actions as Jews, and one of the hallmarks of our faith. It is possible to be a good person without ever thinking about the concept. But omitting it as a point of reference overlooks and leaves out a crucial element of Judaism. Maimonides saw the mitzvot as giving us guidelines of things that are permitted and

those that are not. Restricting our actions improves our character and thus provides us a sense of discipline.

On its most basic level, mitzvah means commandment. The Jewish Publication Society translation of the Torah renders the word as instructions enjoined upon the Israelites. The term has evolved from its original appearance in the Torah and has many layers of nuance, through rabbinic interpretations, the usage and the understanding of later commentators, the Hasidic masters as well as modern thinkers.

One way of looking at the mitzvot is the classical division into two groups: *mitzvot aseh*, *umitzvot lo taaseh*: things we are supposed to do, and things we are supposed to refrain from doing, or positive and negative commandments. There are 248 of the first group, and 365 of the second, corresponding respectively as the rabbis point out, to the limbs of our body and the days of the year.

Another way of distinguishing between the 613 commandments is to categorize them as either *bein adam laMakom*: between humans and God, or *bein adam l'havero*: between human beings. The first would be the rituals unique to us as Jews. The second group governs our interactions with other people, and thus deal with how we should conduct our lives. In both cases, a code of action is offered as to what God expects and demands of us in our relationship with Him and in regard to our fellow human beings. We might also ponder if the two groups have equal weight?

Judaism asserts that when it comes to our actions, intent is significant. Two people can do the exact same thing, and although the act may be the same, one may be doing a mitzvah and one may not. By way of example – Lighting a candle could be in honor of someone's birthday or in memory of a loved one. It could be to give off light during a power failure, or it could be to begin or conclude Shabbat. In each case although the act is the same, the purpose is different.

In terms of motivation and why we perform the mitzvot the Talmud recognizes that intention matters. There is a difference between doing something because you feel like doing it, and because you feel commanded to do so. In fact, it even says something that appears to be counter-intuitive. It holds that “Better is one who is commanded and does something, than one who is not commanded and does it.”

This flies in the face of the prevailing philosophy of our “do something if it feels good” society. It goes against the grain of our embrace of freedom. People usually do things that make them feel good, but the Talmud is telling us not to do something because it will make us feel good or even because it is the right thing to do, but because we are commanded to do so. Why would it maintain that this is preferable? One reason might be because it puts us into a relationship with a Supreme Being. It also increases the likelihood we will do what God expects us to do the next time we have the opportunity to do so, and is thus a better guarantor ultimately of correct behavior than if it is based on what we feel like doing.

Mitzvoth touch upon all aspects of life, leading the New Testament to speak of them pejoratively. It did not recognize the elevating aspect of mitzvoth, portraying them as burdensome and trivial, referring in derogatory terms to jots and tittles of minutiae. Among our own people, Reform Judaism deems observance to be a matter of individual choice, while Orthodoxy sees the commandments as immutable and to be followed unquestioningly since they come from God. Where does that leave us, Conservative Jews? We recognize its inherently compelling power to bind us to God, to the community and to our past, but do not adhere to following all of them. We are left to consider how to determine what to conserve and what to amend, and on what basis to make those determinations.

Friends, tonight is the beginning of a new year. To facilitate the dialogue, I am going to pass around four questions for you to discuss tonight, tomorrow, on shabbat or sometime during these Aseret Y'mei Teshuvah. Then on Yom Kippur afternoon we will discuss your thoughts about this topic.

One of the references to mitzvoth in the Book of Deuteronomy says, “*veHai bahem*” – live by them. Our rabbis say this is because we should recognize that they give us life. As a result, let the conversation begin.

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## Questions for Discussion: What Mitzvoth Bind Us—and Why\*

Our relationship to mitzvah will most likely be enhanced if we ask ourselves and one another these questions.

1. What actions do you feel obliged to perform as a Jew?  
Here are some possible examples:
  - Attending synagogue on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur
  - Giving tzedakah to support the work of the Jewish community
  - Fasting on Yom Kippur
  - Taking action, such as advocating for Darfur and other social action issues
  - Support and Advocacy for Israel
  
2. Are these obligations— if you consider them such—of the same sort or a different sort than the following?
  - Providing your children with the basic necessities and a good start on life
  - Taking care of elderly parents
  - Sharing household duties with your spouse or partner
  - "Being there" for friends or siblings when they need you
  
3. What do you recognize as the source of authority of the mitzvot you perform? More than one answer may apply.
  - God requires this of me
  - Conscience tells me what a good human being should do
  - Gratitude to God or for my life
  - Obligation to carry on the tradition of my ancestors
  - Obligation to care for the Jewish people, especially in the wake of the Holocaust
  - Responsibilities to my community
  - Love of this tradition
  - "This is what Jews do"
  
4. What mitzvot do you think are the ones most pressing for you personally to remember at this New Year, and for you to try to incorporate into your life; and how will you decide what to do? How will you make it a part of your routine?

*\*Adapted by Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt based on 2007 Rosh Hashana message of Chancellor Arnold Eisen*