

The Mitzvah Initiative: The Response



Ever since *Rosh Hashanah*, the response to my call to participate in the *Mitzvah Initiative*, the program of adult Jewish education and adult Jewish transformation, has exceeded my wildest expectations. As I write these words, in mid-October, more than 100 people have enrolled, and we will be running three classes. How extraordinary! This is the most widespread response to a program of adult Jewish education that I can ever remember. It makes me very proud of our congregation.

Perhaps some of you have not yet enrolled, not sure just what the *Mitzvah Initiative* is, or how it could impact your life. So here are a few FAQ's and answers.

What is the *Mitzvah Initiative*?

The *Mitzvah Initiative* is a cooperative project of The Jewish Theological Seminary and Congregation Adath Jeshurun. It is a fourteen-session program that is part adult education and part individual transformation.

What is it about?

It is about taking your Jewish decisions seriously. It used to be that everyone was supposed to be obligated to do all the commandments. But today, in the age of individual decision making, we have to choose our observance. This program takes that decision making seriously and invites you to think about it with others while studying traditional Jewish text.

Why is this Initiative different?

Because it is as much about you as it is about tradition. We will teach you some text, but we will also help you explore your attitudes and beliefs. And without that, why would you take on any observances?

Who will be teaching in the program?

I will be the lead teacher for all the sessions of the *Mitzvah Initiative*, with participation by Hazzan Howard K. Glantz, Debbie Miner, and Manya Monson. If you have not yet enrolled, please contact the synagogue office by phone or email. A schedule of the November classes is found elsewhere in this issue of *The Newsletter*. In my sermon on the second day of *Rosh Hashanah*, I spoke about Jewish decision making in the era of the sovereign self. The authority of *mitzvah*, and the source of our sense of "being commanded" to the point that we feel the necessity to observe the *mitzvot* hallowed by our tradition, must come from within us. We each must be able to hear the "Voice of Sinai" in order to make *mitzvah* a part of our lives. The *Mitzvah Initiative*, by engaging us in dialogue, reflection, and the study of meaningful text will help us grow in our observance in a significant and principled way.

Rabbi Arnold Jacob Wolf, of blessed memory, articulated this process in a beautiful way in the Commentary Symposium of 1966. Here is the passage I quoted in my sermon, one that resonates with me, and judging from the comments I have heard, also has touched many members.

I try to walk the road of Judaism. Embedded in that road there are many jewels. One is marked "Sabbath" and one "Civil Rights" [today we would add, and stewardship of the environment] and one "Kashruth" [and today we might add, the righteous administration of Kashrut] and one "Honor your Parents" and one "Study of Torah" and one "You Shall Be Holy." There are at least 613 of them and they are of different shapes and sizes and weights. Some are light and easy for me to pick up, and I pick them up. Some are too deeply embedded for me, so far at least, though I get a little stronger by trying to extricate the jewels as I walk the street. Some, perhaps, I shall never be able to pick up. I believe that God expects me to keep on walking Judaism Street and to carry away whatever I can of its commandments. I do not believe that He expects me to lift what I cannot, nor may I condemn my fellow Jew who may not be able to pick up even as much as I can.

There is no commandment that may not have its day, and no certainty that may not sometimes fall into doubt. I must not decide in advance what properly belongs on Judaism Street. Nor may I walk down the broad parkway only, but must follow the road even when it narrows and is no longer very easy to walk.

Neither Orthodox nor liberal, I try to be a Jew.

The *Mitzvah Initiative* is structured to guide our individual journey down Judaism Street, and help us gather as many of the jewels that we can carry so that informed by our tradition we can be the best Jewish human beings that we can be. I applaud all those who have joined so far.

If you have not yet signed up, give it another thought and journey with us on this exciting and stimulating path.

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