Simḥah gedolah lih ’yot be-mitzvah, lih ’yot be-mitzvah, be-mitzvah tamid!

It’s a great joy to be in mitzvah, to be in mitzvah, regularly, always.

There’s a growing trend that I’ve noticed. People are referring to the celebration of a child becoming Bar or Bat Mitzvah as “so-and-so’s Mitzvah,” as in “are you going to Leah’s Mitzvah?” or “Asher’s Mitzvah will be in the year 2032.” I consider this trend both cute and thought-provoking, because in translation it literally means, “are you going to Leah’s commandment?”

*Mitzvah* means commandment. It later came to mean “a good deed.” But at its core, a *mitzvah* is a duty, a responsibility, an obligation.

I can’t think of a more difficult idea to sell in America in 2022. After all, “no obligation” is one of the most alluring phrases in American marketing. Freedom, individualism, and convenience are hallmarks of America’s self-identity. And those are all good and important things. But if autonomy cannot ever be subjected to tradition and obligation, it will end up being a hollow foundation for a meaningful
life.\(^1\) And even worse, without the limits of moral and ritual guidelines, an obsession with personal liberty can become a gateway to narcissism and hedonism. In Jewish tradition, *mitzvot* temper our desires and guide our actions.

*Mitzvot* are not meant to be torture. Rabbinic tradition emphasizes *simḥah shel mitzvah*, the joy of fulfilling an obligation, because *mitzvot* are generally meant to feel good, to connect us more deeply with each other and the world, to help us feel cared for even as we care for others.

*Mitzvahs* are often divided into two categories - ethical *mitzvot* in service of our fellow human beings, and ritual *mitzvot* in service of God.\(^2\) In reality, however, ritual and ethical *mitzvot* are inextricably intertwined. For example, *Shabbat* is both ritual and ethical: it’s a ritual enforcing the dignity of workers and the right of every being - human and animal alike - to rest at least one day a week.

Take prayer services as another example. If a prayer service meant to connect us to a higher power includes no moral guidance in it, or teaches harmful ideas, then it’s in fact unethical. This morning’s *Haftarah* reading said as much about the ritual of fasting:

“Is this the kind of fast I desire?

A day of merely starving one’s body?


\(^2\) In Hebrew, *mitzvot bein adam la-ḥaveiro* and *mitzvot bein adam la-Makom.*
Is it bowing your head like a bulrush
and lying in sackcloth and ash?

No, this is the fast I desire:
unlocking the chains of wickedness,
untying of the fetters of lawless exploitation,
freeing all those who are oppressed…
It is to share your bread with the hungry,
And to take the wretched poor into your home;
When you see the naked, to clothe them,
And not to ignore your own flesh.”

To paraphrase Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, “[ritual] must never be a citadel for selfish concerns, but rather a place for deepening concern over other people’s plight.”

A perfect example of the way that prayer services include both ritual and ethical imperatives is a shiv’ah minyan - a prayer service for mourners during their first week of grieving.

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3 Isaiah 58:5-7, English translation adapted from the JPS TANAKH translation on Sefaria.org and from Kol Haneshamah: Prayerbook for the Days of Awe.
And even on a regular Shabbat morning, many of us come to shul not just to pray, but also to find solace and support, to celebrate our happy occasions, or just to connect with each other socially.

But it's important to show up for ritual even when we don't have an interpersonal reason to. If we don't make a habit of showing up in mundane moments, we lose opportunities to create deeper communal connection. And without a regular practice of showing up, we run the risk of failing to support someone in need or missing a chance to enhance someone’s celebration. We need a sense of obligation to create and sustain that habit.

That’s why the Talmud teaches “Gadol ha-metzueh ve-oseh mei-ha-eino metzuveh ve-oseh - one who does something because she is commanded to do so is greater than one who does the same thing without being commanded.”

This may sound backwards to our modern ears. After all, what makes you feel better: when a family member or friend calls you because they feel obligated to, or because they freely chose to do it of their own volition?

What obligation provides that desire does not is reliability. My mentor Rabbi Gordon Tucker puts it this way: “Without obligation, a community doesn’t know what it can count on. …Note that the text does not say that those who do more observances stand on a higher level. Rather, it is those who do what they do

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5 Babylonian Talmud, Bava Kamma 87a
out of a sense of *mitzvah*, those who *autonomously yield* to the voice of *command*, [the voice of covenant, the voice of community].”’

Many of us feel like we have conflicting obligations. Judaism is here to help us prioritize what really matters. Your own health and well-being come first, then your family, then your community. And if your closest friend is having a *shiv’ah* visit at the same time as an Or Atid member you don’t know very well, you don’t have to feel conflicted about going to your friend. But if you’re deciding between a *shiv’ah* gathering for someone you don’t know very well, and a Patriots game for which you already bought expensive tickets… The juxtaposition may sound ridiculous, but these are exactly the ritual-yet-ethical decisions we face every day.

The circles of obligation created by *mitzvot* don’t end with our family and community, however. They extend out, for we have responsibilities to broader society and the entire world. We are commanded to love our neighbor as ourselves.” And in the words of Rabbi Joachim Prinz: “...God created humanity as everybody’s neighbor. Neighbor is not a geographic term. It is a moral concept. It means our collective responsibility for the preservation of each human’s dignity and integrity.”

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7 Leviticus 19:18

As Jews, we also have an ethical obligation to preserve the unique traditions of Judaism - including those that seem irrational or just neutral. As someone who was fortunate to grow up with a diverse Jewish education, I specifically chose to train as a rabbi in the denomination known as “Conservative Judaism” - because our movement seeks to conserve our practices, to perpetuate them as a sacred tradition, a distinctive and beautiful culture that deserves to survive and thrive.

This is both an individual and communal endeavor. Jewish communities don’t run Hebrew schools because it’s easy or, to use an American economic lens, because it’s profitable. We do it because we understand our responsibility to teach and to practice mitzvot in community.

Being part of a community comes with frustration and sometimes even pain, because we’re working with fellow imperfect people. But being part of a community is simply necessary for human survival and flourishing. No human is an island.

There’s a short story about a Ḥasidic Rebbe who lived 150 years ago in Poland, who asked one of his students: “How is your fellow congregant Moishe doing?” The disciple didn’t know. “What?!” shouted the Rebbe. “You don’t know?! You pray under the same roof, you sing the same songs, you study the
same texts - and yet you dare to tell me that you don’t know whether Moishe is in
good health, whether he needs help, advice, or comforting?!”

Herein lies the very essence of the way of life of mitzvot. To sing and to study together, to say that we are part of a community - these are acts that bind us together morally, that obligate us to help each other celebrate and mourn, to set up for the holidays and to clean up after them, and to make sure that there’s a minyan when someone needs to recite Kaddish.

That’s what it means to be a congregation. It means to show up - to help each other by practicing our traditions. We could fulfill some of our so-called ritual obligations by praying alone at home. But instead, we gather as a community, in order to fully realize the beauty and connective power of mitzvot. We come together in order to share in our life as Jews, to do our part to help strengthen the Community of Israel - past, present, and future.

The sage Hillel urges us: al tifrosh min ha-tzibbur - do not separate yourself from the community. Believe it or not, the science of crying backs this up: “emotional tears have higher protein concentration than irritant tears, which makes them fall down your cheeks more slowly—increasing the chance they’ll be seen and solicit care. In literal ways, your body is built for community.” That’s why

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10 Ibid.
11 Pirkei Avot 2:4, cf. https://www.sefaria.org/Pirkei_Avot.2.4?lang=bi
12 Rev. Benjamin Perry on Twitter: https://twitter.com/FaithfullyBP/status/1569690532539994114
Kaddish is supposed to be recited with a minyan - because it requires the mourner to be in community and enables the community to care for the mourner.

So the next time you see a birth announcement in our community, ask if there’s a meal train to which you can contribute. When you learn that someone is holding a shiv’ah visit, whether you know the person or not, whether you can come in person or need to join via Zoom, please show up. If you hear that we’re worried about making a minyan in person on a Shabbat morning, please join us. If you’re asked to help take down a tent or lend a hand in the kitchen, please volunteer as you are able.

Or Atid has a wonderful track record of hesed - acts of kindness and caring. But we could always use more help. And I hope we can continue to grow in our engagement with Jewish traditions and rituals.

If you are a veteran volunteer who already extends or overextends yourself to show up for individual and communal needs, thank you. Your work is so deeply appreciated. And it may be that now, your mitzvah, your obligation, is to step back, give yourself rest, and call others in to step up and help out. If you have room to grow in your participation in Or Atid's communal life, know that this is not a judgment, but an invitation. And if you’re new to Or Atid, I hope that you’ll join and discover the joys and comforts of mitzvot in our community. All are welcome
to join us as we celebrate together, comfort each other, and learn and grow together through mitzvot.

The pandemic has significantly impacted our ability to show up. But we can still fulfill our obligations safely, effectively, meaningfully, and joyfully.

There are many ways to show up for a community, from manual labor to participating in prayer services to donating resources and beyond. None of them are more valid than the others. We need all of them.

We can embrace the obligations of mitzvot without judgment or guilt, though a little Jewish guilt won’t kill you. But Yom Kippur is not just about guilt. And it’s not just about forgiveness, either. It’s about teshuvah - returning, never giving up, but showing up again and again, as we strive to become better versions of ourselves. It’s about feeling simḥah shel mitzvah, the joy of doing good.

Sometimes, we’ll need to show up for mitzvahs that are not our favorite. Supporting each other and our community will not always be easy or convenient. But simḥah shel mitzvah means that we find not just ephemeral happiness but deep contentment, fulfillment, and stability in a life of mitzvot.

Mitzvot enhance the highs and provide structure for the lows. As some of you know, my father died when I was in college. For various reasons, I ended up staying in my dormitory for shiv’ah. My Resident Advisor, an Irish Catholic baseball player named Joe, brought me dinner one night, without my asking. I
don’t know if Joe knew that he was doing a *mitzvah*. But I’m sure that he knew he was doing the right thing. I hope that it gave him a sense of meaning, purpose, and perhaps even contentment. That’s what doing a *mitzvah* should feel like.

But even when it feels burdensome, we have no other ethical choice but to embrace *mitzvot*, because we need each other. *Mitzvot* show us how to care for each other, and how to preserve our tradition’s sacred wisdom, linking generations we will never know, from those long gone to those not yet born.

The great Indian poet and philosopher Rabindranath Tagore captured it in a poem:

“I slept and dreamt
that life was joy.
I awoke and saw
that life was duty.
I acted — and behold,
duty was joy.”

*Tizku le-mitzvos* - this year, may we merit to feel the joy of duty, as we show up to fulfill those acts of caring that we call *mitzvot*. *Gemar ḥatimah tovah* - may we be sealed for a good new year.

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13 I first read this verse in this May 2020 article by Maria Popova from her website The Marginlian: “Yes to Life, in Spite of Everything: Viktor Frankl’s Lost Lectures on Moving Beyond Optimism and Pessimism to Find the Deepest Source of Meaning”