

Mitzvah is a God Deed

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Travel with me into the past, into the ancient past, all the way back to 1982. In 1982, when I began as a rabbi, I believed what I was taught in the Seminary, that Judaism is an historical religious tradition regulated by Halacha, Jewish law. The Torah commands specific behaviors that we are obligated to follow. The commands of the Torah were interpreted by the rabbis of the Mishnah and the Talmud, and then developed further by rabbis of all subsequent generations. And then I was taught that the rabbi is the mara d'atra of his community – you see how long ago I was ordained, that I can refer to all rabbis as “he;” I told you this was ancient history – and the halakhic rulings of the rabbi are binding for his community.

That’s what I was taught, and that’s what I believed.

And almost every one of my sermons in 1982 contained the phrase, “Judaism demands.” I was the rabbi, and I was interpreting tradition for my community, and I was saying, “Judaism demands.” Because isn’t that what Halakhah means? Isn’t that what mitzvah means? Mitzvah means commandment, the word of God that beckons us to obey. To my great surprise, nothing happened. Eyes glazed over as I spoke. No one changed their behavior. No one, apparently, was listening.

The problem was that my teacher, Rabbi Elliot Dorff, had not yet written his book for USY, *Mitzvah Means Commandment*. That didn’t happen until 1989. If I had been able to read Rabbi Dorff’s book in 1982, when I began as a rabbi, I would never have given those sermons. I would have known that they were going to fall on deaf ears. I would have known that no one would respond to the claim, “Judaism demands.”

This is what Rabbi Dorff wrote in the Introduction to his book:

“Even those who believe in God are often not happy with the tradition’s insistence that God demands obedience, for that takes away one’s right to decide what to do... The tradition’s claim that Jewish law is commanded by God, in other words, eliminates one’s autonomy, one’s right and ability to make one’s own decisions.”

If those who believe in God are uncomfortable with a God who demands obedience, how much the more so are people who question what they believe, or are sure they don’t believe in God? Of course a sermon that says “Judaism demands” would be met with eyes glazed over, with those who were sitting there checking their watches and wondering what was going to be served at Kiddush. It was a message that would find few friends.

Rabbi Dorff put his finger exactly on the problem. The problem with the definition of mitzvah as commandment is that it’s an assault on human autonomy and individualism, which are at the core of American culture. Ours is not a society that takes kindly to demands of obedience. Framed in the Constitution of the United States is the fundamental belief that each American is endowed by God with unalienable rights. The American view of God is of a supreme being who endows rights. Rights, not obligations. The only obligation imposed upon Americans is the requirement to pay taxes. And we elect politicians who promise to lower taxes, and we pay professionals to make sure we do not pay too much tax. The only obligation in American civil religion is something we try to get out of. We resist the government imposing obligations on us. It is part of the fundamental nature of Americans.

And this has its parallel in religious life. Even our own synagogue, which is arguably the most observant, most intellectually serious Conservative community in the country, has difficulty with the imposition of religious obligations. What I am about to say is meant to be descriptive, not judgmental. I bring this example in order to learn something about who we are. We still expect men to wear a tallis on Shabbat, not as a personal choice, but as an obligation. If a man comes to shul without a tallis, and there is a greeter at the door, our practice is for the greeter to hand the man a tallis from the rack. But doesn't it make sense to obligate women to wear a tallis as well? But when the Ritual Committee, some twenty years ago, wanted to make wearing a tallis an obligation for women as well as men, the policy was met with emotional resistance. And this reaction was from observant women, learned women, regular shul goers who take mitzvot seriously. So the shul policy became that women are "strongly encouraged" to wear a tallis. Our policy leaves it up to each individual woman to decide for herself, in her own autonomy, whether tallis is a religious practice that she can embrace, or decline if she is not comfortable observing it. Thank God, over time more and more women are choosing to wear a tallis, which I strongly encourage. Now, can we find a time to talk about tefillin?

There is a conflict between the American ethos of rights and the Jewish insistence on obligations. But the language of obligation has been spoken by Judaism since its inception.

One of the most famous midrashim in the Talmud is the teaching of Rav Abdimi bar Hama bar Hasa, who read literally the verse from Exodus 19: "And the children of Israel stood under the mountain" - this is what Rav Avdimi said: "This teaches that the

Holy One, blessed be He, overturned the mountain upon them like a barrel, and said to them, ‘if you accept the Torah, fine; if not, here you shall be buried.’ For many people, that is precisely what the demands of tradition feel like: like an enormous mountain hovering over our heads, ready to drop and smash our skulls at any moment. This is what the rabbis meant when they talked about *‘ol malkhut shamayim*, about the burden of the kingdom of heaven, which is our job to accept. In this image, God is removed and distant, external, imposing, threatening us: obey, or else!

Many people have been moved and motivated by this image. Yeshayahu Leibovitch, one of the most important Jewish thinkers in the 20th century, argued that the only legitimate motivation for observing a mitzvah is obedience. Leibovitch wrote that the only purpose for performing religious commandments was to obey God. Period. To perform a mitzvah in order to receive a reward in the World to Come, or for any psychological or emotional benefit in this world, is in effect serving the self, which is an idolatry. The motivation for performance of mitzvot, according to Leibovitch, is to serve God by submitting to God’s will. Leibovitch maintained that the reasons for the mitzvot were beyond comprehension, and at best, irrelevant, and any attempt to attribute emotional significance to the performance of mitzvot was misguided and akin to idolatry.

What is it about our age that leads to such difficulty with obligations, and with the idea of mitzvot as divine commandments that we observe just because God said so?

Sociologist of religion, Wade Clark Roof, in his book, *A Generation of Seekers*, shines a spotlight on the Baby Boom generation that explains the major influences that shape our worldview. We, who were born in the shadow of Auschwitz and under the mushroom cloud of Nagasaki, came of age with images that taught us that humans are

capable of devastating cruelty, and it is dangerous to place our faith in the goodness of humanity. And then the sixties began, on November 22, 1963, when a lone gunman brutally and abruptly taught us that we were vulnerable. The baby boom generation learned to believe that since the government cannot protect the President of the United States, the government is incapable of protecting anyone. And then came Vietnam, the experience that taught us that the government will take our finest men and women and send them to die half way around the globe for a failed policy that led nowhere. And then came Watergate, which taught us that the leaders of government will lie, cheat and steal. Is it any wonder that the post-War generation grew up distrusting authority? All authority. Government, religion, parents, media - anything and everything and everyone with authority. Even God.

When I was in elementary school we prepared for nuclear attack by dropping, rolling and covering under our desks, believing in the probability that one day we would vaporize in a nuclear blast. And now, Al Gore and others warn us that we are all going to burn up or drown when the globe rapidly warms as a result of burning fossil fuels. If we believe the planet is not going to survive, if we believe humanity is going to disappear, what do we have to put our faith in? Is it any wonder that the current generation is cynical at its core, consumed with matters of emptiness and vanity, riveted by the exploits of Britney Spears and Paris Hilton and Brangelina and Anna Nichole Smith, and all the other symbols of Hollywood decadence and vanity?

So, many Americans, when feeling empty, and lonely, and without purpose or faith in the future, do what is most expected of them: we go shopping. This is the culture we live in, and we have to be honest about how much we are influenced by our culture.

We have perfected the art of consumption. We shop for things we need and for things we want. We shop as a means of entertainment, and distractions, and even therapy.

Jewish critiques of consumerism usually focus on the dangers of idolatry—the temptation to make material goods the center of life rather than God. This, however, misses the real threat consumerism poses. The problem is not consuming to live, but rather living to consume.

In short, we are what we consume. This explains why shopping is the number one leisure activity of Americans. It occupies a role in society that once belonged to religion—the power to give meaning and construct identity. No longer merely an economic system, consumerism has become *the* American worldview—the framework through which we interpret everything else, including God, the Torah, and shul.

When we approach Judaism as consumers rather than seeing it as a comprehensive way of life, Judaism becomes just one more brand we consume along with Abercrombie and Fitch, Toyota and Starbucks to express our identity.

How to explain the popularity of Starbucks? Anyone who has had coffee in Israel knows what a Latte is supposed to taste like. Starbucks has two flavors: burnt and incinerated. Their success, it seems to me, comes more from the menu on the wall than it does from their Cappuccino.

There was a time when ordering coffee meant regular or decaf, cream or sugar. That was it. Those were our choices. Now I walk into a Starbucks and I instinctively crane my neck upwards, over the head of the cashier, studying the menu and trying to figure out exactly what I want. And there lies the secret of their success: Starbucks

provides literally 2,000 different permutations of drinks, which give us almost infinite choice. We laughed with Steve Martin when he ordered coffee in his movie, *LA Story*. Remember? “I’ll have a decaf double half cap with a twist.” But that is not just an *LA* story. It is the story of every part of our consumer society.

But this trend didn’t start with Starbucks.

Let me take you back to 1974, when a national fast food chain came up with an ad campaign to try to compete with McDonald’s. I would be willing to bet that everyone in school today who was older than 6 in 1974 can sing the words of the Burger King commercial with me. Ready to sing it with me? Here we go:

“Hold the pickles; hold the lettuce, special orders won’t upset us, all we ask is that you let us have it your way. Have it your way, have it your way, have it your way, at Burger King, have it your way...”

And overnight, Burger King was catapulted into the pantheon of fast food giants.

The ad executives who designed this campaign brilliantly tapped into the modern *zeitgeist*. We are a consumer society, and in a consumer society the consumer decides what to buy, what to discard, what to invest with value. And we do not want anyone to tell us what to buy, or what to like. We want to have it our way. And we are experts in getting our desires met.

One of the core characteristics of consumerism is choice. With each new option, the shopper is better equipped to construct his unique identity. Customization, creating a product that conforms to my particular desires, has driven businesses to offer an ever-increasing number of choices.

I grew up as part of the “Me” generation. But my kids are part of the “I” generation: iBook, iPod, and now iPhone. The iPod is the icon of personal choice. No longer is anyone required to buy an entire CD to enjoy just one song. You now have instant access to millions of songs, and download them individually for a personalized playlist.

The demand for more choices also drives modern synagogues. The goal is to provide religious consumers with as many individualized choices as possible.

In our society the only value something or someone has is the value I give it. It should surprise no one that in our culture God also has no value apart from what God can do for me.

It isn't difficult to see the incompatibility of consumerism with traditional Judaism. The Torah champions communitarianism and obligation to others, not endless pursuit of personal desire. In consumerism a desire is never illegitimate, it is only unmet. For consumers, fulfillment of desire is the highest good and final arbiter in making decisions—even deciding where and how to daven.

This is the time of the year when Jews are involved in that great religious quest we call “shul shopping.” Can there be anything more consumer driven than shul shopping? And the irony is we do accept MasterCard and Visa.

But we are not for sale. A community is not a commodity.

In consumer Judaism, however, sometimes it feels like shul leaders function as religious baristas, supplying spiritual goods for people to choose from based on their preferences. Our concern becomes not whether people are growing, but whether they are satisfied. Because we all know, an unhappy member, like an unhappy customer, will find

satisfaction elsewhere. Just like Continental Airlines, we know you have a choice in which shul you choose to fly, and thank you for flying Temple Beth Am.

It is no wonder that a message that says “Judaism demands” would sound like a foreign language.

So we have turned mitzvah from a commandment to a good deed. Now, that is a message that everyone can endorse. Because a good deed is so... nice. You know? It's nice. Everyone wants to do things that are nice – even non-Jews, who speak the language of mitzvah as a good deed. And as a rabbi, I can “strongly encourage” people to do mitzvot because that message is so... nice.

But is that really what a mitzvah is? Is that all?

Of course that is not all. No religious tradition would survive, nor should it survive, with a central message that is neither compelling nor spiritually rewarding. And I want to suggest that the key to Jewish survival through the millennia has been our understanding of mitzvah. And if we want to continue to survive in America - not just for survival's sake, but for the sake of a rich religious experience - we need to recapture a sense of what mitzvah is, and why it is or isn't important to us, and what motivates us to behave Jewishly, and what is compelling about the Jewish way of life.

Instead of saying that mitzvah is a good deed, what I think we should say is that mitzvah is a God deed.

Comforting the mourners is one of the mitzvot this congregation does best. I am always moved and inspired and impressed by the reaction of this community when someone suffers a loss, when living rooms are full morning and evening during shiva, when people volunteer to cook meals for mourners and take care of their needs. Why do

we do it? What is the motivation? Is it because of a sense of commandedness? Because of an external imposition of a religious imperative? I am sure that is true for some, and that is a good reason. Do we do it because it is a good deed, and it is a nice thing to do? Surely. But my sense is that the overarching reason that most of us do it is because we are in relationship, and when you take that relationship seriously, that's what you do. You just do it, without thinking deeply about it, without constructing a theology of divine reward or punishment, without expecting to gain something in return. You do it because you are in a relationship, and the relationship commands. The relationship has a claim on your behavior. And a relationship is neither external to you nor internal to you. It is a way of being. Like Buber said, all of life is encounter, and the relationship that derives from encounter – with other people, with God – finds its expression in concrete acts. Those acts are mitzvot.

So I would argue that we should say that mitzvah is a God deed. Abraham Joshua Heschel, in one of his finest moments in his classic book, *God in Search of Man*, writes that mitzvah is a partnership between God and humans, a mutual responsibility. He writes, “A mitzvah is an act which God and man have in common.” The holiness of a mitzvah lies in its role in connecting us to God in an ongoing relationship. In Heschel's construct, a mitzvah is not an act of submission to a commanding Voice. It is an act of surrender to the relationship. Surrender is what we do when we are in love.

That is why the Prophets of Israel speak of the relationship between God and Israel as the love between spouses. There are dozens of verses that speak of the marital relationship between God and Israel; to quote them all to you now would be just showing off. But trust me on this one. Hosea has the most famous of all (2:19): *I will betroth you*

to me forever. I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice and in love and in compassion. That verse is said liturgically, while wrapping the tefillin strap around the hand. Those who put on tefillin do so because it is a symbol of love, where each day God and Israel renew a covenantal bond of love. Do those of us who put on tefillin in the morning do so simply because we are commanded? Again, perhaps some do, and that's OK. But most of us do it because we are in love, and one of the ways that Jews love God, and feel loved by God, is to put on tefillin.

We have many love relationships in our lives, and they each make claims on our behavior. They each create mitzvot that are an outgrowth of our loving relationship. When a child has 104 fever in the middle of the night, does a loving parent stop to think about whether or not he or she should give up sleep to take the child to the emergency room? Not for a moment. The relationship demands that behavior, but it is not an obligation that is imposed from the outside. It is the expression of the loving relationship between parent and child. The love we share with our children has claims on us. Love commands.

And when a spouse is in pain and needs to talk, needs to be heard and acknowledged and appreciated, does a loving spouse resent the intrusion on their personal space? Does a loving spouse wonder what they are giving up in order to care for the other? Not for a moment. It is the expression of the loving relationship between lovers. Because our lovers have claims on us. Love commands.

That is why there is a mitzvah of loving God, and why that mitzvah is articulated as part of the Shema. Everything we do – ritually, ethically, intellectually – is a response to, and an outgrowth of, the mutuality of the love we share with God. *Barukh atah*

Adonai, ohev amo Yisrael – blessed are you, Adonai, who loves His people Israel – we say in the evening prayers. Because God loves us, we have a claim on God; we are God's people. And because we love God, God has a claim on us. We are in a relationship of love, which is expressed in specific acts.

Shabbat and Holiday celebrations, Torah study, acts of kindness and compassion, davening, kashrut, and so much more, are all acts of love. We do them because the relationship commands.

This, then, is the ultimate religious question: what kind of a relationship do you want with God? How much are you in love? How much do you want to be in love? And what are you prepared to do to deepen that love? And how many God deeds do you want in your life? These are the existential questions that Judaism asks, and the questions that Rosh Hashanah wants us to face.

And here's the deal. This is the best part. When we surrender, when we give up the quest to feed and fill our desires, when we stop being consumers and open ourselves up to the full expression of divine love, then we really get to have it our way.

Because isn't it our way to be in love? Isn't it?

Shanah Tovah.