

My journey to becoming a serious Jew was prompted by my roommate at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Larry Cicerelli was a committed evangelical Christian. He had a close friend who had been born Jewish but who had become a Hebrew Christian. The two of them would go to church every week. On Saturday afternoons, when they came back from church and I returned from the synagogue, we would occasionally talk about Bible or Jewish practices. I knew a fair amount, but my head-knowledge existed on a separate plane from my practice. I only kept kosher because in Israel it took a bit of an effort not to keep kosher, I did Shabbat, but only when I had nothing better to do. I liked going to shul and went nearly every week, but if something else came up that was more interesting I would do that instead. Basically, I was a sort of a traditional Jew of convenience. Nothing I did was intentional. That's not to say I was ashamed of being Jewish -- in fact my Jewish identity was a source of great pride to me. When my friends in Minnesota asked me to take them to the synagogue, I did so with pride, explaining the services, the Torah, the Siddur, showing them Hebrew, demonstrating my ability to read and speak the language. But when they asked me what I did that was specifically Jewish -- did I follow the dietary laws, how did I observe the Sabbath, why didn't I observe the Biblical festivals, my only answer, somewhat confused and ashamed, was either that I didn't think the mitzvot applied to me for a reason I couldn't articulate; or that I understood the mitzvot as metaphors intended to remind us of certain important values, though what those values were I had no idea, and why it wasn't important to practice the metaphor, I couldn't answer.

At a certain point in these conversations with Larry and his friend, it began to bother me that Larry's friend, the former Jew, took kashrut and Shabbat more seriously than I did. As time went on, I could no longer avoid the question of what lay at the core of my identity. I was David Krishef, and I was David Yehudah ben Elkanah u'Devorah. I felt bifurcated and false, because the Jewish part of me kept getting shunted aside when it was inconvenient. At that point, I decided to be more intentional about my approach to Mitzvah. To do this, I needed to figure out first what I meant by mitzvah.

Mitzvah can be a daunting concept, even a frightening word. Orthodox Judaism understands mitzvah very clearly as an action commanded by God. Human beings have the choice to obey or suffer consequences. Orthodox communities understand that the authoritative code of Jewish law is the Shulchan Arukh written in the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

Liberal Judaism has embraced mitzvah, but radically changed the meaning to emphasize mitzvah as an individual's path to God, rather than a communal path. To say, from a Reform perspective, that kashrut is a mitzvah is to say that at one point in history Jews considered dietary laws to be part of the life of a Jew, and Jews today may or may not find it spiritually fulfilling.

The Reform path was never compelling to me. I found too much strength in a community of mitzvah. I studied the Orthodox path, but never got over the frustration of a system frozen in time 400 years ago, largely closed to women.

The path I chose fell between two classic Rabbinic Midrashim.

When God came to give the Torah, it was not only revealed to Israel, but to all the nations. God came to the descendants of Esav and asked, "Will you receive the Torah?" They questioned: "What is written in it?" God responded: "Do not murder." They replied, "Master of the world, the very essence of our forefather is a murderer" God came to the descendants of Amon and Moab and asked, "Will you receive the Torah?" They questioned: "What is written in it?"... God came to the descendants of Ishmael and asked, "Will you receive the

Torah?” They questioned: “What is written in it?”... Thus it was with all the nations of the world, God asked if they would receive the Torah [and they refused, based on something in it to which they objected]. When God offered it to Israel, they accepted it without question.<sup>1</sup>

This idea of mitzvah is that God gave us Torah, and we freely accepted it. Our obligation to do mitzvot then, is freely chosen before even understanding what they are or what they mean. The second midrash is based on Exodus 19:17, “Moses led the people out of the camp toward God, and they took their places at the foot of the mountain” - literally, בְּתַהֲמֵית הָהָר, underneath the mountain.”

R. Abdimi b. Hama b. Hasa said: This teaches that the Holy Blessed One overturned the mountain upon them like an [inverted] cask, and said to them, ‘If you accept the Torah, good; if not, there shall be your burial.’<sup>2</sup>

At first, this might seem to represent a coercive attitude regarding mitzvot - do them or die. However, the Talmud continues:

... Said Raba, Yet even so, they re-accepted it in the days of Ahasuerus, for it is written, [the Jews] undertook and obligated themselves,” they confirmed what they had accepted long before.

In other words, every generation of Jews has to affirm their allegiance to Torah, otherwise presumably it will no longer have the force of mitzvah. At this point, they are accepting something they fully understand. The passage concludes:

... Resh Lakish said: The Holy Blessed One said to the Works of Creation: ‘If Israel accepts the Torah, you shall exist; but if not, I will turn you back into emptiness and formlessness.’

From this, I learn that the ultimate meaning of mitzvah is the force which gives meaning to the world. Without Torah and mitzvah, without meaning in our lives, we might as well not exist.

20<sup>th</sup> century theologian Martin Buber wrote that revelation is not legislation. God is not a lawgiver. Revelation is a summons to God’s presence. Mitzvah is that which I do or do not do based on my experience of revelation. His friend and colleague Franz Rosenzweig responded that God is indeed not a lawgiver, but God is a commander. Our communal behavior, our structure of mitzvah, is a way to express God’s command systematically.

Mordecai Kaplan argued that mitzvot are best understood as “the social practices by which a people externalizes the reality of its collective being.”<sup>3</sup> Mitzvot are the set of practices which identify us as a community.

For Abraham Joshua Heschel, mitzvot are a leap of action. We don’t have a leap of faith in Judaism. Rather, we are asked to carry out the words of Torah, and through this action, we become aware of what life is, the power to harm and to hurt, to wreck and to ruin, to derive joy and to bestow it on others. Through mitzvah, we create a partnership between God and Humanity.<sup>4</sup>

My colleague Rabbi Barry Leff wrote: The Slonimer Rebbe says the goal of every Jew should be to achieve devekut, cleaving to God, a powerful connection with God. Agreeing to do Torah without understanding fully the source of Torah demonstrates this. We cleave to God even if we don’t totally understand God.

<sup>1</sup> Sifre Parashat Berakha 343

<sup>2</sup> Shabbat 88a

<sup>3</sup> Judaism as a Civilization, ch. 29

<sup>4</sup> God in Search of Man, page 284, 287

An insistence on having it all explained in an understandable way before taking on a particular mitzvah is symptomatic of a distant relationship with God. If someone you love says “do me a favor,” the answer ought to be “Of course, what is it?” We don’t need it explained first. We agree first because we trust and love the other person. We **want** to do things for them. The Slonimer Rebbe says that at Sinai our ancestors accepted the commandments from a place of love, the way children love their parents.

When a doctor gives a prescription for a particular medication, we normally don’t run to the internet to decide whether or not to take it. We trust our doctor to have given us something for our benefit. There is nothing wrong with asking a question seeking further understanding. We may look on the internet for advice about a particular medication, or more details on things to watch out for. Not because we’re questioning the instruction, but rather for clarification. Similarly, we might see the system of mitzvot as a package because we believe God loves us and the rules God gives us are good. Nevertheless, we can still look for clarification after we’ve accepted them, to deepen our understanding and enhance our action.

So - for Conservative Jews, there is a range of meanings for mitzvah. Those meanings include, but are not limited to, actions that we feel obligated to perform, practices that engage us, instructions that we are responsible for, and disciplines that we undertake out of love.

They may be obligation imposed on us from God, the meaning of which are irrelevant. God said it, so like it or not, we do it. God is the commander, we are the commanded.

They may be obligations imposed on us that come from our love of God. We freely choose to accept the obligation. We do so because we love God; or because we think there is inherent meaning in the mitzvot; or we think they provide for our spiritual development; or because they bring us closer to God; or because they link us to a meaningful community.

They may be communal ways to affirm our covenant with God.

The Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, Dr. Arnie Eisen, has called for a movement wide conversation about mitzvot.

We have much to learn by talking and listening to one another. I ask you to reflect carefully and speak honestly about a subject that is crucial to our community. We may well discover more commitment, individually and collectively, than we had imagined. We also may see greater commitment and perhaps even consensus emerge from our discussion.

My request of you is two-fold:

First, talk to your family and friends and fellow congregants and to me about mitzvah. The study group this afternoon is a good place to start, but continue the conversation in your own groups - what does mitzvah mean to you, which mitzvot are easy for you, which mitzvot are difficult for you. What do you do out of a sense of mitzvah, and what do you not yet do?

Second, demonstrate Faith in Action - Take upon yourself a mitzvah that you have never done or don’t do consistently. For example:

- Come to a weekday minyan
- Put on Tallit and Tefillin
- Reexamine your observance of Kashrut - don’t eat pork or shellfish, or don’t mix dairy and meat
- Come to Shabbat services
- Give to JFGR - set aside \$5, \$10/week
- Give extra to AI

- Make sure that most of your tzedakah goes to a Jewish cause
- Volunteer at God's Kitchen
- Come to the Thursday Torah study group
- Read the Parasha each week
- Light Shabbat candles every Friday
- Say Kiddush on Shabbat and Festivals

Do one until you are comfortable, and then look for another one.

A collection of letters, written by Mother Theresa to her confessor were published recently.<sup>5</sup> They reveal that for the last nearly half-century of her life she felt virtually no presence of God. This, while she was tending to the sick and dying in Calcutta. This, while she was speaking passionately about the reality that one's relationship with Jesus is incarnate in one's actions.

This is a beautifully Jewish outlook. Mitzvah doesn't mean that we are certain that God has personally commanded us to do a set of actions. Mitzvah means that we live our lives with meaning, while continuing to search. Dennis Prager likes to quote Rabbi Emanuel Rackman: God created doubt.

Mother Theresa brought countless people to God not through coercion, but through her loving actions, even though she was struggling mightily with questions of the reality of God.

Dr. Eisen asks:

Are we going to shul this year; or listening to the shofar; or fasting on Yom Kippur, or resolving to be better parents to our children or children to our parents; or getting involved in campaigns to stop genocide in Africa; or helping to bring peace to the Middle East; or giving tzedakah to disaster relief efforts; or volunteering at the local homeless shelter; or supporting our local federation? Are we doing these things and others like them, because or only because we believe that God commanded us to do them at Sinai? For some of us, God does figure as commander of the commandments, whether by means of the revelation to the Israelites at Sinai or through more personal revelations that come to us via conscience, or in the faces of human beings whom we meet and who require our assistance.

For others of us, God may figure only marginally in our sense of commandedness or obligation or responsibility. Other factors are more immediate and consequential. We may feel responsible to our community. Or to our ancestors. Or to the tradition that our ancestors transmitted to us.

We may be heeding the voice of conscience, trying to do the right thing, to live the right way. We may have accepted Jewish tradition—or our particular way of living and learning it as Conservative Jews — as a "package deal," in the same way that marriage and parenting are package deals. We are grateful for the life as a whole that these afford us. Not every detail or duty pleases us equally. Yet we accept these nonetheless as part of the package, grateful for this life, this responsibility, this love.

May the coming year bring you many opportunities to engage in mitzvot; may you find fulfillment in exploring new ways to enhance your Jewish selves; and may you be blessed with a g'mar hatima tova, a good conclusion to the soul searching process of Yom Kippur.

---

<sup>5</sup> Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light