

Yom Kippur

September 26, 2012

The story is told of a rabbi around seventy years ago, new to America, who takes the helm at a new congregation. Before his first High Holidays, the president of the shul takes him aside and gives him a few pointers: “Rabbi, it’s best not to speak about certain things. First of all, Shabbes, because in America almost everyone has to work on Shabbes. Second, Kashrus, because the dietary laws were really ancient health regulations not necessary in the modern world, and it’s too much trouble for the women to bother with two sets of dishes. And finally, circumcision, because American Jews are getting more acculturated and some of them don’t want to look different in the locker room. The Rabbi listens with some concern, and then asks, “So what should I talk about?” “Well, that’s simple,” says the president, “Just talk about Judaism!”

Those who were here on Erev Rosh Hashanah, or at the last board meeting, have heard me make a big deal out of a new book from the Conservative Movement called *The Observant Life*. It is a book about Judaism; a compendium of guidelines for, and essays about, Jewish practice, a kind of successor to the late Rabbi Isaac Klein’s *A Guide to Jewish*

*Practice.* But this book is much more comprehensive. In addition to things like Shabbat, Kashrut, and mourning practices, it teaches about Jewish law regarding banking, inheritance, interfaith relations, and human sexuality. The *Observant Life* is a product of ten years of work and dozens of rabbis in our movement. All of us know there is a long history in Conservative Judaism of Jews caring deeply about their Jewish identity, but feeling markedly ambivalent about the actions that identity entails. Those actions are described by a word almost every Jew – and many non-Jews – knows: “mitzvah.” Many of us know that the literal meaning of mitzvah is commandment. Even more of us know that in common Jewish parlance it means “good deed.” The mitzvah is the basic building block of Jewish practice, of the Jew’s relationship with God. Yet in our world the notion of commandment suffers from an image problem. Classical Judaism insists that God gives us numerous – the traditional number is 613 – mitzvot – both ritual and ethical – meant to be obeyed. In 21st century America, however, we more than ever emphasize the notion that Arnold Eisen and Steven Cohen – in their book *The Jew Within* – refer to as “the sovereign self.” Whether we are aware of it or not—and most of us probably aren’t – we have internalized the German philosopher Immanuel Kant’s belief that autonomy is superior to being guided by outside norms, that we are more

free and more “adult” if we throw off child-like obedience to an external commander. This poses a huge problem for Judaism and for the mitzvah – which bases itself on the idea that the highest form of religion is the accepting of God’s commands on how to live in relationship to Him and to each other. The mitzvah in religious terms is a concrete action that helps our heads get around an abstract concept – God. It is an action sanctified by our Torah tradition as something God wants of us. Abraham Joshua Heschel went further: a mitzvah is an act God and man have in common. That definition makes sense in a tradition which perhaps hyperbolically states that God clothes the naked, buries the dead, and wears Tefillin. However we define it, though, we need to reawaken the sense of mitzvah in ourselves and use it as the basic building block of Jewish commitment and of a relationship with God.

When I have talked with affiliated Jews about what makes them feel commanded, they mention things such as lighting Shabbat candles, fasting on Yom Kippur, and a variety of ethical imperatives. There could be many reasons why one or another of us take mitzvah x or y particularly seriously. Such reasons might be a theological conviction that God wants this of us. But it could also be a sense of tradition, a sense of belonging to the Jewish

community, or a feeling of an imperative to make the world a better place. In any case, what is noteworthy is that in our world as Americans today mitzvot are a matter of choice. Unlike in former centuries, no authority – even in Israel – has the ability to punish us for violations of Halakhah, with the exception of those Jewish laws that comprise part of civil law. The early twentieth century German Jewish philosopher Franz Rosenzweig therefore makes an invaluable contribution to modern Judaism when he says that the laws of the Torah – sometimes arcane and far removed from the modern world – only become commandments – mitzvot – when they are accepted by the individual Jew. Here is an idea that bridges the gap between the Jewish notion of mitzvah and the modern notion of autonomy. Rosenzweig as a Jew and student of Judaism feels obligated to try to take on as much of Halakhah as possible, while not sacrificing his autonomy as a modern human being. It all leads to his famous response when a correspondent asked him whether he put on tefillin each day. His answer: not yet. At that point he did not yet feel commanded regarding that ritual, but he held out hope that soon he would. Our all-important question is what Jewish practices do we accept into our lives as mitzvot, as lines of practical connection between ourselves and God, and how do we keep those lines open?

Jewish tradition recognizes broadly two different kinds of mitzvot, mitzvot bein adam l'chavero, mitzvot between one person and another (like visiting the sick) and mitzvot bein adam la-makom, mitzvot between a person and God (like not eating pork.) The fact that The Observant Life covers both these categories suggests that our relationship with God requires actions to cement it just like a relationship with another person does. This moves the mitzvah in the category of bein adam la-makom from a ritual we do just to prove our Jewish identity into something that can actually play a role in our spiritual lives. We each need a concrete way to connect to the abstract idea of God. And one could argue that if we find God difficult to believe in or that connection hard to make, we need these concrete actions all the more.

With this in mind, I am proposing a program I call “adopt- a - mitzvah.” I would like every Jew in this room, as we enter this new year, to choose a mitzvah he or she would like to try to become committed to in the months to come. I would like for us to cultivate that mitzvah within ourself. Though all of us try to do mitzvot in the colloquial sense, usually that means ethical mitzvot. For this, pick a mitzvah bein adam la-makom, one that deals primarily with our relationship with God – a ritual mitzvah. It should be one you haven't tried before, so that it stands out in your life. It

could be something obvious. If you until now have eaten pork, stop. If you haven't lit Shabbat candles, start. But it could also be something you would never have thought about. Say ha-motzi every time you eat bread. Say the Shema, or part of it, once or twice each day. Don't cook or don't sew or don't shave on Shabbat. And put aside your fear of inconsistency. Bless your food even if you don't keep kosher. Stop some activity on Shabbat even if you still go to the mall or drive to your child's sports event. Even if you think you won't keep it up, make a commitment to do your mitzvah for a month and see how it goes. I can't swear to you it will change your life, but I truly believe it will get you thinking more about the place of God or Judaism in your life. And try to adopt a mitzvah even if you are not sure you believe in God. Abraham Joshua Heschel always emphasized that our understanding of God needs to be experiential. We may come to have more of a belief in God, or at least more of a relationship to the idea of God, by doing our mitzvah than we would previously have thought. And even if not, Jewish law and philosophy teach that even ritual mitzvot are valuable in and of themselves, For instance some say that not mixing milk and meat teaches us the value of compassion and of drawing distinctions between life vs. death. In the midrash, God says "Would they would abandon Me and keep My mitzvot!"

I once read in a Chabad publication the story of a Jewish soldier in Vietnam in the 1960's who met the Lubavicher Rebbe. The Rebbe told him, if he did nothing else, to perform n'tilat yadayim – the ritual of washing the hands – and say the blessing before each meal. To do this at his base in Vietnam it meant going to a source of water several yards away. One day he was performing the ritual when an enemy rocket hit the camp and killed most everyone there. He was spared because he was away from the rest of his fellow soldiers, doing n'tilat yadayim. This story was told to demonstrate the Rebbe's miraculous power, and the power of the individual mitzvah to make all the difference. I am skeptical about these messages. Did God want every soldier dead but spare this individual Jew because of the washing of the hands? However, what I do believe is that for that one soldier that small individual mitzvah would forever have incredible meaning for him. If we make a commitment to one mitzvah, it may resonate for us – through our individual experiences – in ways we would never have expected. May each of us consider the concept of the mitzvah – commandment or good deed or however we define it – and what it means to accept God's command. Let each of us ask of ourselves the question, what makes us feel Jewishly commanded and why. May each one of us in 5773 adopt a mitzvah connected to our relationship with God and consciously see

what role it plays in our lives. If you can, purchase *The Observant Life* for your home. It is my hope that through this activity we can make concrete the presence of God in our lives and spiritually reclaim mitzvah in the sense of both commandment and good deed. In 5773, may we take to heart the words of psalms, mitzvat adonai barah, m'irat eynayim, the commandment of Adonai is pure, opening our eyes.