

MITZVAH AND MITZAVEH
(Commandment and Commander)
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Ten years ago, on a secular kibbutz, sandwiched between the Lebanese border and the Golan Heights, a late night discussion over drinks with our young Israeli tour guide who was helping me lead a tour of Israel, led me to recapture a piece of our religious tradition. The discussion also helped me solve a question that has gnawed at me for a long time. My dilemma was similar to the issues that provoked many debates, discussions and documents within the leadership of the Reform movement, which led to the promulgation of a new set of principles of Reform Judaism which circulated among Reform leaders a decade ago.

This late night discussion took place on the evening prior to Tishah B'Av – the ninth day of the Hebrew month of Av -- which figures prominently in the Jewish calendar and yet has been virtually forgotten within the liberal Jewish community outside of Israel, because it falls during the summer. Most people don't really understand what the Ninth Day of Av represents. The following evening, Tishah B'Av would fall and I was in Israel leading a tour of Americans. I felt it was important to have some sort of service and yet I couldn't figure out what the nature of that service might be. I had a discussion with our Israeli guide, who had been raised in a traditional Jewish home, and discussed how we might make Tishah B'Av relevant to our American Jewish tourists who had probably never experienced Tishah B'Av. But ultimately this conversation focused not on the members of the group but on ourselves. I was truly at a loss to find some true relevance for us -- marking of the day that our tradition tells us: the First Temple was destroyed, the Second Temple was destroyed and every other tragedy that befell our people seemed to have occurred on that same date.

I have always tried to define Judaism based upon the joy that Jewish life and tradition enables us to discover. And I felt uncomfortable with another day that marked our tragedies. Daniel, our young guide, having lived the better part of his adult life in Israel, understood the day as a day of national mourning and an expression of profound loss. Late into the evening we debated what we might do and how we might find some meaning in a commemoration of Tishah B'Av.

In the end, what was created, I believe, was a remarkably moving and profound event in which we recreated our discussion and our debate with the group and asked our members to find where they might find relevance in commemorating Tisha B'Av. It was then we had our young friend and guide, Daniel, chant selections from *Echa* – the Book of Lamentations -- in which our Jewish ancestors, sitting by the shores of the river in Babylon, wept for the loss that they experienced through their forced expulsion from the Holy Land. We concluded with a brief service – it was profound, it was moving, it was relevant and it was deeply Jewish.

So what did we mourn? What was the loss? It is simply this: at one time our people had and held Jerusalem and in the center of that enchanted city stood a place – a building – that tied us together as one people, no matter where we lived. The Temple was ultimately our focus. It was to the Temple we brought our offerings. It was at the Temple that our greatest prayers rose towards the heavens. It was in the Temple that the center of Jewish life was most vibrant. Whether sitting in a kibbutz bar or here on Park Avenue it is impossible not to feel that even though Jews around the world are tied to one another, the ties that bind us have been weakened over the centuries as the center of our Jewish life -- built and destroyed, rebuilt and destroyed again -- no longer exists. And yet ultimately the Temple that once stood in Jerusalem was merely a symbol for something more profound that bound us together. What truly bound us together was our way of life – concretized and bound in by a set of laws that we called *mitzvot*.

I would like to suggest that perhaps a way to recapture our sense of Jewish unity, and ultimately our Jewish authenticity, is to re-examine by what we mean by the word *mitzvah* and to not be afraid as liberal Jews to speak of *mitzvot* and to live by them.

Too often we have reduced the word *mitzvah* by translating it as ‘a good deed.’ That is not what *mitzvah* is all about. In fact the word *mitzvah* (“commandment”) demands that we see the word in terms of a rule that emanates from a *mitzaveh* – a Commander. What makes *mitzvot* compelling is the fact that we, as a unified people, once stood together at Sinai and not only learned the rules that would make our life compelling, but entered into a relationship with the Presence which brought forth those rules.

I'm sure some of you are beginning to worry about where this sermon of mine might lead. And in the back of some of your minds, some might be thinking that Reform Judaism is about freedom. Reform Judaism is about autonomy. Reform

Judaism is about making informed choices. And even the name of our own congregation, The Temple of Universal Judaism, implies an openness in our approach to Jewish life. Let me say from the outset Reform Judaism is about freedom and it is about autonomy and it is about learning. But it is not about doing whatever one wants. The first part of our congregation's name is Congregation Da'at Elohim – the knowledge of God. This points us in the correct direction.

My friend and colleague, Rabbi Herbert Bronstein, has suggested that the greatest challenge to Reform Judaism is understanding what autonomy is within the Jewish community. He reminds us that autonomy is a cardinal principle within Judaism but not in the way one might think. Rabbi Bronstein reminds us that when our people were enslaved in Egypt and Moses was sent to Pharaoh, Moses did not say, "Let my people go that they may be free." Rather, Moses said, "Let my people go so that they might worship God." In this sense, autonomy is the ability to choose against idolatry. We had to leave Egypt because we were not free to worship our God. Instead, surrounded by idols and a Pharaoh who thought himself to be a god, we have to assert our autonomy in order to be ourselves.

We ultimately became one people but not in our escape from Egypt, or the two month journey that turned into a trek for 40 years. Rather, it was at the foot of a mountain in which we came to understand ourselves as one unified nation – one people of shared faith, shared ethics and shared behaviors. It was at the foot of Sinai that we, as a people, first discovered *mitzvot* – commandments – and they were compelling because they came from the *mitzaveh* – from the Commander, God. We discovered *mitzvot* through Da'at Elohim – through the knowledge of God.

So what do we, today, mean when we speak of *mitzvah*. How can we, so many hundreds of generations removed from the Sinai experience, feel tied to one another and feel compelled to follow *mitzvot*? When Rabbi Eric Yoffie became the new President of the Union of Reform Judaism, he suggested several aspects of a definition of *mitzvah*:

1. A *mitzvah* is a religious act drawn from Torah that is carried out by Jews who believe that these acts have been transmitted to us by a commanding God.
2. *Mitzvah* is a reflection of Judaism's insistence on concretizing ethics and theology into daily practice.
3. *Mitzvah* is a natural, logical and necessary extension of Jewish faith which becomes meaningful only when we ask "What does my belief demand of me?"

4. *Mitzvah* is the instrument by which we infuse life with the holy.
5. *Mitzvah* is our connection with Sinai. By performing a *mitzvah* we are taken back to that sacred mountain.
6. *Mitzvah* connects us to God. A *mitzvah* is the act that joins together the Jew and God. And finally,
7. *Mitzvah* is the heart of Torah because without commandments, there can be no Torah.

Rabbi Yoffie's definitions are both profound and provocative. He did not suggest that every rule and law that our traditional brethren claim to be a *mitzvah* must be accepted as such. He suggested an intellectual and emotional engagement with Torah, in order for us to discover what God demands of us. And through that intellectual and emotional engagement we find, not only the commanding presence of God, but we find our link to one another as Jews.

In the absence of a sense of the commanding presence it is easy for the commandments themselves to become meaningless. There is a story of a traveling salesman who rings a doorbell at a house and a 10 year old child answers the door with a cigar in one hand, a beer in the other and an adult magazine tucked under his arm. The salesman says, "Little boy, are your parents at home?" And the child responds, "What do you think..." We all know the situation. When the person who makes the rules is not at home, it's somewhat less compelling to follow those rules. The joke is funny in and of itself, but more profound when we realize it's simply a riff on what has happened over and over again.

Even shortly after receiving the law Sinai, Moses has to go up to the mountain again and disappears. The people began to think that their leader, their source of law, was gone. He might even be dead. And when that realization hit, they reverted to their old ways and created *agyl ha'zahav* – the Golden Calf.

The Haftarah on that particular section of Torah tells an even more profound tale from the First Book of Kings. During the reign of King Ahab, when Israel was divided into Israel and Judah – the northern and southern kingdoms, Ahab allowed idol worship to return to the community and did not try to teach the law to the people. The people ran amuck, worshiping Baal and other idols. Elijah was one who wanted to serve God and railed against the people and their idol worship. Finally he could take no more, so at the top of Mount Carmel, he called on the prophets of Baal, the false prophets, to erect an altar and to place a sacrifice on top of it. And he challenged them (First Kings, Chapter 18, Verse 25 and following):

Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, “Choose one bull and prepare it first, for you are the majority. Invoke your god by name but apply no fire.” They took the bull that was given them. They prepared it, and invoked Baal by name from morning until noon shouting “Oh Baal, answer us!” But there was no sound and none who responded. So they performed a hopping dance about the altar that had been set up. When noon came, Elijah mocked them, saying “Shout louder. After all, he’s a god. Maybe he’s in conversation. He may be detained. Or he may be on a journey. Or maybe he’s asleep and will wake up.” So they shouted louder and gashed themselves with their spears according to their practice until blood streamed over them. When noon passed, they kept raving until the hour of presenting the meal offering. Still there was no sound and none who responded or heeded. Then Elijah said to all the people, “Come closer to me.” And all the people came closer to him. Elijah repaired the damaged altar of God. He took 12 stones corresponding to the numbers of the tribes of the sons of Jacob to whom the word of God came saying “Israel shall be your name” and with the stones he built an altar in the name of God. Around the altar he made a large trench. He laid out the wood. He cut up the bull and laid it on the wood and he said, “Fill four jars with water and pour it over the offering that is to be burned and the wood.” And then he said, “Do it a second time” and they did it a second time. “Do it a third time” and they did it a third time. When it was time to present the meal offering, the prophet Elijah came forward and said, “Adonai, God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and that I have done all the things at your bidding. Answer me, O God, answer me that this people may know you are God, for you have turned their hearts backward.”

The text continues that a fire from God descended and consumed the burnt offering and the wood and the stone and all the rocks and it consumed all the water that fell into the trench. And when the people saw this, they fell on their faces and cried out “*Adonai hu ha Elohim. Adonai hu ha Elohim* – The Eternal is our God, the Eternal is our God.” Those words that they pronounced may sound familiar to you, for they are the same words that are used to close the Gates of Repentance at the end of Yom Kippur day. We end our service with the same declaration that our ancestors of old used when they were finally able to reject the idols and allow the commanding presence of God to enter their lives. At the end of Yom Kippur, as the sun is about to set, we all say together “*Adonai hu ha Elohim*” seven times, recalling Elijah’s great act that brought the people back to God.

To be free, to be a modern liberal Jew, to be part of a community in which autonomy holds sway, really means to reject the idols that are before us and bind ourselves together by that which makes us who we truly are. We all have idols. We create idols for ourselves – the idols of work, the idols of money, the idols of freedom, the idols of our own intellect. But it is in a rejection of all of those that we can come to discover that what binds us together as a people -- it is a set of behaviors, a set of ethics and a set of responsibilities placed upon us, by a Commanding and Loving God. What makes us Jews is not our last names or writing a check to a Jewish organization. Being a Jew means being engaged in Torah and from Torah, discovering that it is what we do, how we behave makes us Jewish.

So what exactly should we do? Let's start small. Why should we be patting ourselves on the back when there are 30 people sitting here on an average Friday night for Shabbat when there are so many more who might become a part of this community? It is in Shabbat that we discover our kinship with God, for if God could stop working after a week's worth of work, then we should be able to stop working for a little while and come together as a community for an hour and a half, and remember what binds us together and what makes us unique. We should learn to feel the obligation, the *mitzvah* of being part of a community that takes a step back from the day to day pressures of living life in New York City and coming to this place to feel, to be Jewish, to sing the melodies that have thrilled and informed our people, to hear the words of Torah. This is what makes us unique as a community. This is our obligation, one to another, and when we discover that obligation we may discover the source of that obligation.

I discovered something about *mitzvah*, not when I rejected a *mitzvah* – in this case, the commemoration of Tishah B'Av – but when I allowed myself to become engaged with it and wrestled with it and wrestled with what responsibilities and obligations that *mitzvah* placed upon my shoulders. And only then, the *mitzvah* became clear and it was an obligation I joyfully embraced.

We can't wait around until we hear the word of God calling forth from the heavens. God has been calling forth since the days of Sinai, but we just haven't tuned our radios in to the proper frequency. What we need to do is engage in the study of Torah -- to look at that text, that scroll, that has provided answers for our people from generation to generation and has, in fact, bound us together. It is that which identified us as Jews.

Once there was a place to which we turned our hearts and found solidarity in our community, it was called The Temple. But that place no longer exists, yet that place was merely a symbol for that which we have right before us. For in Torah we find *mitzvot* and by doing *mitzvot* we discover the *mitzaveh* – the Commander. And then we can truly say with all our hearts “*Adonai hu ha Elohim* – Adonai is our God.”

Shanah tova u'mitukah