

Mitzvah

Just last week I had the opportunity to be a part of a historic event, an exciting happening in Conservative Judaism. This past year has seen many complaining about a malaise in the Movement, a reduction of our numbers, a prediction of our demise; but like Mark Twain, the report of our death is an exaggeration. I attended the Inauguration of the seventh Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America – Dr. Arnold Eisen. JTS is the flagship institution of CJ, there we train rabbis, cantors, educators and lay leaders; many, but not all, look to the Chancellor as ‘a’, if not, ‘the’, leader of CJ in North America. The Inauguration of a Chancellor is not an everyday affair; Chancellor-emeritus Ismar Schorsch held his post for the last 20 years.

It was clear from the beginning that this event was different. The day started with a symposium on “The Future of Religion in America” with three noted professors from around the country. It was interesting, informal and informative and it was a signal that Dr. Eisen is committed to interfaith relations as well as dialogue. The Inauguration itself began with an academic procession that was led by an African drum ensemble that had everyone clapping along and bopping to the beat. There were speakers from the other Movements and from other religions as well as other academics. It was a celebration, marking a new beginning, a new vision, a new passion infusing CJ.

Chancellor Eisen by training is a sociologist. He has spent much of his career studying American Judaism and he has identified the problem of our Movement. When CJ was established it was in reaction to how far from tradition Reform Judaism had strayed, so they sought to ‘conserve’ the traditions, but not a fixed and rigid way – tradition & change became the watchwords of CJ. For a long time we were simply that middle ground between Reform and Orthodoxy. Then in the 1980s we began to try and define ourselves positively in terms of what we stand for rather than negatively by what we are not. That has proven to be more difficult, we are a movement committed to halakha, to Jewish law; and to the observance of mitzvot; but if you closely examine the lives of most members of Conservative congregations you will find people who do not live their lives according to halakha. So what does that mean for us? Chancellor Eisen has called on each of us to think about and discuss the meaning and the role of mitzvot as a first step. That is what I would like to begin to do with you today; I’m not going to give you the definitive answer. However, I hope that we can begin a process of study and discussion to help us better understand the role of mitzvah in our Movement and in our lives.

Mitzvah is a difficult word to define. In the world of traditional Judaism a mitzvah is a religious obligation and it is to be done because God commanded it – simple, straightforward and compelling for those who accept a commanding God; however, for most in our community totally unconvincing. Reform Judaism has defined a mitzvah as a good deed and it is something that you choose to do to make the world a better place. This probably resonates with most of you here today, however, it fails to motivate us or compel us to action. So the challenge before us is can we reinterpret

mitzvah in a way that is not just religious obligation or good deed, but is motivating and can have a positive impact upon our lives?

So how did we get stuck thinking of mitzvah in this limited way? One piece of the puzzle comes from one of the seminal thinkers of Western thought, Immanuel Kant, who in the 18th century, wrote about the dichotomy between obedience and freedom. Very simply put he argued that people are either enlightened and free to follow the dictates of their own logic or obligated to obediently follow the rules given to them. In this paradigm, rule following is childlike and immature, while independence is the desired higher order. Today we understand on one level that this is an oversimplification of life, but it did cast the die in terms of how we think about the topic. As modern Americans we value our independence and only reluctantly follow rules when convinced of their benefit. It is what Dr. Eisen referred to as the “Sovereign Self”, we see ourselves as the final authority on us. We are not eager to accept orders from an external source.

Our thinking about mitzvah has been further hampered by the teachings of early Christianity. As this new religion established itself, it did so by reacting to the teachings and practices of its mother religion, Judaism. One of the early teachings of the Church was that Judaism was a religion of law while Christianity was a religion of love. This of course is an oversimplification; there is law in Christianity and there is love in Judaism, but it has affected how both Jews and Christians have thought about these religions for the last two millennia.

The Jewish philosopher Franz Rozenzweig was obsessed with the dichotomy of law & love. He saw both at the core of our tradition. The Shema is both about our love of God and about our willingness to follow God's law. For Rozenzweig, love was not just a feeling, but also a passionate action. Observance of mitzvot was not blind obedience, but freely accepting law; an acceptance of Divine law because of our love of God.

Thinking of mitzvah in terms of dichotomous opposites is often not helpful, so we need to turn to the myriad of writings in our tradition that show us the variety and the nuances for the term mitzvah to see what will be helpful to us today in our quest. In parashat Nitzavim that we read just last week, we find the phrase, "Kol hamitzvah hazot" "Surely this Instruction" here the term mitzvah means instruction, teaching, Torah. Mitzvah as a guide to life.

The brilliant contemporary rabbi Mordecai Kaplan taught that mitzvot today should be considered folkways. He could not accept mitzvot as being God given, but neither could he give up the observance of mitzvot, they are our link to the past, they are our connection to fellow Jews everywhere, they are quintessential Jewish actions. Some found his teachings heretical while others found them refreshing and inspiring.

In early rabbinic thought, they approached the concept of obligation differently than we do today. For the rabbis of the Talmud that which was obligatory was on a higher level than that which was done voluntarily. It is the reverse of how we think today. We value voluntary service more highly than compliance with orders. We can find midrashim in support of both positions. There is one midrash that says, when Israel stood at Sinai, God

held the mountain over them and offered them the Torah. If they accepted, well and good; but if not, then they would be buried under the mountain. (BT Shabbat 88a) And we find a midrash teaching that God offered the Torah to many different peoples all of whom rejected it for one reason or another. Only Israel said, “Na’ase V’nishma” “We accept”. (Sifre)

Acceptance of mitzvot today is not easy for us; it runs counter to American Individual autonomy. My colleague, Perry Netter, has pointed out that not only do we live in a consumer driven economy, but more we live in a consumer driven society. Every aspect conforms to my needs and wants if it is to have relevance to me. He says that we have gone from the Me generation to the i-generation – iMac, iPod and now the iPhone. No longer do I have to buy an album and listen to the songs in order, now I download the specific song I want and I add it to my personalized play list, so that I hear it when I want. Individual consumerism runs counter to the collective responsibility of traditional Jewish values.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, spiritual inspiration to a generation of rabbis, understood that the power of mitzvot is in their communal nature. We may be individuals, but we are social by nature. We like being part of a family; we seek out clubs and groups where people share our interests and passions. The strongest Jewish communities function that way – people gather together to share in the doing of mitzvot. Our challenge from Chancellor Eisen is to discuss and debate mitzvah to see if we can find a way as a community to engage in mitzvot.

Let me share with you one possible way of understanding mitzvah that is neither good deed nor commandment. Going back to the idea of a relationship with God based on love, we have loving relationships with our parents, our children, our spouses and others. Each of those relationships makes demands upon us and we accept those demands because of the love we have for the other person. We call and visit our parents because we love them; when they are no longer of this earth, we mark their yahrzeit because our love for them transcends the boundaries of life and death. We watch over our children, we care for them and spend money on them because we love them, because we are responsible for them, because the parent-child relationship makes demands upon us. Every relationship takes effort, time and energy to succeed. There are often things that we are called on to do that we would rather not do in the context of relationships, but we do them out of love. In a relationship you can just focus on the I, my needs, my wants, my desires; but rather you have to take in to account the other that you value – what do they need, want, desire from you? If you've ever had a child, think back on the experience of caring for an infant. You clothe them, feed them, clean them and care for them. You might not want to get up at 2 AM to feed or change this precious bundle, but you do it because you love this baby.

Now think of mitzvah in terms of a relationship to God or to Judaism or to the Jewish community. Think of this as a relationship that you value, you participate willingly, even while doing things you'd rather not. It is not how most of think about mitzvot and perhaps it doesn't resonate with you, but as I've said my goal today is to start a process of thinking about the role of mitzvot in our lives and in the life of our community. What commands you?

What motivates you? Heschel said that more than we need a Leap of Faith to believe we need a “Leap of Action”. For a Jew to engage in a Leap of Action is a spiritual act, something that potentially can connect you with your creator.

Yesterday I spoke about the importance of God actions, but today I want to impress upon you that for us to succeed and to do it in a Jewish way means to do it as a community and not just as individuals. We have much to learn by talking and listening to one another on these vital matters. There is no one source of authority that can or will define mitzvah for us. We must find our own relationships, our own motivations, our own connections to mitzvot, but if we do it together both we and Judaism will be strengthened. For our Judaism to be more than just a matter of personal preference and convenience, we need to find those mitzvot that we feel obligated to perform, those that engage us, our hearts, our souls; we need to understand what we are responsible for as part of this community and discover what we are willing to do for love.

I do stand in awe on these Days of Awe of the possibilities and responsibilities that this New Year brings. Together may we find renewed energy and passion for things Jewish may this be a year of mitzvot for one and all.

Shana Tova!