

Shabbat Mishpatim  
Sinai Synagogue, Shabbat AM, February 13, 2010

What motivates us to observe the Mitzvot?

This morning we continue with our discussion of mitzvot and their significance in our daily lives as part of our participation in the Jewish Theological Seminary's Mitzvah Initiative.

Last week we read of the Revelation of God to the entire Jewish people at Mount Sinai and with it the presentation of the Divinely inscribed 10 Commandments on two tablets to Moshe. This morning's Torah portion Mishpatim follows and with it many, many details of laws, dealing with civic, religious and moral topics. Some of which are interesting to us, some of which are outdated, and I dare say, embarrassing. And the question can be asked if Torah is eternal why is the Torah including civil laws that are outdated?

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, the great 20<sup>th</sup> century theologian, writes that the great question for a religious person is not "Does God exist" but rather "What must I do?" The Torah portion of Mishpatim is the response, that is, mitzvot are the response. Actions, duties, obligations in all areas of life are the Jewish religious response to the question of "what must I do?". In this way, it is not significant if a civic legal ruling seems outdated to us, the concept that religious behaviors and actions are essential to participating in the Covenant is what is most crucial. Notice, and this is unique among ancient legal codes, that this list in Mishpatim and later lists of law in Deuteronomy do not

compartmentalize, civil, moral, cultic laws are all equal, they are all religious obligations.

However today it is important for us not only to fulfill the Covenant through observance of mitzvot, it is essential for us to think about what motivates us to observe mitzvot. There is not one answer but many. And we often employ numerous reasonings for our commitments.

The Traditional response to why we should observe the mitzvot is simply this-- God revealed God's will to the Jewish people through Torah and other sacred texts and we are to follow them because God said so.

We read in the first chapter of Pirke Avot (Ethics of the Sages): Antigonus of Sokho received the Tradition from Simon the Just. He used to say: "Don't be like servants who serve the master in order to receive a reward. Rather, be like servants who serve the master not in order to receive a reward. And let the fear of heaven be upon you."

A modern interpretation of Antigonus' teaching is made by Dr. Yeshayahu Leibowitz, a 20<sup>th</sup> century scholar and theologian: Man can worship God only by committing himself to the observance of mitzvot, which are the expression of the divine will and not means for the satisfaction of his [man's] needs, not even of his spiritual needs." According to Leibowitz mitzvot are in no way a means for human self expression or spirituality. They are simply are responsibility to God. And one who observes mitzvot because they "get something meaningful" out of it is sidling very close to idolatry.

However throughout Jewish history many traditionalists disagreed with Leibowitz' approach. "There is a group of human beings who consider it a grievous

thing that causes should be given for any law; what would please them most is that the intellect would not find a meaning for the commandments and prohibitions. What compels them to feel thus is a sickness that they find in their souls. . . For they think that if those laws were useful in this existence and had been given to us for this or that reason, it would be as if they derived from the reflection and understanding of some intelligent being. If however, there is a thing for which the intellect could not find any meaning at all and that does not lead to something useful, it indubitably derives from God: For the reflection of man would lead to no such thing.” So wrote Moses Maimonides, the giant of Jewish philosophers in his Guide to the Perplexed 3:31. Maimonides and philosophers like him engaged in an important discussion in the history of Jewish thought called “ta’amei mitzvot”, finding reasons, benefits and meaning for each of the mitzvot.

Mitzvot were understood to be given for the benefit of humankind or at least the Jewish people. Of course if some mitzvot were unclear, or questionable, such as laws of kashrut or laws of ritual purity, the traditionalist would be forced to say, “We don’t have the correct understanding today of why this mitzvah was given to us yet nevertheless we must do it, for God has given this law to us”. One day we will but ‘not yet’.

Along comes Franz Rozenzweig, who turns the ‘not yet’ on its head. For Rozenzweig, a fascinating Jewish thinker from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, was an assimilated and unlearned Jew who came back to Jewish tradition. As he learned more and began to take on traditional observances he would respond when asked about mitzvot

he was not observing, “not yet”. He reserved the right to not observe mitzvot until he could make sense of them. Rozenzweig understood the whole point of Revelation at Sinai was to create a relationship between God and the Jewish people as one of *Commander* and *Commanded*; but the specifics of that relationship were to be humanly developed. This is similar to Professor Benjamin Sommer’s words whom I quoted last week: “Israel fills in the object of the verb in the sentence “God demands” but God remains the subject and the verb does not lose its basic sense of requirement and obedience...”

Yet another motivation for observing mitzvot is as Dr. Arnie Eisen, Chancellor of the Seminary, writes, “nostalgia, far more a “reason of the heart” than of the mind. A recognizable area of life—located in private time and space, as the new rules for particularist religious loyalties demanded—is organized around regular performances which lend performers the conviction that they are carrying on the essence of their ancestors’ faith and practice even while they alter both belief and observance to suit their new circumstances. Rethinking Modern Judaism: Ritual, Commandment, Community, p. 91.

Related to this is the observing mitzvot as a sacred discipline. Observing mitzvot, such as coming to minyan every morning and evening, is a way to give my life an order and guide based in this tradition, this heritage I treasure.

A different way of thinking was considered by Mordecai Kaplan: mitzvot cannot be commanded in the normal sense because no such thing as a Commander exists. Rather they are communal norms that help maintain community. He disliked the term mitzvot and

preferred 'folkways'. "Folkways are the social practices by which a people externalizes the reality of its collective being..."

This is a way of saying "mitzvot is just what Jews do". And these folkways of course can change as Jews change.

Abraham Joshua Heschel took an opposite tack – he deeply believed in God and the deep spiritual capacity within humans.

"A Jew is asked to take a leap of action rather than a leap of thought. He is asked to surpass his needs, to do more than he understands in order to understand more than he does. In carrying out the word of the Torah he is ushered into the presence of spiritual meaning. Through the ecstasy of deeds he learns to be certain of the hereness of God. Right living is a way to right thinking..."

Heschel suggests that mitzvot are not only expressions of meanings given once and for all, but ways of evoking new meaning again and again. They are acts of inspiration rather than acts of compliance. They are the songs that express our wonder.

These are among the various reasons and motivations for observing mitzvot. We find meaning in some or all of them. Sometimes just 'because', sometimes because it connects me with something greater than myself, sometimes because that is what Jews do.

What is essential in all is that we Jews develop an appreciation for observing mitzvot as mitzvot, as spiritual or Jewish behaviors that I do in my status as a Jew. Personally I need the connection to God and Kaplan's approach leaves me cold but for many this makes the most sense.

This week's parasha concludes with the people of Israel declaring as they received the instructions regarding the Covenant from Moshe:

"We will do and we will hear", that is we, the Jewish people, will participate in this Sacred Covenant and we will construct meaning for ourselves in that act of participation.