

Shabbat Tazria Metzora
Sinai Synagogue, Shabbat AM, April 16, 2010

This is the last of our Shabbat sermons dedicated to the Mitzvah Initiative. We continue our studies at minyan and this month we are looking at the mitzvah of tzedakah. We will conclude our studies and our year long participation in the Mitzvah Initiative on Shavuot with a program which relates to our topic this morning. This is the notion of a "signature mitzvah" as referred to by the authors of the Mitzvah initiative curriculum. That is, a singular mitzvah that defines you or which you seek to exemplify.

The significance of just one mitzvah is expressed in a Talmudic about how a rabbi discovered that just one mitzvah could merit a person a place in Heaven.

Rabbi Broka was frequently to be found in the marketplace. Elijah (the Prophet) was often there with him. Rabbi Broka asked Elijah, "Is there anyone in the market who deserves to receive the rewards of the Next World?"... In the meantime, two people came by and Elijah said to him, "These will receive the rewards of the Next World." Rabbi Broka asked them, "What do you do?" They replied, "We are clowns, making sad people laugh. Also, when we see two people arguing, We work hard to make peace between them."

I find this story comforting because it suggest you can get in to heaven with a good sense of humor and a desire to make others laugh. Which means I have a chance unless my kids are the arbiters of who is funny and who is not.

This story contradicts to some extent what we usually assume about the need to observe the *mitzvot*.

It is not observing the entire corpus of *halacha* but rather doing one righteous act, consistently. Another midrash notes that one key *mitzvah* is all you need:

“Open the Gates of *Tzedek* (Righteousness) for me...” (Psalms 118:19) At the time of Judgment in the Future World everyone will be asked: “What was your occupation?” If the person answers: “I fed the hungry,” they will say to him: “This is God’s gate; you, who fed the hungry, may enter.”... “I clothed the naked,” they will say to him: “This is God’s gate; you, who clothed the naked, may enter.” And similarly with those who raised orphans, and who performed the *Mitzvah* of *Tzedakah*, and who performed acts of caring and loving-kindness.

King David called out: “I have done all of these. Let all the gates open for me.” That is why the verse says: “Open the *Gates* of *Tzedek* for me. I shall enter them, thanking the Lord.”

The whole notion of counting *mitzvot* is confusing. We speak of 613 *mitzvot* but this is based on word play not an actual tally in the Torah. The numerology for the word Torah in Hebrew is 611 which represents the number of *mitzvot* that Moses taught the people plus the first two of the Ten commandments that the people heard directly from God at Sinai and you have 613. Nevertheless many sages sought to unravel the mystery of which *mitzvot* actually constituted the Biblical 613.

Rabbi Simlai taught: Moses received 613 *mitzvot* – 365 negative *mitzvot* (prohibitions), corresponding to the number of days in the solar calendar, and 248 positive *mitzvot*, corresponding to the number of limbs in the human body. When (King) David ruled, he reduced the number to 11 as enumerated in Psalm 15.

Then Isaiah came and reduced the number to the 6 found in Isaiah 33:14-16. When Micah prophesied, he reduced the number to 3 (essential *mitzvot*), as it is written: "He has told you, O man, what is good, and what the Lord requires of you: only to (1) do justice and to (2) love goodness and to (3) walk modestly with your God (Micah 6:8). Isaiah responded by reducing the number to 2 (essential *mitzvot*): "Observe (1) what is right and do (2) what is just" (Isaiah 56:1) Amos further reduced them to one: "Thus said God to the House of Israel: 'Seek me and live.'" (Amos 5:4). But Rav Nachman bar Yitzchak disagreed. The verse could be construed, he points out, as meaning that one must seek God by means of *all* of the Torah; thus, it would simply be reaffirming the imperative of the 613 *mitzvot*. Instead, he suggested a verse from Habakkuk as articulating the single imperative by which one should live: "but the righteous shall live by his trustworthiness, integrity" (Hab. 2:4). Dr Devorah Steinmetz suggests that this adds a moral imperative to the living a life of *mitzvah* observance.

Thus we have a homiletic teaching that what is significant is not the quantity of *mitzvot* observed but the quality and kind.

According to the Hasidic sage known as the Ishbitzer this significant *mitzvah* may not be the same for each person:

"You shall love the Lord your God with all you heart, with all your soul and with all your might (Deuteronomy 6:5) Everyone has a particular *mitzvah*. By fulfilling it, he achieves the world to come and according to this *mitzvah* and its fulfillment is the essence of that person's whole existence."

If we think deeply about this it makes sense since each person is so unique, and we are all different from one another, how could we approach mitzvot and Jewish life the exact same way? Truly we should seek to make our own singular mark on Jewish observance.

The Maggid of Zlotchov was asked by a hasid: We are told that everyone in Israel is duty-bound to say: "When will my work (in the world) approach the works of my ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob?" How are we to understand this? How could we ever venture to think that we could do what our ancestors did?

The rabbi expounded: "Just as our ancestors founded new ways of serving, each a new service according to their character; one the service of love, the other that of stern justice, the third that of beauty, so each one of us in our own way shall devise something new in light of teachings and of service, and do what has not been done."

Martin Buber, in The Way of Man according to the teaching of Hasidism, explains this passages as "Every person born into this world represents something new, something that never existed before; something original and unique. It is the duty of every person in Israel to know and consider that he is unique in the world in his particular character and there has never been anyone like him in the world, for if there had been someone like him, there would have been no need for him to be in the world. Every single person is a new thing in the world. And is called upon to fulfill their particularity in this world...Every person's foremost task is the actualization of their unique, unprecedented and never recurring potentialities, and not the repetition of something that another, and be it even the greatest, has already achieved."

In this week's Torah portion, we find that it is Aaron the priest who determines and diagnoses the impurity of the skin disease called *tzaraat* and the one who oversees the purification rites. Accordingly Aaron's role amongst Israel was significant because he was the person through whom Israel was made pure from transgression, just as we acknowledge every Yom Kippur. The Sfat Emet, Rabbi Yehudah Leib Alter of Ger, remarked that just as God chose one person in each generation to represent purity and through whose actions purity would flow to all Israel, so too each individual has a similar dynamic. Set aside one quality, or one special *mitzvah*, about which you take fabulous care. Through this you will be able to draw light and redemption to all your qualities.

This is the power of the "signature *mitzvah*". If we can choose one act, one *mitzvah* to focus on, to remain firm and steadfast in its observance, it will illuminate for us other avenues of holiness, leading to other *mitzvot*. For example, if I take the *mitzvah* of *Kashrut* very seriously, in which I take this most mundane of all activities and raise it to a level of holy action, perhaps I will say, if I can do that with eating maybe I can do this with another mundane activity such as how I spend my time. And by thinking this through I recognize that by taking seriously the value of time I come to appreciate the value of holiness in time and begin to observe Shabbat properly. Or maybe if I take *kashrut* seriously and think about where my food is coming from, how it is prepared, who is preparing it – then *kashrut* will lead me to a greater concern with the morality of eating and I become more active in the *mitzvot* of environmentalism and *bal Tashchit*, the *mitzvah* not to waste. Or maybe as Rabbi Israel Salanter taught we should learn to be as careful with what we put in our mouth as what comes

out, and guard ourselves against *lashon hara*, evil speech.

This is what the rabbis meant by "*mitzvah goreret mitzvah*" – the reward for doing a *mitzvah* is that it pulls us to the next one. But we have to start somewhere. We have to start with one. And so we should each be asking ourselves, What is that *mitzvah* which is most important to me and through which I can begin to draw up the light from all my qualities?