

Shabbat Yitro
Sinai Synagogue, Shabbat AM, February 6, 2010

How can I make sense of the Mitzvot?

This week with the description of the Revelation of God and the Ten Commandments to the people of Israel at Mount Sinai I am going to begin a series of Divrei Torah on the meaning of Mitzvot and our responsibilities as Jews to observance. We are part of the Mitzvah Initiative program out of the Seminary. I spoke about this on RH, how are relationship to mitzvot and commandedness impinges on our relationship to our synagogue community as well as to the Jewish people and to God. And I hope that come spring we will be able to begin thinking about how commandedness and obligation impact on what we need to do as a synagogue community in developing Sinai's future. We have been studying at minyan the meaning of specific mitzvot and this morning I want to look at the idea of commandedness and obligation.

Just before Israel receives the Torah, God prefaces the Revelation in this way: The Lord called to him from the mountain, saying, "Thus shall you say to the house of Jacob and declare to the children of Israel. 'You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, how I bore you in eagles' wings and brought you to Me. Now then, if you obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, Indeed, all the earth is Mine but you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.'

God demands that Israel obey the Divinely

imposed Covenant. And what are the terms upon which that obligation is based? The claim of experience and history: The Exodus experience.

Even for the generation of the Exodus this claim was not enough. The Golden Calf incident proved how fluid were Israel's allegiances. How much the more so than we who live generations after that event. My brother a profound agnostic loves to echo Woody Allen's line – I would believe in God if he would only send me a sign – like a million dollars being deposited into a Swiss bank account in my name. But these super natural miracles don't occur. And if they do we are able to explain them away as a natural response to historical or scientific events. Even the birth of Israel which is the greatest miracle to occur to the Jewish people in two thousand years, is part of a slow understandable historical development. The Holocaust was a factor but don't be deceived by the Israel haters. The state of Israel was the product of over one hundred years of immigration and a Jewish response to the nationalist movements of Continental Europe. The modern state of Israel developed in a very humanly devised socio-political process. Was God involved? If yes, then God was involved in the same way that God was involved in the miracle of Purim and Hanukah, behind the scenes, invisibly working through human hands.

For modern Jews, the way to commandedness that our ancestors in the Sinai desert followed is not available to us. How then can we speak of being commanded today?

Traditional societies are more accepting of the parameters of tradition. They also promote a social structure that imposes observance on its members.

Participants in traditional Jewish societies know that if they act outside the bounds of their community they will shut out of those communities. For example, the Syrian Jewish community in New York does not permit its members to marry converts. Even if the convert is ultra orthodox, converts are forbidden. This is a stricture no other community observes. And the Syrian Jews go to college, they don't live isolated from the rest of the world. How do they maintain such a stance in today's world. Because they want the social-financial-emotional benefits of being part of their particular community.

Yet we modern Jews do understand commandedness. Some of you may remember the story I told a few years ago about my attempt to remove the wax from my basement floor with an industrial sander. I did not clean the floor but almost destroyed my basement. Why did I do it? Because Lizzie told me to. When Moshe needs us to drive him to swim or tennis meets, or Ilan is in a play and Lizzie and I spend our summer driving out to Michigan every day to get him to play practice or if it is Tali or Hillel who demand our time, energy and resources and I would much rather be doing something else, whether I or Lizzie grumble or not, we do it. Because I love Lizzie, I love my kids. I understand the meaning of obligation. My relationship commands me. Sometimes our sense of doing something out of being commanded is out of fear – not going through a red light on an empty road at midnight because I might get a ticket. I used to be a Reform Jew on traffic lights – until I got a ticket.

The Talmud voices an opinion that was concerned about God being accused of coercion. Rav Avdimi bar Hama bar Hasa said taught that the Holy One inclined the

mountain over them like a tilted tub and said: If you accept the Torah, all is well. If not, here will be your grave. Rav Aha bar Jacob responded: That is a great warning concerning the Torah. That is, how can Israel be expected to follow its obligations if they were compelled to accept under duress. To which Rabbah said: they nevertheless accepted it in the time of Ahasuerus for it is written: "The Jews acknowledged and accepted (kimu vekiblu).(Esther 9:27) Putting aside the issue of whether the context of this communal acceptance was the whole Torah or just the idea of observing Purim, most Jews today would not agree that the community's acceptance is binding on us unless each of us were willing to take the oath ourselves.

Franz Rosenzweig recognized this, in his address at the opening of Lehrhaus learning institute, a modern Jewish academy in Germany, he stated: "(Our return to Judaism) is a learning in reverse order. A learning that no longer starts from the Torah and lead into life but the other way around. From life, from a world that knows nothing of the Torah or pretends to know nothing back to the Torah...From the periphery back to the center; from the outside in."

A midrash on the giving of the Torah in Pesikta Rav Kahana 12:25 teaches that each Jew heard the Revelation uniquely. R. Jose bar. R. Hanina taught: "the Divine Word spoke to each and every person according to his particular capacity... R. Levi said: "The Holy One appeared to them as a statue with faces on every side, so that though a thousand men might be looking at the statue, they would be led to believe that it was looking at each one of them. So, too when the Holy One spoke, each and every person in Israel could say: The Divine

Word is addressing me. See God was already into personalized marketing way before Madison Avenue.

Arnie Eisen recalling this midrash wrote: "Different individuals will inevitably hear (the Divine message) differently, bring different needs and talents to the hearing, approach Torah from a number of different angles."

And one of those angles need not include God:

"God need not figure in the decision, at least not at the outset. One might simply want to stand as a Jew with the Jewish people: to live and perpetuate its culture, serve universal ideals as it has formulated them, find meaning for oneself, and transmit it to one's children inside the "never-ending story" and "pattern for living" which have not only sustained Jews for centuries but have perhaps constituted the Jewish people's greatest gifts to humanity as a whole."

*Dr Eisen appreciates that just as we have embrace obligations to friends and family, so too it is possible to expand that circle to the Jewish people: "(We) recognize that we do not live simply as human beings, in general, or only as members of a particular society such as America, bound to its laws by implicit social contract. We have special responsibilities to family, friends and community, and find meaning in and those relations as well as through the exercise of responsibilities which flow from them. If all works as it should, the grudging performance of mere duty is transformed over time into enthusiastic acts of love..."*All Jews are responsible for one another," as the Talmud puts it, because all share membership in the same extended family or community, emerge from the same history, are subject to the same

fate, and derive meaning from the same story and “patterns for living” which they by common effort maintain.

(Also) there is the recognition that communities survive and thrive not merely physically but spiritually. Judaism...can continue only if its ideals and culture are transmitted in a form that is compelling to successive generations. If one is committed to Jewish survival, one must pledge fealty as well to the means required to secure it: festivals and dietary laws, rites and symbols...” *Dr Eisen is suggesting that if you truly care about Jewish life and Judaism perpetuating itself you can't do it in the abstract. You have to live it for it to thrive.*

“It is crucial that Jews, considering acceptance of the covenant on these terms understand that, according to the framework passed down to us from Sinai, no blind allegiance is required. That is certainly the case in our day, when ...affiliation cannot be coerced in any case. This is a contract from which one can withdraw at anytime. But in one sense that has always been true.

Judaism has never been an all or nothing, take it or leave it, matter. Life according to the Torah cannot ever be objectified into a discrete “it” independent of the living Jews who carry on the conversation that Sinai initiated. Criticism, interpretation, diverse understanding are ever essential...The meaning of the law is never fixed. We ourselves help to determine it, once we have stepped inside the framework of mitzvah. That is in my view the sense of the Israelites’ declaration “We will do and we will hear.” One can only hear from the midst of doing. What can be heard is a function of what Jews, partners to the covenant, have done.”

Dr. Eisen says here something close to “Judaism is what Jews do” but at the same time recognizes that to say that one has to be part of the learning, observing community.

Dr. Benjamin Sommer suggests that while there is a great amount of human input into the commandments of the Torah, ultimately what occurred at Sinai is a recognition that our relationship with God is based on God being a Commander and we being Commanded: “A real and commanding presence indeed stood behind that qol... the silent voice that imparts no content yet does command. “Yet does command”... The responses of the Jewish people to revelation at Sinai as presented in texts from the biblical period until the advent of the modern era, have unanimously expressed themselves in terms of law. From the consistency of these responses, we can learn that Jews understood the God manifest at Sinai ...as a presence that commands. Such a manifestation must be characterized as one that enjoins even though we recognize that human beings fashioned (and fashion) the specific mandates in the Bible and later Jewish texts...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...”

For us today this means, that our responsibility is to find that voice and to learn what is being asked of me. It might be all of tradition such as those who have returned to Orthodox observance in *ba'alei teshuvah* movement; or it might be taking on the observance of certain types of mitzvot such as those that speak to concerns of social justice and compassion. Or it might be communal responsibilities – coming to minyan to assist fellow Jews,

or philanthropy to support Jewish education for others, or becoming educated in Jewish learning in order to teach Judaism to our children.

The call of Sinai today is for each of us to find through study and meditation the content of that voice.