

The Challenge of Mitzvah: What Am I Supposed to Do?

Rabbi Ari Sunshine

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A couple of weeks ago I read an amusing editorial in the Chicago Tribune entitled, “*Scratch another off the list*”. The editorial referred to a new Web site dedicated to lists, called “Meosphere”—do you think the founder could have thought of a more egocentric title? ☺—and it gives list enthusiasts a chance to compile lists in at least 2500 categories. The lists run the gamut from places you’ve slept away from home (not dozed, but actually slept overnight), cars you drove in high school, sushi you’ve eaten, books from Oprah’s list you’ve read, even notable synagogues you’ve visited (quick, after Yom Tov, get BSO on your list). Then, after you’re done compiling your list, or lists, of choice, you can e-mail the list to everyone you know and either impress them or force them to come up with similarly impressive lists of their own. As the Tribune joked, “it’s competitive listing”. The website founder, Eric Eliason, explains the concept on the site this way: “*Your meosphere is everywhere you’ve been, everything you’ve done, and everything you want to do—it defines your own personal world, in a very personal way.... Creating an official meosphere is a perfect way to impress a date. (“Wow, you’ve really eaten all of the world’s spiciest peppers?") It can leave a legacy for your grandkids. (“Grandpa’s first car*

was a 1980 Chevette, poor guy.”) It can even help you determine what you’re going to do the rest of your life. (If you can play Ping-Pong in just one more country, your dream will finally be complete.)” While Meosphere is the grand pooh-bah of “have done” lists, its founder also views it as a kind of “life list”, an inspirational to- do-list for life, and it seems like a strangely compelling motivating concept. The Tribune goes a step further and notes the fact that our to-do lists vary in nature—from the life list, or as they put it, the “aspirational 87 Things to Do Before You Die-type list”, to the “reach” list—like renovating the house, all the way down to the normal, everyday list. And then, there are the people who “run their lives listlessly. They careen from chore to chore, errand to errand, haphazardly. If they remember, it gets done. If not, who cares?”

The Tribune’s editorial is intended to poke fun at all of us, the author of the editorial included, for our obsession with lists. After all, people really can be slaves to the lists they compile. Some of us keep our lists on PDAs or Blackberrys, others prefer the old fashioned notepads or “sticky notes”.

Who doesn’t get satisfaction from looking at a post-it note with a whole bunch of items scribbled on there and realizing that we’ve done one and we can go ahead and cross it off the list? ☺ With that in mind, I gave you a list

yesterday geared towards improving family and community life—and now I'll give you an even bigger list to start working on. 😊

Because whether we've realized it until now or not, our Jewish tradition comes complete with a rather lengthy to-do list, otherwise known as Mitzvot. What is a Mitzvah? Our tradition has always understood that Mitzvah isn't just the popular Jewish usage of "good deed", though it certainly may be a part of certain Mitzvot. Nor is a Mitzvah quite as simple as "commandment". Our *Chumash* translates Mitzvot as both "commandments that the Israelites were commanded" and "instructions that were enjoined upon them", and over the centuries our tradition's use of the word has come to include other meanings such as actions that we feel *obligated* to perform, actions that *engage* us, actions that we are *responsible* for, and actions that we undertake out of *love*.

So what are these Mitzvot really about? For many traditional Jews, they are divine obligations that they feel compelled to do whether or not it is convenient because "God said so" or because they are a part of our way of life. But that is a hard notion to accept here and now in the modern world. Most of us have grown up with a powerful sense of personal autonomy—we are our own masters, we make our own choices, and no one can force us to act in a certain way, with the exception of secular laws that we must follow

to be good citizens. This notion of personal autonomy isn't just a twentieth century notion, however. It's been around for at least 250 years, going back to the Enlightenment in Europe in the middle of the 18th century, when both Jews and Christians challenged the idea that there is an external source of authority that commands us to act a certain way. Until that time, there were no other options for Jews—the secular world did not accept them, so Jewish traditions and communal norms and obligations were all the Jews had available to them while living within their own insular communities and it was simply expected that people would follow those traditions and norms. With the opportunity to live outside the shtetl for the first time, Jews relished their newfound freedom and began to seriously question how Jewish they should be. Rabbis then faced a new and difficult task—making a convincing argument for why be Jewish, and how—and have continued to make those arguments even as the different modern movements of Judaism subsequently evolved.

The how, namely “what should a Jew do to be Jewish?”, generally returned to this concept of Mitzvah, but the specific “shoulds” and their origins are still the subject of much debate. Are the 613 traditionally cited Mitzvot, which are no longer all fulfillable in modern days, from God? Are they products of history? Are they just communal obligations or folkways?

And why else might we observe them if we don't consider them to be explicitly commanded by God? We still talk about other sources of authority for the fulfillment of Mitzvot, such as a sense of responsibility to the Jewish community, an obligation to carry on the Jewish tradition of our ancestors, love of our tradition and/or gratitude to God or for our lives. And we still know that there are some things we OUGHT to do not only because they're right, but also because they define us as part of a community and part of the Jewish people. The hard part is figuring out what those things are—what's actually on our “to-do list”, as it were.

One of my colleagues, Rabbi Alan Lucas in Roslyn, New York, recently taught a class in which he asked his students to come up with ten mitzvot that every member of the congregation would agree to, and live by. He wanted to post a sign on the front door of the shul which said, “All who enter these doors believe in, agree to, and observe these 10 mitzvot”. His students quickly suggested the Ten Commandments, but even that would have been problematic—the positive obligation of observing Shabbat and even the negative prohibition against committing adultery would not have been livable for every member of the congregation. This story illustrates how difficult it is for even a congregational community to arrive at a consensus on shared behaviors and norms, and yet it is difficult to achieve

community **without** a sense of Mitzvah, of acts that bind us together and define us.

When we step back and think about it, what makes us a member of a community is not how we feel or what we believe, but **WHAT WE DO**. If we are having trouble relating to external authority commanding us to action, whether that external authority is God or community, then why not consider obligating or committing ourselves? One of the great Jewish theologians of this past century, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, Z”L, calls this taking “a leap of action”. According to Heschel, faith does not bring us to action; rather, our actions inspire faith. Heschel puts it this way: “God’s will is revealed in our doing”. If we want to experience the spiritual richness of Judaism, then we must be prepared to embrace the practices of Judaism and do them. The classic statement in our tradition that reflects Heschel’s notion is the midrash of the Israelites at Mount Sinai, proclaiming “Na’ase v’Nishma”—we will do and we will listen—in response to God’s offering them the covenant. The Talmud tells us that a heretic criticized the sages by saying that the Jewish people are rash and compulsive people, who should have listened first and acted later. How could they possibly know that what was being asked of them made sense? In Heschel’s view, our ancestors took a leap of action. “By living as Jews we may attain our faith as Jews. We do

not HAVE faith because of our deeds. We may ATTAIN faith through sacred deeds”. Here’s a simple example: the best way to understand Shabbat is to try it and step inside the experience of it. Only from within that experience will a Jew come to understand it—no number of books will do the trick, nor will a leap of faith do it. Judaism is not taught, but caught.

Why would we take the action? Because life is confusing—we’re driven to understand how we live; maybe not all the time, otherwise we wouldn’t need these Days of Awe to reflect. We wonder how we should live, what we should do with our time, what is the purpose of our life. We seek something larger than ourselves with which to connect—and we find it through community and through God. And Mitzvah—whether a commandment, obligation, responsibility, or act of love—is the common language that we share with other Jews and with God, Mitzvah is what brings us together in partnership. We are not alone in this world, and neither is God when we are doing Mitzvot.

A few weeks ago during Shabbat services, I mentioned that Dr. Arnie Eisen, the new chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, has issued a movement-wide challenge this year to Conservative synagogues to enter into an open dialogue on the meaning of Mitzvah. Let’s start with lunch today—talk to one another over lunch about where we are starting from right now,

what engages us, what obligates us, what love do we feel. What are the similarities and differences of doing things for our families out of obligation and love, VS. doing things as a Jew out of obligation and love? What excites us about the common language of mitzvah, and what is difficult for us? And what are we willing to do to strengthen our relationships with community and with God?

These conversations are the beginning. But discussion also needs action to go with it, especially when we're talking about Mitzvah. So, as we begin this Jewish new year, let's resolve together to start a new list among our many lists, using Judaism's "to-do list" as our framework. We already perform many more Mitzvot than we realize, such as putting mezuzot on the doorposts of our homes, providing our children with a Jewish education, affiliating with a synagogue, and helping those in need. Try creating a Mitzvah list divided amongst the Tribune editorial's three categories—an every day list of Mitzvot, a list of Mitzvot that are more of a "reach" for us in our lives, and the pie-in-the-sky Mitzvot that we might aspire to fulfill at some point in the future. Check off Mitzvot on our lists that we are already doing, and challenge ourselves to identify at least one more Mitzvah on our list of possibilities for which we are prepared to take a leap of action this year. It can be as simple as saying the Sh'ma when we go to bed at night

(even just the first line!), putting tzedakah in a pushke once a day (even a couple of coins), or attending minyan once a week or Shabbat services twice a month. Or it can be a larger commitment if we're ready for it, like considering observing Shabbat differently or changing our house over to kosher. We obligate ourselves to read the newspaper every day or work out three times a week or avoid certain foods while dieting—why can't we create a life of discipline and holiness when it comes to Mitzvot? Whether we look at Mitzvot as adding beauty to our lives, or giving us a wholesome and disciplined to-do list, a sense of order that prevents us from “careening listlessly and haphazardly through life”, as the newspaper referred to it, or linking us to something bigger than ourselves—tradition, community, and God—the leap of action that is Mitzvah has the potential to enrich our life immeasurably. Our sages teach us that “mitzvah goreret mitzvah”—one mitzvah has a way of leading to others. Let's start by taking a leap together!