

**Mitzvah as Obligation**  
Sermon for Rosh Hashanah, Beth-El, Fort Worth  
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The classic Jewish story is that God gave us commandments at Sinai, so now we know what God requires of us. History has bequeathed us a beautiful set of *mitzvot*, “commandments,” precious and insightful guidance for living. But over the ages we have learned that the whole Torah did not come from Sinai. It evolved over many centuries. People—Jews, not God—actually wrote it down, and some of their own ideas, right and wrong, crept in. So Torah is sacred, our spiritual constitution, I like to call it, but the question remains: if we do not take every verse in the Torah as literally God’s word, in what sense is a *mitzvah* a commandment?

To get out of the realm of philosophic abstraction: did God say: “Thou shalt light those candles” or not? More important: does God say “Thou shalt not murder” and “Thou shalt not commit adultery” or not?

This year a group of scholars put together a *Festschrift*—that is academese for a book of essays honoring someone—in this case honoring my friend and mentor, Rabbi Neil Gillman of the Jewish Theological Seminary. Rabbi Gillman shook up a lot of people in his Conservative Jewish movement about 8 years ago by telling the national convention of The Synagogue Council of America that they were kidding themselves that they were a halachic movement, committed to Jewish law. At risk of oversimplifying, the argument was that if you allow people to drive on Shabbat and make all sorts of other compromises with modernity such as equal rights for women, you are not liberal Orthodox but rather traditionalist Reform (my terminology, not

his). Moreover, for all its talk about halachah, said Gillman, Conservative Judaism has failed to create a “ritually committed laity.” That is, most of them do not keep kosher, take off work on festivals, or pray every Shabbat, much less daily, as *halachah* says one should.

Several of the essays in the Festschrift analyzed and argued the implications of Rabbi Gillman’s critique of his movement. Can you have an authentic Judaism without *halachah* and—Gillman’s term—*chovah*, a sense of Jewish obligation?

How faithful Conservative Jews need to be to *halachah* is up to them—none of our business! Except that whether you can be authentically Jewish just doing whatever you want, and neglecting whatever you chose to neglect, is a vital question for Reform, as well. For both ritual and moral matters, the issue goes all the way back to the prophets, with some taking the people to task for neglecting the sacrifices, but more insisting that God “hates” sacrifices and “solemn assembly,” caring, instead, that “justice well up as water, and righteousness as a mighty stream.” (Amos 5:24)

Reform Judaism declared, nearly 200 years ago, that though ritual has a role to play in our spiritual lives, it is prophetic Judaism—the “mission of Israel,” *tikun olam* is today’s buzzword, “perfecting the world”—that we are quintessentially about. We in Reform do not even argue much any more about whether we have to be true to *halachah*, which we insist is a human, not a divine, legal system. But before any of us gets smug, that does not begin to answer Rabbi

Gillman's deeper question. Must there not be some sense of *obligation* for the Jewish enterprise to count for anything, whether in our individual lives or in the world at large?

I'll tell you a secret about Jewish denominations (only a secret because we do not go to one another's services very often—you can test it out any Saturday morning): The Orthodox do not get everyone to services each week, either, though they tend to do better than the Conservatives. Conservatives often do better, but only a little better, than the Reform. No one has cornered the market on piety; no one has a monopoly on apathy. When the renowned Orthodox rabbi and theologian Yitz Greenberg spoke to a group of Reform rabbis I was among some years ago, and remarked that the danger to the Orthodox was that some trivialized Judaism by becoming obsessed with ritual, he noticed a lot of eyebrows being raised. Did that Orthodox rabbi really say what we thought he said?! He stopped and said, "I see you're surprised to hear me say that. Look; I know my people's weaknesses better than you do, just as you know your people's weaknesses better than I do. Orthodox, Conservative, Reform: it doesn't matter which denomination you are . . . as long as you're ashamed of it!"

Our Reform "dirty little secret," if you will, is that so many do next to nothing religiously. "I don't have to do any of that stuff; I'm Reform!" We say blessing after blessing which begin, *baruch atah adonai, eloheinu melech ha'olam, asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav v'tzeevanu ...* praising God "who hallows our lives with commandments, and commands us..." to do this, that or the other thing—light candles on Shabbat, come to services, have *brit milah*, and study Torah. We read Isaiah at Confirmation reminding ourselves of God's charge to us to be "a light to the

nations” (42:6), meaning we must be honest in business, make peace where there is strife, and so on. *Mitzvah. Chovah. Commandment. Obligation.* If Judaism is just what feels good, at the end of the day how much does it matter? Indifference is not a program, or a goal towards which one should strive. So, having insisted that we can find the rituals which work for us and neglect the rest, because the main task is *tikun olam*, “perfecting the world,” are we morally exemplary—light!—to others? Occasionally! But consistently? Naah....

We cannot have authentic Judaism without the sense of obligation to be, and do, something. With a modern understanding of Torah as a human document, what is the “something” we must do? What does God require of us?

One of the more provocative papers in that Festschrift is by a wonderful teacher whom I quoted last year at this season, and whose mystical take on the 10 Commandments some of us studied on Erev Shavuot, Rabbi Arthur Green—ordained Conservative and now Reconstructionist. The article is Green’s personal credo, much too long to quote, but it begins with the assertion that the one God is the Ultimate Reality and thus that God’s presence “underlies, surrounds, and fills all of existence.” Our task as Jews is “to live our lives in response to that awareness, each of us becoming a unique image of God.” (p. 68) Our rituals make us aware of that duty, “but they are to be seen as means rather than ends.” (p. 68-9) So that entails taking care of our selves—body and soul—and worrying about others, especially the neglected and downtrodden. It means finding teachers who can point us to truth and wisdom. It means being part of a Jewish community where we can support one another and grow, spiritually, together, and recognizing

Torah “as our people’s unique language for expressing an ancient and universal truth.” It means being loyal members of the covenantal community of Jews, worrying about and taking responsibility for our fellow Jews everywhere. Judaism, its rituals and ideals, are about life and the world—making life holy as we struggle to improve our world.

Then Rabbi Green takes a surprising but very Jewish turn. He attaches to the text of his credo a section-by-section commentary, responding to some of the obvious questions that such glittering generalities are bound to raise. And when Green comes to his rather Reform-sounding assertion that he loves ritual but sees it as a means to an end, never an end in itself, he writes the following—a note on the demand for *obligation*:

The Hasidic sources often quote an older play on the word *mitzvah*, deriving it from the Aramaic *tzavta* or “togetherness.” A *mitzvah* is an act in which God and the person are drawn together, an opportunity to find one another in the midst of our eternal game of hide-and-seek. I rather like this reading, but I hear the traditionalist immediately rise to object, “But where is the obligation in all of this?” he (probably a “he”) will ask. Go back to (my) credo. Read it again. There is plenty of obligation: to openheartedness, to compassion, to decency, to Torah, to the Jewish people, to healing the world and lots more. Traditional observance is not the only way for Jews to have a culture of obligation. Classical Reform’s prophetic call and Zionism’s *yishuv ha-aretz* (“settling the land”) are also forms of deep Jewish commitment; they are *religious*, even though some may not call them that. (p. 81)

That is—if I may explain in my language—you do not have to regard each *mitzvah* as literally the word of God to see the “*mitzvah* tradition,” the mass of commandments developed through the ages, as a response to God’s presence in life and the holiness of being. That is the tradition our sons and daughters join through their *bar* and *bat mitzvah* experience; they become members of the community which takes the idea of *mitzvah*—sacred obligation—seriously. When we recognize that there is more to life than accident, that there is a God in the world, a measure of direction, of meaning and purpose in all existence and particularly in our lives, where we make choices about our values and deeds, then we can appreciate that the choices we make, the values we live, truly make a difference. As they say these days, “walking the walk” as well as “talking the talk” matters. If we keep our Jewish identity always in mind, *and act on it!*, then we can make ourselves, our lives, holy. “You shall be holy for I the Lord your God am holy”—we will read on Yom Kippur. (Lev. 19:2)

The sense of *chovah*, obligation, arises the moment we recognize that the universal God is real—not alone because of words in a scroll, but also because we have learned through our own experience that the path to holiness for each of us, and the road to a decent world for all, is paved with *mitzvot*. Our millennial faith affirms that there is meaning to the universe. *Shema yisraeyl, adonai eloheinu adonai echad*. God is, and God is one. We are thus blessed with the opportunity to behave in Godly, God-imitating, fashion, striving for excellence, showing love and compassion to others, establishing “justice in the gates,” truly living our ideals, creating more of beauty and truth and harmony (*shalom*), and feeding our own souls, as it were, in the process. Alternatively, we have the freedom to do whatever we want, sleep-walking through life

at best, lapsing into selfishness and sin at worst. The *obligation* is to respond to the holiness, the meaning, *God*, by *adding to* that holiness and meaning.

The words in the scroll, however any given verse came to be there, point us to the Godly in life, telling us to be loving, to preserve the fragile balances of nature, to stand in humble awe before the truths which make our lives worth living—human dignity, freedom, compassion, beauty and faith and the opportunity to create more of these. In a sense human life is only potentially sacred. It becomes holy only when we *act* to make it so. That is our *chovah*, our obligation. Keeping kosher and saying certain prayers in a certain order or any of hundreds of other *mitzvot* are important reminders of that duty—spiritual opportunities which may speak to any one of us. We should each find the ones that speak to us. But the ritual *mitzvot* do not by themselves fulfill the obligation. That takes moral excellence, as well.

These “days of awe” are for pondering, each of us, if we are doing enough, ritually and morally. The more we appreciate that we shape the quality of our lives, and thus of our society and world, the more we can sense the *obligation—chovah, mitzvah*—to live up to our sacred potential. To the Jew, yea to any person who takes seriously that the world’s order derives from God, the obligation to live in consonance with that Order—to listen, in other words, for *mitzvot*—is inescapable.

We have fallen short. Again! We know, each of us, that we can do better, can live more Jewishly. Let 5774 be the year we truly make the effort. Amen.

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Festschrift: *Personal Theology: Essays in Honor of Neil Gillman*, ed. William Plevin (Boston, Academic Studies Press, 2013).