

Blades of Grass and Angels

THE TEMPLE EMANUEL MITZVAH PROJECT:
SEVENTY ESSAYS ON MITZVAH, SEVENTY FACES OF TORAH

A Conservative Congregation Talks About What Inspires Us to Lead Jewish Lives



A MIDRASH TEACHES US THAT
BEHIND EVERY BLADE OF
GRASS, THERE IS A SPECIAL
ANGEL IN HEAVEN WHISPERING
ENCOURAGEMENT: "GROW,
GROW." (MIDRASH BEREISHIT
RABBAH, PARSHA YUD, PISKA
VAV BASED ON JOB 38:33).
THIS MIDRASH CAPTURES WHO
WE ARE RIGHT NOW.

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Blades of Grass and Angels

A midrash teaches us that behind every blade of grass, there is a special angel in heaven whispering encouragement: “grow, grow.” (Midrash Bereishit Rabbah, parsha yud, piska vav based on Job 38:33). This midrash captures who we are right now.

We are blades of grass, needing to grow. That is what Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are all about. How can we be more than we were last year? How can we do better than we did last year?

And we are the angels who can help one another grow. We can be the angels who whisper “grow, grow” to one another.

This booklet was written by us in all of our diversity: lay and professional; people who come to shul regularly and others who come seldom; those who are Jewishly learned and others at the beginning of their serious study of Jewish texts.

The Temple Emanuel Mitzvah Project helps us learn from one another how to grow as Jews, as human beings and as mensches. It does so by getting us to confront the concept of mitzvah.

For some in this booklet, as for some in our congregation, mitzvah means commandment. God commands. We obey. Our life is enriched.

But there are many of us for whom this equation of mitzvah as commandment does not completely resonate. It misses those of us who perhaps want to, but are not sure we believe in God. It misses those of us who, as Americans, protect our autonomy and resist being told what to do and when to do it. It misses those of us who feel “culturally Jewish” but not “religious.” It misses those of us who feel “spiritual” but don’t care for

“organized religion.” We in this wonderful shul are all this and more.

Fortunately, mitzvah is far richer and subtler than merely commandment. In this book we teach one another the various ways our members relate to, and live out, the concept of mitzvah. Perhaps these different conceptions will move you.

How should you encounter this booklet? The same way you eat a box of Godiva chocolates. In the same way that nobody can eat a whole box of Godiva chocolates in one sitting, we do not expect you to read this entire booklet in one sitting either. Like a Godiva chocolate, each essay should be savored one at a time. Therefore, please take the booklet home and read it over the course of the next weeks and months.

As you read and reflect on each essay, ask yourself three simple questions.

- What is the writer’s conception of mitzvah?
- Is that conception helpful to you?
- If it is helpful to you, and you were to take that conception of mitzvah seriously, what would you do differently? What would be the impact of thinking about mitzvah in this new way?

If we read these essays thoughtfully, we can become each other’s rabbis and students. Better yet – we can become each other’s blades of grass and angels. Grow, grow.

RABBI WES GARDENSWARTZ

RABBI MICHELLE ROBINSON

HAZZAN ELIAS ROSEMBERG

HAZZAN SHEINI DAN NESSON



Long Term Mitzvah

Beverly Andreozzi

FIVE YEARS AGO, I BEGAN MY “MOM SHABBAT.” I WAS GOING TO VISIT MY MOM IN FRANKLIN EVERY OTHER SATURDAY.

So one Shabbat was at shul and the next week would be with Mom. Taking her out and spending time with her. She and I were both new to Massachusetts, so we had new places to explore. She always enjoyed going to the malls. It was a good way to get out of the house, especially in winter, and a great way to get some exercise. And my Mom and I hadn’t spent any time together in many years. She needed me and I needed her and it was good. And it’s a Mitzvah.

It was a lot of adjustment, a lot of new responsibility and I thought I’d done my part. I’d spent plenty of time helping her through things and I was done. But then there was more. And all I could think was, “I shouldn’t have to do this.” And I’d get angry. And the joy was gone.

But then I came back to what happened to the Mitzvah? Why did things change? What’s going on? Can this Mitzvah be fixed? I realized that after all this time that we’ve now spent together, my Mom relies even more on me now. She counts on me to help her out because that’s what I’ve been doing, little by little. I didn’t see it from her point of view – that of a frail now 85 year-old woman who never lived alone in her life until she became a widow.

And I rely more on her now as well. But it’s me who made the difference and I who am in the position to make things better again. So I stopped resisting and started fixing. After getting the umpteenth call on Shabbat about how her rent is getting adjusted, the next time I went to visit was a Friday. And I said, “Let’s go to the apartment complex office together and have them explain

what all these numbers mean.” And they did, and then they explained more, even giving some advice to me on doing things in a slightly different way that could benefit my Mom.

And I recently solved the “we’re not walking together Mom” problem, which was because she insisted on using her cane, which she isn’t really using, she carries it with her. It’s a comfort. And then I’d roam off and we’d be two strangers, not connecting. Which was defeating the purpose of the visit. She is smaller than me, and I am pretty strong, so I told her that if she needs to lean on something for support, lean on me. I walk slower, give her my arm or take her hand, and in a pinch, I’m right there! And I’m not alone and neither is she. It’s nice.

The last visit was a Mitzvah. It’s been long term, but the “work,” really growth, never stops. That’s what I lost; that’s what I forgot. I can identify a problem and must now solve it instead of thinking things can’t change.

I’VE HAD A LIFETIME OF CHANGE AND I CAN MAKE IT BETTER. I AM CONTINUALLY STRIVING TO BE A BETTER JEW; I FORGOT THAT THIS ALSO INCLUDES STRIVING TO BE A BETTER DAUGHTER.

Beverly Andreozzi lives in Allston and was a part of the Adult Bat Mitzvah class this past Pesach.



Repairing the World

Ruth Levine Arnold

MITZVOT ARE NOT USUALLY PLANNED; THE BEST ONES HAPPEN SPONTANEOUSLY, IN THE MOMENT. I MAY NOT KNOW IF I AM DOING ONE, EVEN AS IT IS HAPPENING. SOMETIMES I DON’T LEARN UNTIL YEARS LATER THE EFFECT SOMETHING I DID HAD ON SOMEONE. DOING MITZVOT ARE ABOUT DOING THE RIGHT THING, REPAIRING THE WORLD.

The survivors of the Holocaust remind me that the world has been in great disrepair for a long time. I can't repair the entire world, but I can take responsibility for the world directly around me.

So, when my face is held by Channah Berkovits, and she kisses me on both cheeks, I look into her eyes, see the hearts and souls of my lost relatives, and hope that another mitzvah is around the corner.

Ruth Levine Arnold, M.S., CCC-SLP: Speech and Language Pathologist



The Act of Mitzvah as the Path to God

Linda M. Baer

TO ME, VIEWING MITZVOT AS COMMANDMENTS, WHICH ARE RULES TO BE OBEYED WITHOUT QUESTION, TRIVIALIZES THEM AND DIMINISHES THEIR DIGNITY.

Rules certainly teach discipline, but leave little room for free choice or flexibility. Rather, I think of mitzvot as action, voluntarily taken, to experience a meaningful connection with others. Mitzvot can be motivated by peer pressure or religious ritual, but they are more often impelled by an emotional reaction to the pain or need of others; such a genuine and very personal response stirs us to reach beyond ourselves and our own needs to make a difference in the life of another.

The act of mitzvot is blessedly egalitarian, it is not just for the rich and famous who have the means and influence to create a bold public resume of good deeds for everyone, including God, to admire. Everyone has the ability and means to perform mitzvot because mitzvot dwell in the minutia of how we live our lives and conduct ourselves in our personal moments. The blessing of mitzvot is found in respecting the value and

dignity of every person whom we encounter each day. It is going outside of what is comfortable or easy for us to soothe someone else. It is overcoming one's own fear or insecurity to help another human being. Mitzvah is about relationships with others. Whether it is fleeting or extended or involves one person or many, the act of mitzvah has miraculous effect. The miraculous paradox is that in doing for others, we are helping ourselves.

WHEN I EMPOWER ANOTHER PERSON OR IMPROVE THE LIFE OF ANOTHER, EVEN BY AN ANONYMOUS OR PRIVATE ACT, IT GIVES ME A SENSE OF SATISFACTION AND SELF-RESPECT TO WHICH NO MATERIAL ACQUISITION CAN COMPARE.

God instills within each of us the drive to connect with and help others. If we listen to the promptings of our hearts, we become a loving force for good, and by doing so, we find God.



Why Do Mitzvot?

Aaron Beitner

I WOULD LIKE TO START BY NARROWING THE SCOPE OF THIS QUESTION. LET US FIRST UNDERSTAND THE TERM MITZVAH TO MEAN AN ACTION (OR INACTION) THAT WE, AS JEWS, FEEL AN OBLIGATION TO PERFORM CONSISTENTLY. THREE THINGS TO NOTE: 1) WE PHYSICALLY DO IT, NOT JUST THINK ABOUT IT, 2) IT LINKS US TO JUDAISM...IT IS NOT MERELY A GOOD DEED, 3) IT IS OBSERVED ALL THE TIME, NOT JUST WHEN IT IS CONVENIENT.

I would also like to restrict my answer by avoiding the question of why certain Mitzvot are chosen to be observed over others and what the source of the obligation is. Let us take for granted that there are Mitzvot, following the description

above, that I actively choose to observe. Some of these are very good deeds, while others are strictly dogmatic. Furthermore, some of these dogmatic practices can at times feel like nothing more than a burden. The question I would like to address is: Why is it important for me to observe these Mitzvot all the time and not just when it feels right?

I have made it an obligation of mine to get my wife water. If she so much as hints to me that she is thirsty, I will fill one of our large, plastic, blue cups with water from the filtered pitcher in our refrigerator, add two ice cubes, and bring it to wherever she is in the apartment. It's not much. It doesn't begin to make up for everything she does for me. It is just something small that I do to show her I care.

Fulfilling this self-appointed duty is usually a pleasure and is so commonly performed that it has almost become automatic. There are other times when things are not as simple. When we are angry at one another, I do not receive nearly the same joy from getting her water as I normally do. It is during these moments that it is most crucial I follow through, precisely because it does not come easily.

My wife never insists that I get her water, and certainly doesn't expect it when we are on bad terms. It would be very easy for me not to bother. By giving to her while we are angry, I am communicating that my love for her cannot be affected by ephemeral animosity. The act itself also diffuses my anger and increases my feelings of love towards her. Our sages teach us that, "*a person comes to love the one to whom he gives.*" This concept is strengthened further when the giving is done under difficult conditions.

A Mitzvah has the power to enrich the lives of others; however, when we limit its scope by thinking of it as merely a good deed, we are not realizing its full potential. By performing Mitzvot, we are able to bring ourselves into a direct relationship with the divine presence, whether that is understood to be a caring deity, like the one

espoused by Heschel, or the Jewish community as a whole, represented by Kaplan's idea of a communal force that resides within each of us. That relationship is strengthened through our actions. One of the most enduring Jewish concepts is that our spiritual reality is shaped by our physical one.

It is a struggle to make every Mitzvah I do meaningful. There are times when the dogmatic practices of Judaism seem hollow because of their rote nature.

BUT EVEN WHEN I AM UNABLE TO ELEVATE MYSELF SPIRITUALLY BY PERFORMING A MITZVAH, THERE IS STILL MERIT TO THE ACTION. IT FORTIFIES MY RESOLVE AND GIVES ME THE STRENGTH TO CARRY OUT THE ACT DURING TIMES WHEN IT DOES NOT COME NATURALLY.

I get water for my wife without exception, even when it seems to be an empty gesture, so that I will have the discipline to get the water when it is important. Similarly, I feel compelled to perform certain Mitzvot even when the act itself is not accompanied by any sort of immediate moral or spiritual recompense.

Every Mitzvah can be seen as an opportunity to bring us closer to the Jewish people (the local, global, and historical communities) and to God. Whether you believe that Mitzvot reflect the will of the creator or the will of the collective conscious of the Jewish people, this relationship is what enriches our lives and sustains us as Jews.

Aaron Beitner is married to Marci Beitner and has recently joined the community in Newton. He would like to thank everyone who has already welcomed him with open arms.



All I Really Need to Know About Mitzvot I Learned in Sunday School

Barry Bergman

EVERYONE HAS A DIFFERENT REASON FOR PERFORMING MITZVOT. FOR SOME IT IS BECAUSE THEY ARE COMMANDED BY GOD, FOR OTHERS IT IS A PERSONAL CHOICE. FOR ME IT IS DUE TO A SUNDAY SCHOOL HANUKKAH STORY I HEARD IN SECOND GRADE.

The story was about how Hannah and her seven sons were tortured and executed by Antiochus for refusing to bow down to a statue and eat pig's meat. I knew that I would never be that brave in a similar situation. Much of my Jewish observance originates from this story. Today, in a world where I have the freedom to keep kosher, how can I not keep kosher when these people were willing to die for that privilege? I feel that I have an obligation to practice Judaism fully in order to keep those traditions that my ancestors worked so hard to preserve.

There are many other mitzvot besides following the laws of kashrut. These are found in the Torah, which contains the story of the Jewish people and is the cornerstone of Jewish life. When I was in Sunday School I wondered how the Torah could be physically given by God on Mount Sinai before the Israelites reached Canaan. Why didn't the Israelites just read the end of the Torah to see how things turned out? Later I realized that although the Torah we read today contains the "laws of God", it doesn't mean that the written Torah was given by God. However, I do believe that like there are "laws of nature" there are "laws of God." For example the law of gravity is obvious. If you jump off a fifty story building without a parachute you are in trouble. The same is true of the "laws of God." Moses identified the ten most important

"laws of God" – the Ten Commandments. These are obvious laws without which society can't function properly. In addition to the Ten Commandments, the writers of the Torah were able to identify other rules that needed to be followed to preserve a Jewish civilization. I believe that they were keen observers of the history of the Jewish people and of the surrounding world. They watched societies crumble and developed laws to protect Jewish civilization from a similar fate. Some of these rules, such as those dealing with the Temple, are no longer relevant while others, such as those dealing with charity, are still important.

THE PUNISHMENT FOR NOT FOLLOWING THESE "LAWS OF GOD" IS THAT SOCIETY ITSELF SUFFERS. A SOCIETY WHERE A LOT OF FOLKS ARE STEALING IS GOING TO FAIL. A WORLD WHERE GREED TRUMPS GOOD ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT RESULTS IN A SITUATION WHERE EVERYONE SUFFERS. GOD DOESN'T REACH DOWN AND PUNISH. THE ORDER OF THE WORLD DOES THAT AUTOMATICALLY.

Practicing the mitzvot or Jewish traditions is not really a burden nor should it be. Jewish holidays have many unique traditions surrounding them, unlike secular holidays like Memorial Day or Labor Day. Observance of a traditional Shabbat can be a very enjoyable experience as we witnessed during Temple Emanuel's Shabbat Unplugged. In Sunday School, I learned that Judaism could be fun by building menorahs or making graggers. In later years, through my experiences at Camp Ramah, USY and B.U. Hillel, I learned that Shabbat dinner with friends, z'mirot and games is fun. I also learned that Purim is a great time for partying and that Judaism is more than just sitting in synagogue.

I believe that the synagogue plays a vital role in exposing members to the beauty of Jewish tradition and customs. It is important for the synagogue to set the example by providing as many opportunities as possible to highlight all aspects of our traditions, including those that take place outside the synagogue. I believe that this can be educational, enlightening and fun.

Barry Bergman: Barry has been a member of Temple Emanuel for twenty years and serves as Chairman of the Audit Committee and Co-Chair of the Havurah Committee with his wife, Susan. Barry is a C.P.A.



Habits of My Heart

Channah Berkovitz

AS I REVIEW MY LIFE, THE EMOTIONAL IMPRINT THAT CONTROLS MY HEART, MY BRAIN, MY CHOICES, MY BEHAVIOR, MY JUDGMENT, WAS GREATLY INFLUENCED BY THE JEWISH PRAYER BOOK OF MY FAMILY.

The Prayer book - the prayers - were the central focus of my family's life. They were the existential underpinning of their behavior of the day.

“ושנתם לבניך”

“*You shall teach your offspring*” was considered a life enhancing guide of parenting.

In one of Grandfather David's visits, he sat me on his knees and talked to me for some time, then he asked for a prayer book and decided that I was ready to learn the “א.ב.”

Later, my mother, Michja, arranged with a Lehrer (Hebrew teacher) to come to our house once a week and start teaching me the prayers. Grandmothers Zlate and Deborah recited with me my first prayer “מודה אני לפניך”

and later the “שמע ישראל.”

In my home, the Jewish Calendar, the Shabbat, the Festivals were observed with ritual devotion with their special prayers.

Watching my Grandmother Deborah holding her prayer book to her heart, while reciting the prayers by heart, the swaying movements of my father, Israel Jacob, during prayer - all are vivid in my memory, precious in my heart.

“ויראה במעשינו טהר לבם”

May their purity be reflected in our lives.

Mitzvah Statement

Hadassah Blocker

WHEN I WAS YOUNGER I DELIGHTED IN SINGING IN THE TEMPLE CHOIR. I ENJOYED THE BEAUTIFUL MUSIC THAT OUR TALENTED CHAZZAN TAUGHT US. I TRULY LOOKED FORWARD TO THE REHEARSALS WHICH HELPED ME UNDERSTAND THE MITZVOT WHICH WE WERE EXPRESSING. THEY WERE NOT TOO NUMEROUS, BUT I UNDERSTOOD THEM. I WAS CONTENT TO WAIT TO KNOW MORE.

However, came the day when I could no longer sing in the choir because I was unable to stand. I was now just one of the congregation. I now understood the lost feeling of the listeners. I had become bored with services but refused to give up. I have tried to find my own way.

How delighted I am that we shall try as a congregation to find the way to understand the meaning of the mitzvot in our lives.

We shall fulfill any one of the commandments that are in the Torah and thus bring joy and peace to humans and see this as the purpose of the mitzvah. This is not always that simple, but by studying it, we shall enrich our lives and become greater people.

I have found this to be true, and if some mitzvot avoid my understanding, I shall continue to try. If we all try together, we should come to understandings which we didn't have before. How much we shall all gain from this exercise.



The Mitzvah of Saying the Mourner's Kaddish

Judy Bolton-Fasman

THE NIGHT BEFORE MY DAD'S FUNERAL I FOUND A TATTERED PRAYER BOOK IN MY OLD BEDROOM. IT WAS A SMALL SQUARE BOOK FROM MY YESHIVA DAYS. I HAVE SEEN WOMEN USE THIS SAME SIZE BOOK TO PRAY AT THE WAILING WALL. ITS PASTRY-THIN PAGES SUGGEST A MODESTY THAT I HAD ONCE UNDERSTOOD AND THEN REBELLED AGAINST.

I held my little prayer book and remembered how line after line of the tiny Hebrew letters could thicken, choking my intentions. I lay down on my old bed, still made with the same bedspread of my childhood and covered with a layer of dust. I wanted to practice reading through the chewy Aramaic of the Mourner's Kaddish, to rehearse my new role as my father's survivor, as the child who would say the Kaddish for him, the child who would be his Kaddish.

I knew that I would not find a single word about death in the Kaddish prayer. But I was struck by the phrase "magnified and sanctified." The words were connected to the act of enlarging God's stature and acknowledging His holiness. I pictured myself as one of those old fashioned girl detectives with her own mystery book series, holding a large magnifying glass, examining remnants of my father's soul.

Yet these words of the Kaddish at first struck me as a stiff valentine to a lover who, in my resentful state of mind, did not deserve such adoration. A lover who demanded unearned affection. A God who, when I was most vulnerable, said that He needed me more than I needed Him.

Years before my Dad died of Parkinson's disease, I had been saying an improvised Kaddish with him.

We tacitly mourned together for the sturdy Yale alum that he once was. Our prayer book was one of his favorites, "The Yale Football Story." Our personal Kaddish was the section about Albert J. Booth, Jr., the Yale Football captain of 1931.

"Little Boy Blue," Dad said, whispering Albie's nickname. Albie Booth was not fast, but he was agile and small and I knew that Dad envied his dexterity, his flexibility. "He could change direction without anyone noticing until it was too late," Dad said of his hero.

I opened the book and read the same section each time I visited him – the description of the 1929 Yale-Army game. Dad sat up in his wheelchair, eyes tearing, and left hand shaking. He wore his reading glasses out of habit.

"21-13," he said solemnly.

"But not until Albie returned the punt and then scored two touchdowns."

DAD WAS NINE YEARS-OLD WHEN HE WATCHED ALBIE BOOTH MAKE YALE FOOTBALL HISTORY.

AND THE MOMENT WAS MAGNIFIED AND SANCTIFIED IN MY FATHER'S TRUE BLUE MIND. I HELD UP THE BOOK SO HE COULD ADMIRE ALBIE WEARING A BIG Y EMBLAZONED ON HIS CHEST.

In the Fall, Dad and I listened to Yale Football through a wall of static on WELI, Yale's AM radio station.

"29-29," I said to Dad. He winced. He was dressed in sweats, athletic socks wrapped around his swollen ankles and threadbare slippers dangling from his feet. He sat immobile in a wicker chair on the porch. His legs shook under a red plaid blanket.

"You were there, remember?" I asked him.

"Indeed."

"Tell me the year," I said trying not to quiz him.

"1968."

"What happened?"

"Lost the lead. Harvard scored 16 points in 42 seconds to tie it up."

Magnified and sanctified. This is how memory works. To magnify and sanctify my father's own prodigious memory, my own loving memory of him. That is why I said the Mourner's Kaddish every day the year following Dad's death.

Judy Bolton-Fasman serves on Temple Emanuel's Board of Directors and writes a weekly column for *The Jewish Advocate*.



A Surprise Gift

Ruth Brenner

AS SOMEONE WHO HAS SPENT THE GREATER PART OF A LIFETIME ATTEMPTING TO UNDERSTAND HUMAN BEHAVIOR, 'MOTIVATION' OCCUPIES A HIGHLY SIGNIFICANT PLACE OF INQUIRY. A FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLE UNDERSCORES THE FACT THAT "ALL BEHAVIOR IS MULTI-DETERMINED."

When one explores the meanings, purposes and implementation of Mitzvot, the possibilities for understanding each of these dimensions are numerous. However, because this is to have a more personal focus and not an academic one, I must say that, for me, the impulse to do a mitzvah proceeds from a caring, a concern, a wish to help another, and only later to the notion of performing a 'good deed' or mitzvah. The original impulse is humanitarian, and only later (at least consciously) and not consistently do I recognize the religious component; e.g., it is God's commandment, or it is my way of protecting myself and gaining favor in God's eyes. It is primarily an interpersonal connection, not a spiritual one, that motivates me.

Mitzvot that enhance my spiritual self, that focus on ritual, prayer, tradition and observance are often more duty/responsibility determined, and sadly are not performed with the same energy or emotion. It has the function more often of pleasing family, those here and those deceased. On the other hand, it also offers me an opportunity to connect with them and to savor and appreciate that connectedness, as well as to bond with

the entire Jewish community that is simultaneously and similarly attuned and involved.

I must admit that the process of writing this has clarified some issues for me. I feel a sense of profound gratitude for how Mitzvot have the power to bind me to the past, and to the present, while simultaneously evoking strong feelings of personal satisfaction and a deeper optimism about and hope for the future.

Joining a community through the doing of Mitzvot that allows me to partner with others and with God is therefore profoundly gratifying, especially because it furthers a most important Jewish value, that of 'gemilut hasadim.' Additionally, my perception of life feels expanded and enriched, encompassing a fuller recognition of the presence of the spark of divinity that resides in each of us and in the natural world. This heightened sensitivity serves as an inspiration to act in more compassionate ways to everyone, to see and reach beyond the most immediate and most personal. The awareness that I have much potential to influence our environment and our destiny positively is meaningful, empowering and most gratifying to me.

I thank you for the opportunity you have given me to explore my relationship to Mitzvot. I now appreciate the concept as a most precious one, to me and to my people.

Ruth Brenner is a proud mother, grandmother, and clinical social worker. Walking her dog provides vital contact with the natural world that enhances her being.





A Unique, Beautiful, and Important Spiritual Path

Dan Caine

WHAT IS JUDAISM ALL ABOUT? EVERYONE HAS A DIFFERENT ANSWER. BUT HERE IS MY JUDAISM:

Judaism teaches us that the important life is the one we live here and now.

Judaism teaches us the value of freedom for all people.

Judaism teaches us to be tolerant of other cultures.

Judaism teaches us to respect science, intellectual inquiry, and challenging of authority.

Judaism takes people as they really are. For example, Judaism understands that the drive to acquire the security that money can bring is natural. Judaism asks only that we share that money with those who are less fortunate than ourselves.

For another example, Judaism understands that jealousy is natural. Judaism only asks that we attempt to be happy with your own lot, and that we regularly stop to appreciate what we have.

Judaism asks us to focus outward, become engaged in the constant improvement of ourselves, our children, our community, and our world. In this way, Judaism is an antidote to empty materialism.

With all these wonderful values and teachings, Judaism is a wonderful spiritual path. I have not come across any other spiritual path that combines all of these beautiful elements. By following this path, Jews have a lot to contribute to the world.

How do we help ourselves stay on this path and transmit it to our children? Through Jewish learning, Jewish ritual observances, and Jewish mitzvot.

We see the connection of each Jewish observance with key Jewish values.

Shabbat reminds us to take a break from acquisition and to reconnect with our families.

Rosh Hashanah reminds us to be grateful for everything that we have. Yom Kippur commands us to ask ourselves how we can do better for our families and our communities.

Succoth reminds us of the fragility of life, and the importance of sharing what we have with others.

Simchat Torah reminds us of the importance of Torah study. Torah study helps inculcate in us the values of inquiry, challenge, questioning, and study. Passover reminds us of the importance of freedom and of working continually to help assure the freedom of peoples everywhere.

Tisha B'Av reminds us that jealousy can be destructive, and also that it is necessary to take an active approach to safeguarding Judaism and the Jewish people.

Jewish teaching and Jewish ritual have evolved over millennia of devotion to these fine ideals. To actually profit from this wisdom, and to have it actually affect the way we live our lives, then we have to actually do the observance. If we accept the notion that Judaism is a valuable tradition that can ennoble us and improve our world, if we want to embrace it in our lives and pass it on to our children, then we have to live our Judaism.

JUDAISM HAS PROVEN ITSELF TO BE A BEAUTIFUL, IMPORTANT, AND UNIQUE SPIRITUAL PATH – ONE THAT REALLY WORKS TO MAKE PEOPLE BETTER AND THE WORLD A BETTER PLACE.

Striving to follow this path, for the betterment of oneself, one's family, and one's world, is, for me, the meaning of "Mitzvah."

Dan Caine is a software developer living in Newton with his wife, Claire, and four children.



Why Do We Need Mitzvot?

Rabbi Samuel Chiel

THE REASON WE NEED MITZVOT IS BEST TAUGHT IN A GREAT VERSE FROM THE BOOK OF LEVITICUS WHICH SAYS: "YOU SHALL BE HOLY FOR I THE LORD YOUR GOD AM HOLY."

The Torah calls upon us to imitate God in His holiness and that is the real task of every Jew.

What does it mean to be holy? It means to strive constantly to become a better Jew and a better human being. For example, each of us needs to become a better husband or wife, a better parent, a better daughter or son.

How do we achieve this great goal? Through the practice of Mitzvot. There are two kinds of Mitzvot, some are prohibitive in their expression. For example, you shall not steal, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not stand by when another person's life is in danger. These are the fundamental moral rules in creating a civilized society.

Other Mitzvot have positive formulations. For example, observe the Sabbath and you will experience a day of spiritual joy through prayer, study, and joining in fellowship with your family and friends.

Or celebrate Rosh Hashanah and be reminded of the possibility of changing your life for the better through Teshuvah, repentance, and thereby ridding yourself of some of your troubling character flaws.

Or fast on Yom Kippur and observe the Mitzvah of forgiving somebody or asking someone to forgive you and you will experience a new joy of reconciliation and peace.

And finally, what is the most important of all the Mitzvot in the Torah? You shall love your neighbor as yourself by trying to see the image of God in each person and treating each person with dignity and empathy.

Do these Mitzvot come from God? I believe that they come from God mediated through our great teachers like Abraham, Moses, and Isaiah. They have taught us about our God of compassion, concern, and love for all His children.

Others believe that the Mitzvot are the result of the aspirations of our people to understand God and how to live good lives.

All of us agree that the teachings of the Torah, the Talmud, and our other great religious writings are attempts to fashion us into a great people with each of us hopefully becoming a real Mensch.

Is all of this too ambitious and too difficult to achieve? Moses understood that people might feel that way and so just before he died he said,

"For these Mitzvot that I command you this day are not too hard for you neither are they too far off. They are not in heaven that you might say, 'Who will go up to heaven and bring them down to us so that we will hear them and do them....For they are very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, and you can do them.'"

People today are in search for spirituality. The greatest source of spirituality lies in studying and performing our great Mitzvot.

Rabbi Chiel is Rabbi Emeritus of Temple Emanuel. He served as Rabbi of our Temple for 27 years. Since his retirement, he has been involved in a number of teaching projects in the Greater Boston community. He is Scholar in Residence of the Combined Jewish Philanthropies. He is Director of the Rabbinic Institute of Hebrew College and the Massachusetts Board of Rabbis. He is Jewish Scholar for the New England Anti-Defamation League.

Rabbi Chiel and his wife, Janet, are the parents of three sons and enjoy their many grandchildren.



Why I Do What I Do

Julie Shumofsky Chivo

I CHOOSE TO PRACTICE THE MITZVOT THAT MAKE MY LIFE BETTER AND AM ALWAYS LOOKING FOR IDEAS OF HOW TO MAKE OTHER MITZVOT MEANINGFUL TO ME. THE ONES I FOLLOW FALL INTO THREE CATEGORIES:

1. Learning more about Judaism and Hebrew.
2. Making it easy for my children to love Judaism. This includes exposing them to plenty of Jewish education, both formal and experiential and doing things with them that are just plain fun. Jewish people make the world a better place. The world wouldn't be the same without us. I want my kids to become rooted in the culture to pass on the traditions to the next generation.
3. Adding meaning to my life. Mitzvot connect me to my family, friends and the community. They mark time and remind me to celebrate life.

I have been amazed to discover how much overlap I find among the three categories. In recent years, we started doing much more for Sukkot, which to me is a perfect example of how the categories are entwined. Observing Sukkot used to mean visiting the sukkah at synagogue and that was it. Three years ago, however, we built our own sukkah for the first time and it has given us such a nice new connection to Judaism.

Putting up the sukkah involves all members of the family working together on the construction and decorating. My kids love the week of "picnics" in the Sukkah. I have learned prayers I did not know before and we always invite neighbors over. I feel a closeness to nature in my own backyard just from the amount of time I spend outside during the holiday.

All children who visit us build, and subsequently consume, edible model sukkot made out of graham crackers, pretzels, and vanilla frosting. To my 4

year-old and 7 year-old this alone is a great reason to love Judaism!

This year the holiday is arriving relatively early and I am hoping for weather warm enough to tempt us to try breakfast in the sukkah. Preparing for Sukkot takes a considerable amount of work, but at the end of the holiday, the connections I feel to my family, my friends, nature and Jews all over the world who are also doing the same thing, makes the effort more than worth it.

SOME MITZVOT DON'T SEEM TO MAKE SENSE FOR US RIGHT NOW - BUT I LOOK FORWARD TO DISCOVERING NEW MITZVOT AND INTRODUCING THEM TO MY FAMILY TO MAKE OUR LIVES EVEN RICHER IN THE YEARS TO COME.

Julie Shumofsky Chivo is married to David Chivo. They live with their children, Talia and Daniel in West Newton.



The Numbers Game

Lisa Popik Coll

THE YEAR MY HUSBAND, ARIEH, AND I FIRST LOOKED AT SOLOMON SCHECHTER, THERE WERE 613 STUDENTS REGISTERED AT THE SCHOOL. WE TOOK THIS AS A DIVINE SIGNAL AND SIGNED UP OUR ELDEST CHILD IMMEDIATELY, BEFORE THE LIGHTNING STRUCK. IT DIDN'T MATTER THAT HE WAS ONLY TWO YEARS OLD AT THE TIME...

The number swam around in my head for a very long time. I have always known that there are 613 mitzvot I need to fulfill, but that number was just really overwhelming. I often have trouble walking and chewing gum at the same time, how can I possibly carry out 613 mitzvot? Then it struck me that I didn't even know what they all were. How could I perform them all if I didn't know what they all were? So I started reading through the Torah, for all the "You musts" and "You mustn'ts." I also

looked for a list of all 613, which was surprisingly easy to find online. Gotta love Google.

After reading the lists, the number 613 got a lot more manageable. It turns out that of the 613, 365 are *mitzvot lo taaseh*, things we are commanded not to do, or negative mitzvot, and 248 are *mitzvot aseh*, actions we are commanded to perform, or positive mitzvot. Well that made things a lot easier, it's pretty easy not to do something, so I just had to act on 248, right?

Well, it wasn't all that simple, and a lot depended on levels of observance. Some of the "Thou shalt nots" were not always so easy. I have been known to wear my husband's old T shirts (Deuteronomy 22:5 – "A woman shall not wear man's clothing"). My family and I have read all seven Harry Potter books with GREAT enjoyment (Deuteronomy 18:10 – "There shall not be found amongst you ... a sorcerer"). I don't always check the fiber content of my clothing, and I may have mixed linen and wool (Leviticus 19:19). And as for bearing a grudge (Leviticus 19:18), well, just ask my sisters.

The good news was that a lot of the negative mitzvot don't apply to me. I'm not a priest, a harlot or a leper. I don't own any livestock that I plan on sacrificing, and I don't have any slaves. Whew! That got rid of quite a few.

Which brought me to the positive mitzvot. Again, not being a priest, harlot, or leper comes in pretty handy. As does not owning an ox. A lot of the positive mitzvot are one-time gigs – I had my sons circumcised (Genesis 17:10/Leviticus 12:3) and redeemed my firstborn son (Numbers 18:15) – been there, done that. I even made my mark and helped write a Torah (Deuteronomy 31:19). But some of the daily requirements were a little tougher. I don't say Birkat after every meal (Deuteronomy 8:10). I don't always say the Sh'ma twice a day (Deuteronomy 6:7). I don't always keep Shabbat to the highest standards (Exodus 23:12). I have mouthed off to my mother (Exodus 20:12). I wouldn't even deign to think that I know how to walk in God's ways (Deuteronomy 28:9). I don't even think I have the right shoes.

So I do what I can. As far as I know, the mitzvot are not weighted, although I have always felt they should be. Not killing should count a whole lot more than a Nazarite not cutting his hair (Numbers 6:5). Giving Tzedakah (Deuteronomy 15:8) should count more than redeeming your firstborn donkey (Exodus 13:13).

And after a lot of thought, I've decided that for me, although the other 612 are really important, it all comes down to one. I try my best not to harden my heart against anyone and open my hands to help those in need (Deuteronomy 15:7). I try to fulfill this mitzvah by giving Tzedakah, and by visiting my elderly neighbors, whose needs are mostly companionship. I donated bone marrow when called upon to do so. I cook for sick friends, and try to take their kids out to play when they are overwhelmed. My friends tease me and say I don't know how to say "no." I should just tell them that being soft-hearted is my way of fulfilling mitzvot.

Lisa Popik Coll: Grant writer, volunteer, and mother of three in Newton, Massachusetts.



Mitzvah – What's in a Name?

Shirley Frant

WHAT IS A MITZVAH? IN THE TUESDAY MORNING SISTERHOOD STUDY GROUP

WE'VE READ ABOUT DIFFERENT VIEWS OF ITS MEANING. MANY OF US, FROM EARLY CHILDHOOD, LEARNED THAT A MITZVAH IS GOOD, AND LATER, THAT IT MEANT DOING A GOOD OR SELFLESS DEED. IN OUR READINGS AND DISCUSSION, WE LEARNED THAT THE EARLY AND MORE ORTHODOX READING OF MITZVAH IS A COMMANDMENT. ARE THESE MEANINGS IN CONFLICT WITH EACH OTHER? DO THEY EXIST SYMBIOTICALLY – DOES EACH CONCEPT ACTUALLY STRENGTHEN THE MEANING OF THE OTHER?

I found that I couldn't resolve these questions easily. The idea of individual sovereignty—picking and choosing those aspects of religious observance that meshed with our personal philosophy is one that I once thought really was akin to my own feelings. Do we have free will? My answer now is – up to a point. We are certainly molded by early experiences, and we still hear the voices of our loved ones. The idea of individual sovereignty is a misapprehension. Of course we make decisions. We hope that they are informed. We hope that they are the right ones. Whatever guides us to decide, it ultimately is our decision, and of course, our responsibility. What happens when we make decisions that turn out to be wrong? There must be room for regret, and more importantly, to realize that if we have caused harm, it is a “cop-out” to claim shared responsibility. The fanatic claims that God told him to act when he performs unthinkable deeds of terror and devastation.

Back to mitzvot... I have to examine my relationship with God. I do believe in a higher power. Like many others, I find myself calling upon it for help. My thinking is murky here. Positive things – love, natural beauty, joy, solace have a religious feel for me. I occasionally find myself thinking, “How can God let this happen- this terrible thing?” I think that doing some good and helping those in need is the way we cope in a less than perfect world.

So, what is a mitzvah? How does it tie-in with Judaism? A mitzvah, I believe, is often a deed that does good. In a small way, it makes the world a better place. It may also be a commitment. People are counting on us. We “command” ourselves not to let them down. A commandment to do good for our own sense of worthiness is a self-fulfilling thing – in short – a mitzvah.

Shirley Frant (née Geschwind): My husband, Martin, a research chemist, and I moved to Newton in 1963 with our children, Barbara and Howard. We joined Temple Emanuel so that they could continue their Hebrew School education. My undergraduate degree from Brooklyn College

was in psychology. In 1965, I received a Masters of Education degree from Harvard and taught in Waltham for thirty-two years. Howard was a Temple Emanuel Bar Mitzvah and Barbara, while in high school, was asked to sing in the first contemporary Rosh Hashanah service organized by Rabbi Chiel. A few years later, she was married to Michael Hecht, whom she met at the Temple Emanuel Youth Group. Although I was raised in an Orthodox home, I had received no Hebrew education. At my grandson Alexander's Bar Mitzvah, I relied on a transliteration when Martin and I were called for an Aliyah. I determined to study Hebrew before his sister, Elizabeth, was a Bat Mitzvah. After two years of study, I became an adult Bat Mitzvah in 2002.



Mitzvot Essay

Rabbi Larry Freedman

THE ISSUE OF MITZVOT RAISES ALL SORTS OF “WHY” QUESTIONS. THEY TEND TO COME IN TWO CATEGORIES. WHY SHOULD I FOLLOW THEM AND WHY DO WE DO THEM? THE LEAST COMPELLING ANSWER IS “BECAUSE GOD TELLS US TO.” IT IS THE LEAST COMPELLING BECAUSE IT REQUIRES A JUVENILE THEOLOGY AND DENIES THE REALITY WE LIVE IN. A MORE COMPELLING ANSWER IS FOUND HERE: “BECAUSE IT TELLS A STORY.”

All of our mitzvot tell a story that leave us with a moral. The morals of the story are not always obvious at first, but like a good game of hide-and-seek, discovery turns what was frustratingly hidden into something obvious and satisfying.

Pick a mitzvah, any mitzvah, give it some attention (find a teacher; Judaism was never meant to be studied alone) and you will find the message. It is a message of values and ethics, of making the world a better place and making oneself a better person. There is a reason – sometimes hidden in the depths, sometimes the shallows – that can be found.

As a case in point, let's look at one of the most inscrutable of the mitzvot to be found. It is from Leviticus 19:19 and it discusses mixing different species. Ramban (Nachmanides 1194-1270, Spain and Eretz Yisrael) offers this in his commentary to the verse: "One who combines two different species thereby changes and defies the work of creation as if he believes that the Holy One blessed be He has not completely perfected the world and he desires to improve it by adding to it new kinds of species." To be honest, my personal practice does not involve checking my garments for linen and wool, but my personal approach to the very modern conversation of genetic engineering and bio-diversity is indeed informed by the meaning behind the issue of shatnez. One does not have to be a Luddite to ask reasonable and serious questions regarding the food we eat or the environmental impact of modern farming. It is reasonable to be sure the progress of science is indeed progress and not hubris. It is fair to ask if all new technology is equally moral. All of these questions are informed by one line regarding shatnez! If I can find an approach to the world in one of the most unusual mitzvot, how much easier it will be to find the meaning behind the fast of Yom Kippur or the sukkah under which we will soon sit.

Finding these meanings and bringing them into our lives can be exciting and uplifting. It can also be frustrating. There are some who say that the meanings we must find and the specific behaviors we must have are frozen in time. There are those who will cut off query, and with smiles and friendship, tell you it must be done as it has always been done for the reasons that have always been given. This is not true even though to those with modest Judaic backgrounds it might seem true and even intoxicating. But it is not true.

THE JEWISH PEOPLE HAVE ALWAYS BEEN BLESSED WITH DIVERGENT OPINIONS. WE ARE FREE TO ASK QUESTIONS AND CHALLENGE WHATEVER WE WISH.

THE MEANINGS WE FIND ARE NOT EXCLUSIVE.

IN ONE CORNER OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE AN ARGUMENT TAKES US TO ONE CONCLUSION, IN

ANOTHER CORNER, A DIFFERENT CONCLUSION. THIS DYNAMIC TENSION IS WHAT KEEPS THE JEWISH PEOPLE HEALTHY AND VIBRANT.

That is what I do for my practice. I ask questions. I seek answers. I find the meanings behind the mitzvot that allow me to have intellectual honesty and integrity to my actions. True, there are a few things I do for which I have not found a satisfying ethical charge, but these are few and endangered should I not find an answer within a reasonable amount of time. It is also true that there will always be those behaviors that are purely emotional, that warm the heart merely by their repetition, yet even that has its own value.

The stories behind the mitzvot, the meaning, values, ethics, lessons behind the mitzvot are what move me. And that is just one reason. I haven't addressed the place God holds in all of this or the community's role. These are for another sermon, another day. For now, I'm discovering the stories.

Rabbi Larry Freedman, Education Director at Temple Emanuel, enjoys bringing the excitement of discovery to our children at the synagogue.



Mitzvah Statement

Ruth and Don Freedman

A PRIME CONNECTION OF OURS TO THE TEMPLE AND THE MITZVOTH HAS BEEN OUR OPPORTUNITY TO SERVE AS VOLUNTEERS WITH THE TEMPLE'S STARS OF DAVID PROGRAM.

The program provides Jewish adults with developmental and other disabilities opportunities to participate in social, educational and religious activities at the Temple. Our relationship to this

group and to its members has grown and deepened over the years. We have shared many personal milestones together – both joyful and difficult. With the Stars, we know that “God is in this place” when we see:

- A member proudly reading (with assistance, even a single Hebrew word) from the haggadah at our model seder.
- Members called to the Torah as adult bar/bat mitzvot.
- Spirited Israeli dancing with a young man in a wheelchair.
- Members consoling one another on the loss of a parent.

For all the warmth, support and gratification that we receive from our involvement with the Stars, what has really struck us is how much the Stars teach us.

In their unselfish support of one another, especially in times of distress, they teach us the importance of relationship, of emotional connection, over mere intellectual understanding.

In their acceptance of the limitations in each other, in their ability to unself-consciously compensate for each other’s limitations, as one assumes the role of the eyes while another the ears and another the reader, they teach us to be more accepting of the limitations of each other, and hopefully, of ourselves.

In their capacity to find success, and joy, in getting through a workday, in mastering a simple new task, in receiving even a small work check, they teach us what it really means to succeed in life – to do the most we can with what talents we have.

In their pride in participating in the processional marches of Make Your Mark, crutches and wheelchairs and all – the largest contingent of any participating arm of the Temple – they teach that we need not be self-conscious in our love of our traditions.

In their willingness to ask a question, as one member did, “Why did God make me like this

[with cerebral palsy]?” they teach us humility, to appreciate what we have, and to take ourselves less seriously in the ways that don’t matter and more seriously in the ways that do.

Ruth and Don Freedman: Proud parents of Andrew and Ezra, grandparents of Max and Zachary, Ruth is Associate Dean of the Boston University School of Social Work, and Don is a partner in the Newton law firm, Rosenberg, Freedman & Goldstein, where he practices elder and disability law, and estate planning.



It’s Not the Thought that Counts

Elyse Friedman

- **UPON RECEIVING THE TORAH, THE ISRAELITES RESPONDED, NA’ASEH V’NISHMAH, “WE SHALL DO, AND THEN WE WILL UNDERSTAND.” (EXODUS 24:7.)**
- **THE SAGES TEACH US THAT EACH ONE OF US WAS AND IS ALWAYS AT SINAI, ETERNALLY RECEIVING THE DIVINE WORD, TORAH.**

These two points inform my comprehension of mitzvah, commandedness, and obligation. Mitzvah is a process of action – doing – in order to understand.

From our earliest years, we are troubled by the vast complexity of life, and we strive to give our days form and meaning. Over the millennia, the mitzvot – as they were given to us at Sinai – have shaped the lives of our ancestors, and they, in performing the mitzvot, understood, interpreted, and conveyed to us their meaning and value. Individually, in observing mitzvot, we reach from Sinai to a meaningful present and future.

But this is far from apparent to everyone. For example, since my childhood, people who consider themselves intelligent, up-to-date, practical, and realistic have tried to explain to me why it is irrelevant and silly for me—in this day and age—to keep kosher. I grew up in a kosher home, and I always considered keeping kosher to be a “given.” It turns out, however, that it is not a given for many people I know, including members of my family. So, I’ve had to rethink this. Why do I continue to keep kosher?

Na’aseh v’nishmah. Food and eating are at the center of life. In keeping kosher, I am always aware that I shop, cook, and eat in accordance with a well-defined code. I am subtly aware that my ancestors, who are otherwise unknown and lost to me, were similarly conscious of what and how they ate. I could not know them, I could not understand our connection through Sinai, and I could not comprehend the timelessness of mitzvah if I did not keep kosher. In this way, I have learned to understand that the core of Judaism is doing and taking action. Why observe any of the mitzvot? For we Jews, it is not the thought that counts. It is the doing that counts. It is the doing that gives meaning and shape to our lives. *Na’aseh v’nishmah.*



Mitzvah: Why We Do That Thing We Do

Michael Gardener

BEFORE WE CAN DISCUSS WHY WE DO MITZVOT, IT IS FIRST NECESSARY, I SUPPOSE, TO DEFINE WHAT WE MEAN BY “MITZVOT.”

If by that term we are talking about good deeds done to or for others, God does not, for me, enter the picture. That is, if it were possible to prove definitively one way or the other God’s existence

or non-existence, my practices and actions with regard to others would in no way be affected. (If anything, a notion of a hovering divine figure “ordering” particular forms of behavior would be more likely to give rise to a rebellious contrariness compelling me, if not to do exactly the opposite, then sullenly, perhaps, to do nothing at all.)

My own sense is that we do mitzvot because it makes us “feel good,” having a “right feeling” about it. The significant question, of course, is why does doing mitzvot occasion this feeling? If one shares, as I do, the view that achieving the good life, or a meaningful life, is essentially a journey toward attaining increasing stages of loving connectedness, then the impetus underlying mitzvot would appear readily at hand: their performance provides the means for meaningful connection with others, even complete strangers.

IF IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO TRULY LOVE ALL HUMANITY, IT SEEMS ENTIRELY POSSIBLE TO EMPATHIZE WITH OUR FELLOWS, TO KNOW THEIR SORROWS AND MISFORTUNES AND TO SHARE IN INCREASINGLY INTIMATE WAYS IN THEIR STRUGGLES. AND IT IS THAT CONNECTEDNESS, THAT FEELING OF BEING BOUND UP IN THE LIVES OF OTHERS — OF ALL OTHERS — THAT ALLAY WHAT MUST OTHERWISE BE AN OVERWHELMINGLY TERRIFYING SENSE OF ALONENESS AND SEPARATENESS IN AN UNBLINKING UNIVERSE.

If God is the sum of our connected parts, if all of us -- beings past, present and future -- together comprise God, then perhaps what was said previously stands amendment. God would matter, not because He commands, but rather because He is ourselves.



My Mitzvah Statement

Sam Gardenswartz

THE HEBREW WORD MITZVAH LITERALLY MEANS A COMMANDMENT. I HAVE NEVER LIKED THIS DEFINITION, HOWEVER, BECAUSE THE WORD COMMANDMENT ALWAYS REMINDS ME OF THE SLAVES IN EGYPT. THE WORD CALLS TO MIND THE IMAGE OF A WEAK, OLD HEBREW BEING FORCED TO DRAG HEAVY BRICKS ACROSS A DESERT.

I do not think, however, that mitzvot are issued with the same force as an Egyptian taskmaster. It is not as if a dismissal of mitzvot will receive punishment. Rather, I think the word Mitzvah would be better defined as an optional improvement to one's life. If I choose not to do mitzvot, no one is going to punish me. However, if I do choose to do mitzvot, I feel better about myself. I'm not even talking here about huge time commitments or mitzvot that need lots of planning. I'm talking about miniscule-modern-mitzvot. Think about the difference when you're walking into a building between the person in front of you who keeps the door open for you, even though it takes an extra five seconds of his time, or the person who closes it in your face. Or think about the difference at the checkout counter at the grocery store between the clerk who grimaces through the encounter versus the clerk who smiles and asks how you are. These little acts are not hard; to the contrary, it's easy to smile instead of frown. However, they make the people you encounter every day happier, even if you do not even know those people. And if I do these miniscule-modern-mitzvot, then perhaps other people will repay me by performing them back at me. It could be one giant, happy, cheery mitzvah circle!

Sam Gardenswartz is a Junior at Gann Academy: The New Jewish High School of Greater Boston. He

loves the Temple and USY. He wishes everyone a happy and sweet new year.



To Hold or to Toss: How Mitzvah Helps Us Own Today

Rabbi Wes Gardenswartz

WHAT DO WE DO WITH THE THINGS IN OUR LIVES THAT CONJURE UP MEMORIES OF WHAT USED TO BE BUT IS NO MORE? BIRTHDAY CARDS. FATHER'S DAY AND MOTHER'S DAY CARDS. ANNIVERSARY CARDS. THE THINGS OUR CHILDREN MADE IN ARTS AND CRAFTS WHEN THEY WERE IN PRESCHOOL, YEARS AGO, LIKE A GOLDEN SPRAY PAINTED PENCIL BOX, WITH DRIED MACARONI GLUED ON? TO HOLD OR TO TOSS? THAT IS THE QUESTION. IN MY LIFE I HAVE KNOWN TWO TYPES, WITH NOTHING IN BETWEEN.

There are the holders. I count myself in this group. Every birthday card and spray painted pencil box is sacred. We store it all in a box in the linen closet, and when that fills up, we move it upstairs to the attic, or downstairs to the basement, where it remains. For decades if not forever. When it comes time to move, we have to deal with a lifetime of photographs and memories in box after box.

Then there are the tossers. The birthday card was beautiful. Thank you. But soon enough it is discarded. The spray painted pencil box was gorgeous! I love it and I needed it! It stays for a while longer, but a few spring cleanings later, it too is history. When it comes time to move from that house, the basement is free of boxes of mementos.

What is at stake here is our ambivalence about the passage of time. Things that become invested with memory become much more than things—and then they get caught up in the deep feelings we feel

when thinking about bygone days. Stuff is fraught with emotion, and the holders and tossers have different ways of dealing with it.

Speaking for the holders, since I am one, I hold onto all that stuff because I have a hard time letting go of chapters that were once beautiful but are no more. In some not rational but deeply felt way, holding onto the things that my nursery school children made prolongs their youth.

Why do the tossers toss? Perhaps because they can more easily separate the card or the childhood tchatchka from the relationship behind it. Perhaps because they do not like clutter and believe that less is more. Perhaps because they can more easily let go of yesterday so that they can own today.

In this dialectic between the holders and the tossers, mitzvah has a helpful role to play. When we find ourselves struggling with how to make peace with the passage of time, taking mitzvah seriously may be just what we need. For mitzvah forces us to stop and dwell on what is right with our lives today. Whatever yesterday was, it was. But today is the day that mitzvah sanctifies. The examples of this are limitless, but consider three.

Prayer, *tefillah*, causes us to savor what is right with us this very morning. *Modeh ani lefanecha*, grateful to you am I, my creator, for the gift of this day. Those are the first words we say every morning. By davening every day, I become mindful of God's daily blessings—health, friendship, work, community, food, clothing, a humane society, a Jewish mission to make a difference—that I would otherwise not see.

Shabbat and *chagim*, the holy days, cause us to create time out of time so that we can have meals around a table, with family and friends, and not be disturbed by buzzing blackberries and clanging cell phones. If we have Shabbat and holiday meals with the ones we love, that creates a connectedness every week that nothing else can match.

Tikkun olam, the obligation to get out of ourselves and work to help others, gives us the chance to make every day richer because we have done somebody else a favor. Somebody in the planet is better off because of what we did, today.

SOME OF US ARE HOLDERS, SOME ARE TOSSERS. BUT BY TAKING MITZVAH SERIOUSLY, ALL OF US ARE ENABLED TO BE AT PEACE WITH THE PASSAGE OF TIME, AND TO MAKE FRIENDS WITH TODAY, WHICH IS THE ONLY DAY WE'VE GOT.

Rabbi Wes Gardenswartz is married to Shira Goodman and is the father of Nat, Sam and Jordana. He says the shehechyanu every day for the privilege of being a rabbi here.



You are Doing a Mitzvah Right

Ralph M. Gilbert

IT IS WRITTEN THAT ONE SHOULD NOT PUT A STUMBLING BLOCK BEFORE THE BLIND. SO, HOW MUCH MORE OF A MITZVAH IS IT TO ENCOURAGE SHORTSIGHTED PERSONS, SUCH AS MYSELF, TO REFLECT ON VIEWS OF OUR OWN JEWISH IDENTITY?

Rabbi Gardenswartz, President Michael Benjamin and all who have worked on this project, and you here today, have created a forum for the rest of us to examine our beliefs. You have all done a Mitzvah.

Sometimes it helps to know what Judaism is by experiencing what it is not. Recently, I spent a week with two old friends from England. This couple have been our frequent house guests, as we've been theirs for many years. They are members of the Church of England. His father was the Vicar of Tenterton, in Kent. After a few drinks in the evening, Christopher and I sometimes have conversations that I actually remember the next morning. This past visit was one of those times.

He said to me: "You Jews are not too keen on Afterlife, or for that matter, Sin, are you?"

“We live our lives,” he continued with a flourish of his hand, “in order to avoid Sin. We have Faith that the Love that Jesus has for us will lead us to a better world after death. What exactly do you Jews believe?”

What indeed?

My friend Chris is tall and fair and continues to be a competitive oarsman since his days at Oxford. He is clear of eye and doesn't suffer fools well. I knew him when he served in Her Royal Majesty's Fusiliers. I could picture him in another time, in pressed Khakis with a swagger stick under his arm, turning families away from Palestine. If you had an illustrated book of Yiddish words, one would not expect his picture to be seen under the word: “Rachmonis” (Compassion).

Compassion and strict Justice are the two opposite poles that our Talmud struggles between. Rachmonis is that part of Judaism that is most human. The phrase: “We were just following orders” is not part of our teachings. The children of Israel wouldn't even follow God's edict to kill the men, women and children of the Amalekites. Capital punishment exists in our codes, but in order to prove a case, there are so many requirements that a court who passes one capital case in a hundred years is referred to as a “hanging court.” There exists in Judaism a balance between both compassion and justice.

How can I possibly compare Chris's strict ideas of Hell and Eternal Damnation with my own simple, almost existential, approach to my beliefs? Certain things just make me feel good and right, like listening to my friend Paul Rosman chanting the kiddish over the wine, or walking to services on Shabbat or how I feel when I say the prayers, or listening to the Rabbi's D'vor Torah, or to go to Kiddish afterwards and shmooze with Barrie Greiff who tells me stories of growing up in Brooklyn. It makes me feel good. But I also know that it is what God wants me to do.

Chris talks about the hypocrisy of his clergy and fellow congregants. He does not go to Church anymore. He feels that they all should follow Christ's teachings, as he understands them, to

give all their money away to the poor. He does not do this himself. Rabbi Hillel said: “If I'm not for myself, who will be?” I would not give that amount of funds that would compromise my ability to continue to give Tzedakah. I live a life well within my means, so that I can continue to support worthy institutions. My understanding of the mitzvah is to share.

I am delighted to have the ability to support the American Society for Technion of which Joel Berkowitz is the Local Director.

IF, AS THE MIDRASH TELLS US, THE IMAGE OF GOD IS HIDDEN DEEP WITHIN US, WE MUST STUDY AND BECOME FRIENDS WITH OUR OWN HUMANITY IN ORDER TO GLIMPSE THAT IMAGE OF GOD. WHEN I STUDY THE TALMUDIC LAWS OF JEWISH BUSINESS ETHICS, I FEEL I AM LEARNING ABOUT THE MIND OF GOD.

Perhaps, then, my Judaism is less of an idealized activity than Chris's faith. As we know, it is important to do the Mitzvoth even if we don't have the Kavanah (intentionality). The doing is the important thing. The faith will follow. And who is the ultimate arbiter of what we should do? It is, in my opinion, ourselves. After study and consultation with the teachers of our community, we are the ones, created in the image of God, to decide how to practice our own Judaism.

We make interpretations and do the mitzvoth, and by learning to carry on with the practice of our Judaism, notwithstanding all the contradictions, ambiguities, and even hypocrisy of life, we are doing nothing less than affirming our faith in God.



The Joy of Mitzvah

Paul Gilman

I DIVIDE THE MITZVOT INTO TWO CATEGORIES. FIRST ARE THE FORMALIZED RITUALS LIKE PRAYER, FASTING, AND KASHRUT. THEN THERE ARE THOSE MITZVOT WHICH LEAD US MORE DIRECTLY ONTO THE PATH OF “G’MILUT CHASEDIM,” WHICH INVOLVES REACHING OUT AND CONNECTING WITH OTHER PEOPLE IN A LOVING AND COMPASSIONATE MANNER, A PATH WHOSE GOAL IS “TIKKUN OLAM,” THE REPAIR OR PERFECTION OF THE WORLD.

I find this second group to be most engaging. The ritualistic mitzvot are also important; mainly insofar, as they serve as reminders that the ultimate goal of Torah is the respectful and compassionate treatment of others, including animals. Too often people see the mitzvot as burdensome obligations rather than the gift from God which Rabbi Heschel describes. The sense of joy and empowerment which one feels when performing an act of “*g’milut chesedim*” is succinctly expressed in the Hebrew expression “*s’char mitzvah mitzvah*”—the reward of a good deed is in the doing. Once people experience this reality, the performance of loving acts becomes habit-forming.

For me, the Torah figure who best understood the joy of mitzvah was Abraham, the progenitor of the Jewish people. He had an intuitive grasp of “*tzedakah*,” which has come to mean charity, but whose core meaning is justice. When God informed him that He was going to destroy the city of Sodom, Abraham became a self-appointed defense counsel for people whom he had never met, all because he feared that some innocents might be killed. He relented in his argument only when God assured him that there were not even ten righteous people in Sodom—not enough to form a *menschlich minyan*. And, while recovering from circumcision, he saw three strangers in the distance, he ran to greet them and offer them his hospitality. He did not want to take a chance that they would pass by, depriving him

of the opportunity of performing the mitzvah of welcoming guests. Abraham never studied Torah, yet by his example, he has been teaching Torah to humanity down through the ages.

There is a familiar homily that expresses the connection between formal prayer, communion with God, and mitzvot aimed at “*tikkun olam*.” A person is caught in traffic on the way to shul and arrives just as *maariv* is ending. He is disappointed and complains that he has missed the service. The rabbi responds: “The prayers are over, but the service is just beginning.”

Paul Gilman: I grew up in Boston and attended Boston Latin School, Harvard College and Hebrew College. I have been a member of Temple Emanuel since 1980.



Doing Mitzvot is Who I Am

Renée Brezniak Glazier

MY INVOLVEMENT IN MITZVOT BEGAN AS A CHILD ASSISTING MY MOTHER PREPARING FOR THE SISTERHOOD SPONSORED FRIDAY NIGHT ONEG, BRINGING TZEDAKAH MONEY TO HEBREW SCHOOL TO BUY A LEAF ON A TREE TO BE PLANTED IN ISRAEL, COLLECTING FOR ISRAEL DOOR TO DOOR AS MY FATHER DID IN HIS BUSINESS OR SINGING SONGS WITH MY BROWNIE TROOP AT A HOME FOR CRIPPLED CHILDREN IN NEWTON. DOING THOSE THINGS MADE ME FEEL GOOD.

Doing mitzvot is my way of living life to the fullest. I joined various organizations, but the ones that have meant the most to me have been the ones where I have been able to connect with others and make a difference.

Sisterhood Temple Emanuel and Women's League for Conservative Judaism are a significant part of my life; in both, I have friends of all ages, have grown in skills and knowledge and have helped others through training and consulting sessions. I have held many leadership roles in both, but the one role I consider most fulfilling is that of mentor or role model.

Role model or mentor has been a role that I have tried to provide for my family as well. I remember one Christmas when our family worked at Rosie's Place. As we drove there, my husband, Irwin, and our children Robyn, Jocelyn, Elizabeth and Jon were fairly quiet. We thought about what would be expected of us. We were put to work cooking, putting out and serving the food. Coming home, we talked about how each of our individual experiences made us feel; we all realized that these women were very much like other women we knew, but that an unfortunate event in their lives had brought them to where they were. This realization stayed with us.

In my professional life, I perform mitzvot daily. When my mother had a stroke, at my husband's suggestion, our family came together to talk about inviting my mother, Sonia Brezniak, to move in with us. We explored our feelings about this and unanimously, but with some trepidation, asked Mom to move in. She agreed and we built on to our home to accommodate everyone's needs. The new family dynamic of three generations living under one roof was, at times, both challenging and rewarding. We all learned so much about ourselves and discovered ways to make it work for each one of us. Was it always easy? No, but we all knew in our hearts that we were doing the right thing for the right reason.

WHEN MY MOTHER PASSED AWAY, I ENROLLED IN UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS IN BOSTON TO STUDY FOR A CERTIFICATE IN GERONTOLOGY; I WANTED TO LEARN MORE ABOUT AGING AND THE AGING PROCESS. DURING MY STUDIES A NEW FIELD OPENED UP TO ME.

After graduation I became the facilitator of a support group for adult children of aging parents; this was a group of which I had been a member when my mother lived with us. I also became a long-term care ombudsman advocating on behalf of nursing home residents; in this capacity I could change the life of one resident at a time for a brief period. From both of these roles, I realized how difficult the elder service maze was for families and, with a colleague, decided to establish a geriatric care management practice to assist families with the many decisions they face as they and their parents age. I have been in business for eight years and during this time each family's experience has enhanced my life. I feel like I am helping do God's work as I advocate and educate and help others to honor mothers, fathers, siblings, aunts and uncles one person at a time.

Renee Brezniak Glazier is a lifelong member of Temple Emanuel. She is a former Sisterhood President, married to past Temple President, Irwin Glazier, and the mother of Robyn Glazier & Charles Hecht, Jocelyn Glazier & Steve Goldberg, Elizabeth Glazier & Michael Piesman, & Jon & Alysha Glazier and grandmother of Sam, Jason & Ben. Renee is the President of Aging Link, Inc., a geriatric care management firm in Newton.



Mitzvah Gorreret Mitzvah (One Mitzvah Leads to Another Mitzvah)

Wayne Goldstein

I FEEL FORTUNATE TO BE IN A POSITION WHERE I CAN HAVE SOME IMPACT ON THE LIVES OF OUR JEWISH YOUTH. AS AN INFORMAL JEWISH EDUCATOR, THE ABILITY TO PERFORM THE MITZVAH OF "TEACH YOUR CHILDREN" IS AN OPPORTUNITY GIVEN TO ME EVERY DAY AT TEMPLE EMANUEL AND OVER THE SUMMER AT CAMP YOUNG JUDEA.

I try to instill the importance of performing acts of loving kindness (*gimilut hasadim*) through the classes I teach, activities I organize, B'nai Mitzvah projects I encourage, and through my interactions with our children in less formal settings. The importance of being a good person is the message I feel obligated to send to our kids in each of these settings and are separate from their athletic, musical, or academic abilities. Every child is special and every child (and adult) should treat each other with respect and kindness. This important message is subtly infused into all of my relationships with children and adults.

By being a positive role model to the next generation and trying to treat everyone I come in contact with in a respectful and gracious manner, my hope is that our children (as well as my own two sons) will recognize the importance of being a “*mensch*.” It would truly be wonderful if these same children are somehow influenced by what they learn with me and feel obligated to work on the mitzvah of “repairing the world” in whatever way they can. Many of the children I know already recognize the importance of this and are able to look outside themselves and are already performing this mitzvah. If all of our children can help repair the world in some small way, then my work with them has been a success and, hopefully, our next generation will live in happiness, good health and peace. *Shanah Tovah*.

Wayne Goldstein, the Harry Kraft Director of Informal Youth Education at Temple Emanuel, is entering his 4th year at the shul. His family and work with Jewish youth are the most important things in his life.



So Many Mitzvot, So Much Meaning

David Goldstone

THERE ARE SO MANY WONDERFUL MITZVOT AND THEY ENCOMPASS ALL ASPECTS OF OUR LIVES - BEARING AND RAISING OUR CHILDREN LOVINGLY; GIVING TZEDAKAH, VISITING THE SICK, AND OTHERWISE REPAIRING THE WORLD AROUND US; HONORING, OBSERVING AND CELEBRATING SHABBAT AND THE HOLIDAYS; SERVICE TO THE COMMUNITY; LOVE OF ISRAEL AND KLAL YISRAEL; TAKING CARE OF OUR BODIES; WATCHING WHAT WE EAT; SHOWING KINDNESS TO OUR NEIGHBORS; LEARNING; AND, OF COURSE, DEVOTION TO THE ONE GOD.

From what I know of our community (and indeed our Conservative Movement generally), while we may have some room for improvement, we do perform so many mitzvot – every day and in every way. And we do our mitzvot for so many reasons and with so many motivations.

With us all performing so many mitzvot, I wonder if it might be helpful to focus on the most meaningful mitzvot. Aren't the mitzvot that most inspire and excite our fellow Conservative Jews the ones that will most likely inspire us and deepen our own relationships with God? When we perform mitzvot with enthusiasm, isn't that what is most likely to share with others our love for Judaism?

So here's my nomination for that kind of a model mitzvah: The mitzvah of building and being in the sukkah. My family and I do this every year, and we always invite others to join us. If you haven't tried this before, we hope you consider it now.

Here's how we do it, and it works great. Every year before Sukkot we have a sukkah-building party, and we invite over friends and their kids. People who come to help are usually people who are not building their own sukkah (and sometimes they are people who are not Jewish – such as a spouse in an interfaith family). Some help with

construction and others make decorations. (Some people just nosh and kibbitz, of course.) When the walls eventually go up and the s'chach is put on top, we have a great feeling of accomplishment and pride. Adding the decorations makes it even more festive!

Then, for the next week or two, we eat, read, and entertain in our new little hut in the backyard. And shaking the lulav and the etrog in a sukkah is a great Sukkot activity that everyone can try. It sometimes gets a bit chilly here in New England but there are always some nice days; plus, that little chill is also a reminder that the long winter is not yet here.

Our sukkah is a fabulous mitzvah that inspires us in ways too numerous to count, but here are a few reasons that I offer it as a model mitzvah:

- Sukkot has a profound theological message for our relationships with God, encompassing the unity and omnipotence of God, and our reliance upon God;
- Building and being in a sukkah and shaking the lulav and etrog are distinctively Jewish and firmly grounded in Torah, halacha and tradition;
- A sukkah is tangible - we can have fun and take pride in building, decorating and dwelling in it;
- A sukkah, lulav, and etrog do not require extensive learning or background to enjoy – Jews with limited backgrounds and non-Jews do not find them as tedious or threatening as certain other ritual practices;
- The sukkah, lulav and etrog can be performed at home, and thus empower us to “do it ourselves” and approach our tradition as an active participant;
- Building a sukkah is well-matched to our suburban lifestyle; and
- The “sukkah of peace” is a profound metaphor (already in our liturgy) that with our own sukkah we can further establish in our children and ourselves.

WE'LL BE BUILDING OUR SUKKAH THIS YEAR ON SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 23. IF YOU WANT TO PARTICIPATE, COME ON BY. OR CONSIDER WHETHER THIS IS THE YEAR TO BUILD YOUR OWN SUKKAH, AND TO INVITE FRIENDS AND FAMILY – JEWS AND NON-JEWS – TO JOIN YOU TOO!

David Goldstone is married to Melissa Goldstone, and lives in Newton Centre with their three beautiful daughters – Tove (4), Emma (3) and Lily (9 months). Naturally, we are fans of Temple Emanuel's Tot Shabbat service.



The Bond of Mitzvah

Rabbi Arnold M. Goodman

MITZVAH DEFINES ME AS A JEW AND AS A HUMAN BEING. MITZVOT COMMANDING US TO BE MORAL, ETHICAL AND EMBRACE A “SOCIAL JUSTICE” AGENDA ARE NOT DIRECTED ONLY TO JEWS. THE “SEVEN MITZVOT” GIVEN TO ALL OF NOAH’S DESCENDANTS CHALLENGE JEWS AND GENTILES ALIKE TO EMBRACE HONESTY, INTEGRITY, CONCERN FOR THE POOR AND THE SANCTITY OF EVERY HUMAN LIFE.

We, who are the descendants of those who experienced Divine Revelation at Sinai, are called upon to perform many other mitzvot in our quest for *kedushah* or sanctification. The *mitzvot* specifically commanded to *Am Yisrael* [the Jewish People] define me as a Jew.

Others observe their Sabbath on Friday or Sunday. For millennia, however, Saturday is our *Shabbat* with its menu of unique rituals of candles, *kiddush*, Synagogue attendance.

Like all human beings, we crave and need nourishment, yet our diet has very specific limitations. Keeping kosher helps us maintain a dimension of uniqueness. We stay away from certain foods not because of high fat or sugar

content, not to neutralize high cholesterol numbers or to regulate diabetes, but because we are to seek *kedushah* or sanctification by not eating pork or shellfish or mixing meat and milk.

Affixing a *mezuzah* to our doorposts and donning the ritual worship items of *tallit* and *tefillin* are also ways we are to incorporate *mitzvah* into the very fabric of our lives.

These and other *mitzvot* enrich my life in various ways. Firstly, *mitzvah* enables me to perceive myself as a link in a chain that was first forged at Sinai and to be added to well into the future. Secondly, through *mitzvah*, I bond with like-minded Jews in all walks of life and in all parts of the world. Sitting in a Synagogue in Beijing or Bangkok or in other communities, there is instant rapport with those at my side.

In our own community, we often bond with others through *mitzvah*. The student, for example, who absents himself for the High Holidays or brings matzah for her lunch during Passover feels an immediate one-ness with others who are doing the same.

Thirdly, *mitzvah* creates order in my life. My morning is not complete if I haven't donned *tallit* and *tefillin*. Candles and wine and *Kiddush* transform Friday night and Saturdays into Shabbat. *Kashrut* creates a focus for my diet. As I permit *mitzvah* to define more and more of my life, my children and grandchildren will hopefully come to share these values and perceive themselves as links in that great historic chain that is *Am Yisrael*.

Finally, I believe that *mitzvot* are commands from God on how to live my life, perhaps in order to attain the aforementioned three benefits of *mitzvah*. I believe that *mitzvah*, with its bonding power, is part of a Divine strategy enabling us to survive as a People and as unique and sanctified People.

WHILE ALL HUMANITY IS COMMANDED TO EMBRACE THE SEVEN NOAHIDE MITZVOT, IT IS UPON US THAT GOD HAS BESTOWED THE RESPONSIBILITY, THE BURDEN AND THE PRIVILEGE TO PERFORM THOSE UNIQUE MITZVOT THAT FORM

THAT BOND BOTH WITH OUR ANCESTORS AND WITH THE ONE WHO REVEALED HIMSELF AT SINAI.

Rabbi Arnold M. Goodman served pulpits in Chicago, Minneapolis and Atlanta. He is a former President of the Rabbinical Assembly. He is also blessed to be the father of Shira Goodman and the father-in-love of Rabbi Wesley Gardenswartz. He and his wife Rae now live in Jerusalem, but feel privileged to be always welcomed at Temple Emanuel.



Hillel's Luster

David S. Greenfield

MY FATHER WAS A GOOD MAN. I LEARNED A LOT FROM HIM, AND I CONTINUE TO LEARN FROM HIM EVEN THOUGH HE IS NO LONGER HERE TO OFFER GUIDANCE.

He endured terrible suffering and loss, but it did not diminish his good nature and zest for life. He was generous and did good deeds, *mitzvot*, without thinking about or planning to perform *mitzvot*. It was just natural for him. He was my hero. In the private, quiet times we shared, I had occasion to hear precious snippets of his life in Europe before, during and immediately after the "war." In one favorite pearl about Shabbat afternoons, I could close my eyes and "see" my father with his grandfather at their ritual of study. *Pirke Avot* was always a favorite text. The wisdom of Rabbi Hillel's words inscribed within had particular resonance for my father. He often quoted phrases from Hillel's insights ... "If I am not for myself, who will be? But if I am only for myself, what am I? I am not obligated to finish the task, but I am not absolved from starting" ... and, "If not now, when?"

This last verse was inscribed on the gold chain he wore around his neck. My sister and I respectfully selected that same phrase to etch into his matzsevah. It was however another teaching of Hillel that I most identified with how my father lived his life ... “*Treat your neighbor as you would yourself.*” The rest, as we know, is commentary.

My father was born into an observant home, typical of Jewish families in his small Polish town. But scarred upon his emergence from the Shoah, adherence to religious ritual and reverence for a just, loving, and protective God were no longer immediate imperatives. Despite the traumas, the wisdom, guidance and traditions experienced in his youth were never lost, nor did they diminish the luster of Hillel’s words which remained part of his fiber.

I never had a grandfather to sit and study with, nor did my father renew his tradition of Shabbat afternoon study with me. Whatever I learned was by observing actions. So, I too, do not consciously pursue doing mitzvot; it is not in defiance of the command to do so, or because I do not covet the joy to be experienced in the performance. Treating my neighbor as I would treat myself is a natural for me, just as it was for my father, my hero. The rest can be considered commentary.

David S. Greenfield: My parents are survivors. I was born in a DP camp right after the Shoah and just before the rebirth of the State of Israel. This joint Legacy has melded to form the building blocks of my Jewish identity.



Doing brings Meaning: Kashering the Kitchen

Roberta Gross-Torres

JUST AFTER *PESACH* OF THIS YEAR I COMPLETED THE PROCESS OF *KASHERING* MY KITCHEN. ALTHOUGH I CAN NOT TELL YOU WHY, I ALWAYS KNEW IT WAS THE RIGHT THING FOR ME TO DO. BUT, LIFE GOT COMPLICATED AND TIME SLIPPED AWAY. *KASHERING* THE KITCHEN BECAME ONE OF THOSE ITEMS FAR DOWN ON THE “TO DO” LIST.

My “empty nester” years presented me with opportunities to observe more *mitzvot* than ever before. I was able to attend shul more regularly. I could attend more adult learning classes and participate in volunteer activities. I found that I was prioritizing my life to do more, and the more I did, the more I wanted to do. Moreover, I realized that fulfilling what seemed to be the most minor *mitzvot* (are any of the *mitzvot* minor?) was adding purpose to the mundane – a sort of “multi-tasking” in a religious way! Little by little that old desire to *kasher* my kitchen crept up on me again. I wanted to maintain a *kosher* home. I wanted to keep *kosher* when eating out. I really wanted to accept the obligation to purchase, prepare and eat food according to our religious tradition and laws.

I started out reading books, magazine articles and information on web sites. Then, I talked to friends who keep kosher homes about all the practical things like how they use their dishwashers, dish towels, sponges, soaps, tablecloths, etc.

My questions must have sounded incredibly foolish and naive. I met with Rabbi Gardenswartz who gave wonderful advice and promised to come to the house to help when the time was right.

Next, I evaluated my kitchen and a 35 year-old collection of kitchenware. Evaluating what could be *kashered* and handing the rest over to special people felt like a religious activity in itself. I cleaned cabinets and scrubbed appliances. I purchased new kitchen

items, many of which were duplicates: one red and one blue. I found a big stone to put in a pot of boiling water in which to immerse silverware. I heated pots and pans until paper touching them singed. I rearranged my kitchen and developed new habits and routines of working in it.

In accepting the obligation/*mitzvah* of *kasbrut*, I agreed to purchase, prepare and consume food according to our tradition. I felt proud. I felt humbled. I do not feel like a better Jew, but like I am living a “more Jewish” life. Finally I was ready. I called Rabbi Gardenswartz. He came to the house and helped scrub countertops. We said a *shehechianu* and both of us rejoiced. I felt like a new bride.

Roberta Gross-Torres lives in Jamaica Plain. She sells residential real estate.



Why Do Mitzvot?

Ken Grundfast

WHY DO WE DO MITZVOT? IS IT BECAUSE GOD TELLS US TO DO CERTAIN THINGS, OR, IS IT

BECAUSE, ON A HUMAN LEVEL, WE HAVE LEARNED THAT DOING CERTAIN DEEDS IS BENEFICIAL TO US AND TO THE COMMUNITY IN WHICH WE LIVE?

That is, are we doing mitzvot because God is like a coach on the sidelines of a football field and we are like the quarterback ready to go to the scrimmage hearing the voice of God piped into our helmet telling us what do? Or, are we more like the quarterbacks who have no wireless hook-up to a coach so that we call our own plays, we learn from experience, constantly assessing what we see in front of us, making adjustments as needed, and taking the strategic actions that will help us and our team to succeed?

Mordecai Kaplan might say that we may have been coached in what to do, but we make our own decisions, keeping in mind that the best outcomes are expected when we have cohesiveness and harmony among the players on our team. Abraham Joshua Heschel likely would say that we take actions because we are receiving signals at all times from the almighty God and we are fearful of doing wrong in the eyes of God. Kaplan suggests that mitzvot are proscribed behaviors that we as a community of Jews do because we know that doing these deeds helps us to live together in harmony, and to survive as a community within a world that can sometimes be hostile and threatening. To Kaplan, the mitzvot are a binding, an adhesive that keeps us together. To Heschel, the mitzvot come to us as divine heavenly mandates, sent from God to man. In Heschel’s view, the motivation to act in certain ways comes from an external all-knowing force while Kaplan seems to believe that the motivation for doing good is earthly, within each individual, collectively within a community and the doing of certain deeds has a pragmatic preservationist value.

Whether God is in the forefront or background in our lives, there comes a time in almost everyone’s life when we do think about God and need to feel that there is a place to turn for solace, guidance, comfort, and hope. After all, every quarterback, those who receive signals in their helmets and those who call each play on their own, instantaneously puts faith in a higher power to throw the “Hail Mary” pass when facing an imminent game loss with no time left to run a well-designed and practiced play.

And what do I believe? Like Kaplan, I believe that doing mitzvot has served to maintain our community of individuals throughout the millennia – doing certain things and avoiding doing other things can engender harmony that leads to a communal sense of togetherness – out of the communal ethos of doing good deeds and following accepted rules of behavior comes the sense of being part of a distinct community with wholesome values. The opposite of this would be an every-man-for-himself individualistic loose

community that might be prone to the endless strife and in-fighting that would make the community more precarious and less able to survive throughout the ages. Thus, I am keenly aware of the preservationist secular aspect of doing mitzvot.

HOWEVER, DOING MITZVOT IS NOT ALL ABOUT PRESERVING COMMUNITIES OF JEWS. I DO FIND THAT RELIGION, TALMUDIC TEACHINGS, AND THE SPIRITUALITY THAT COMES FROM BEING AN OBSERVANT JEW BELONGING TO A VIBRANT SYNAGOGUE PROVIDE ME WITH AN INTERNAL GYROSCOPE THAT HELPS ME TO NAVIGATE ESPECIALLY WHEN I AM HAVING TROUBLE FINDING MY WAY.

Though our understanding of the world around us has increased enormously in the past century, I believe that man is at risk of drifting insidiously toward a meaningless way of living as humankind becomes ever more confident about human powers and less apt to live in awe of natural wonders. In the modern world, too many people have become egocentric; as mysteries are whittled away, as we understand more biology, genetics, chemistry, physics, astronomy, psychology, we can explain in scientific terms aspects of the world that in a prior era might have seemed to be under the direct influence of an ethereal higher being. Nonetheless, like Heschel, I believe that a sense of radical amazement adds greatly to the spirituality and meaning of human life. We cannot ever understand all that is in this world or all that happens in the course of human life.

Although some of the 613 mitzvot seem arcane and difficult to comprehend, most of the mitzvot are laden with meaning and that is why I view the mitzvot as valuable pithy tidbits of advice. In fact, I have to say, the older I get the more meaning I find in the mitzvot and the more I strive to learn and follow these tidbits of advice on how to live a good life.



The Daily Minyan – a Recurring Mitzvah

Dr. Debbie Guthermann

I BEGAN ATTENDING MINYAN WHEN MY MOTHER DIED BECAUSE I THOUGHT IT WAS THE RIGHT THING TO DO. IT WAS A WAY TO MEMORIALIZE HER IN A JEWISH TRADITIONAL SENSE AS A WORTHY PERSON WHOSE CHILD WAS WILLING TO STAND AMONG THE CONGREGATION FOR A PERIOD OF ELEVEN MONTHS AND SANCTIFY GOD'S NAME BY SAYING KADDISH FOR HER. THIS CHALLENGE BEGAN WITH A SENSE OF DAUNTING RESPONSIBILITY BECAUSE I KNEW THAT MY FATHER WAS NOT PHYSICALLY ABLE, AND THAT MY BROTHER WOULD NOT CHOOSE TO DO SO.

During the course of this process, there occurred a profound transformation in my attitude. Yes, the sense of obligation remained, but I quickly realized that there was much more to the experience. First, the core of our daily minyan at Temple Emanuel is a wonderfully supportive and very social group. Since many of the regulars joined when they too were saying kaddish, for me it became a network of people who knew and personally understood my sense of loss. There were always warm greetings, and in the mornings I was soon participating in the pre-davening coffee klatch.

Next arose the spiritual aspect – the sense of comfort and peace that I derived from starting and ending the day with my new routine, watching the sun rise through the skylight of the chapel, sometimes losing myself in reverie as I followed along with the chanting of the service, the simple satisfaction of leaving a charitable donation in a tzedakah box afterwards, all in the process of setting aside time to remember my mother. Finally, there ensued the education in Jewish prayer and ritual throughout the cycle of the year as I derived meaning from the text, and ultimately evolved into someone who is able to lead the service, a shaleach

tzibor. My interest expanded to learning Torah and haftarah trope, which I taught myself using the music sheets that my daughter had been given as she had studied for her bat mitzvah a few years before.

When my official term of saying kaddish ended, my commitment to the minyan group remained. I continued to attend a few times a week and became more involved. Sadly, I also subsequently said kaddish two more times, for both my father and my brother.

I see the daily minyan as an integral force of our Temple community, strengthening our ties with our tradition of prayer, and also offering a warm, welcoming and reassuring place for people to come when they need the power and comfort that is part of being with this group.

THE FORMULA IS SIMPLE – COME FOR WHATEVER REASON MOVES YOU, AND STAY FOR THE DAVENING, THE CAMARADERIE, THE BREAKFAST, AND OF COURSE, THE COFFEE.

Dr. Debbie Guthermann is an audiologist, and a partner in the West Newton Hearing Center. At Temple Emanuel, she is a member of the Board of Directors, a Sisterhood vice president, a service leader for the Bereavement Committee, and a teammate of the daily minyan kitchen crew.



Live to Do Mitzvot

Suzanne Hanser-Teperow

I NEVER KNEW THAT MITZVAH MEANT COMMANDMENT.

DOING MITZVOT WAS SIMPLY WHAT JEWISH PEOPLE DID. IT WAS A SMALL WAY OF THANKING GOD FOR BREATH, LIFE, LOVE, BEAUTY AND NATURE. I ALWAYS KNEW IT WAS MY RESPONSIBILITY TO TAKE CARE OF GOD'S WORLD AND GOD'S CREATURES AND I TOOK THAT TASK

SERIOUSLY. IT WAS THE LEAST I COULD DO FOR THE MANY GIFTS I RECEIVED. I WAS GRATEFUL TO HAVE A LOVING FAMILY, A LOVELY HOME, AND A LOVE-FILLED LIFE.

I wish I could credit my parents for teaching me this theology. But I am afraid that my father cursed God more than he praised God. He had survived the horrors of World War II and seen my mother's physical pain. She was ill most of her life and all of mine, so it was difficult for my parents to express appreciation to a higher power. We did not lead a religious life, but I learned from them that it was important to identify as a Jew and to do mitzvot. This was easy for me. Giving to others was a selfish act - it made me feel good. My parents were socially conscious advocates who were motivated by a clear sense of right and wrong. They were strong role models for serving others. So there was no question that this would be my life's mission, as well.

I also remember, as a child, looking with awe at the magnificence of nature and art, and musing at my mother's sweet voice. These creations were divine; there was no other way to explain their grandeur. As an adult, it is such a miracle to be alive, to bear children, to love, to be loved, and to use all of my senses to experience God's creations. I believe in the God within me. Now I live an observant life because of my husband's convictions, our dear family's commitment, and my devotion to his values. At last, it all begins to come together. God's wisdom and God's plan commands us to live a full Jewish life by performing mitzvot as we take care of each other and protect the earth that sustains us. This is the only way for me to continue God's work - the only way to live.

Suzanne Hanser-Teperow is the Founding Chair of the Music Therapy Department at Berklee College of Music and Music Therapist at Dana-Farber Cancer Institute. She is proud mother of three and stepmother of three, an adoring wife, and a madricha at Mayyim Hayyim.

Larryism

Larry Heimlich

RABBI SHAMMAI WAS AN ENGINEER, KNOWN FOR THE STRICTNESS OF HIS VIEWS. THE TALMUD TELLS THAT A GENTILE CAME TO SHAMMAI SAYING THAT HE WOULD CONVERT TO JUDAISM IF SHAMMAI COULD TEACH HIM THE WHOLE TORAH IN THE TIME THAT HE COULD STAND ON ONE FOOT. SHAMMAI DROVE HIM AWAY WITH A BUILDER'S MEASURING STICK! HILLEL, ON THE OTHER HAND, CONVERTED THE GENTILE BY TELLING HIM, "THAT WHICH IS HATEFUL TO YOU, DO NOT DO TO YOUR NEIGHBOR. THAT IS THE WHOLE TORAH; THE REST IS COMMENTARY. GO AND STUDY IT."

My God is an abstraction. My God has provided all of us with a moral and ethical code by which to live and love. This code, these mitzvot, have been handed down through the millennia, first orally and then through writings of the learned and wise. To live by them arguably requires perfection which probably is unattainable, but it doesn't mean we should not attempt to achieve more.

Mitzvot provide me with a moral compass that points to a way of living, loving and behaving. Understanding this, like all knowledge, requires study (Talmud), requires empathy and above all, requires practice and determination.

Like every new skill, we sometimes have to feel uncomfortable or force ourselves to bring about change to perform the mitzvah not previously done, considered important, or necessary.

Upon my father's death almost four years ago, I began saying Kaddish... and I continued to attend Shabbat services because it seemed right, it seemed comfortable... it seemed that I belonged in and to the Temple. (Formal religious education had ended long ago after studying for my Bar Mitzvah for five years, five days a week in New York City. I look back at that experience as most unsatisfying. The only motivation to attend was the threat of punishment from my Mother or Father ... interestingly enough secular Jews who rarely attended services or Jews without Judaism.)

As I attended services, I was captivated by the mysteries and melodies of the services and usually joyous events celebrated weekly. I was also drawn to the intellectualism exhibited by Rabbi Gardenswartz. I wanted to belong and to understand more about what I was witnessing. This led me to Meah and subsequently to join the Rabbi's Talmud class.

A long-time friend of mine passed away earlier this year. My wife was closer to his wife than I was to him. Despite that, I was mitzvah-bound to attend the funeral and make several Shiva calls... because it was the "right" thing to do. It was the voice of Rabbi Hillel saying that I would have appreciated a similar show of respect for me and my family.

Last spring I was on a business trip and on an airplane. I was intent on reading Shattered Fragments and rarely speak with anyone seated next to me. (A friend of mine always discourages airplane conversation with his seatmate by answering the "what do you do question" with the response "I'm an undertaker.")

FOR SOME UNKNOWN REASON, I BECAME ENGAGED IN CONVERSATION WITH A 30-YEAR-OLD WOMAN WHO WAS RETURNING FROM A VISIT WITH HER MOTHER WHO LIVED IN THE SOUTH. SHE BEGAN TO TELL ME SOME THINGS ABOUT HERSELF AND HER LIFE, HER LIMITED EDUCATION, AND ABOUT THE DIFFICULTY OF GROWING UP ON THE WRONG SIDE OF THE TRACKS. THERE WAS SOMETHING THAT MOTIVATED ME TO TELL HER ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF PURSUING A MORE FORMAL EDUCATION THAT WAS EASILY WITHIN HER REACH.

Her response was that it was the same message her mother spent the weekend trying to drum in to her. It was my companion's belief that her "Lord" was sending her a message, first through her mother and now through a complete stranger that she needed to and was capable of accomplishing more in her life.

What was my motivation in speaking with her? Was it a force of mitzvah that ironically pulled me

away from a book of Jewish study, to do a mitzvah where, perhaps in the past, I would not have tread. Is this Larryism? Is this my Torah? Is this my God?

Larry Heimlich: Larry and Arline's Simcha list includes the marriage of his son Marc to Donna last year, the forthcoming September wedding of his daughter Lauren to Eitan Rubinstein, to be followed (two weeks later?) by Donna giving birth to our first grandchild. All of these dots are connected.



The Mitzvah of Visiting Israel

Jessica Hills

THE MITZVAH OF VISITING ISRAEL HAS BEEN PARTICULARLY PREVALENT IN MY LIFE THIS PAST YEAR. WHEN I THINK ABOUT MY TWO MOST RECENT TRIPS TO ISRAEL—ONE IN DECEMBER WITH OUR CONGREGATION AND ONE THIS PAST SUMMER WITH CAMP YAVNEH—MASADA IMMEDIATELY STANDS OUT AS A HIGHLIGHT OF EACH VISIT.

Sharing this experience with special people in a special place caused me to think about the choices I have made in my observance of Judaism and why it is so important to do mitzvot.

Over the summer, I traveled throughout Israel for six weeks with a group of about thirty of my closest friends from camp. Masada was one of the last stops on our tour, and we went there directly from the army base where we had just completed a week of basic army training called Gadna.

AT FIRST, WE WERE NOT PSYCHED ABOUT HAVING TO WAKE UP AT FOUR IN THE MORNING TO HIKE MASADA AT SUNRISE; BUT BY THE END OF OUR TREK, EACH OF US WAS MOVED AND INSPIRED.

Although we were exhausted physically, climbing Masada after having just finished Gadna enabled us to feel a deeper connection to the story of the

Zealots. All soldiers in the Israeli army climb Masada, and after our own army experience we had a new perspective on the importance of defending Israel and the Jewish people. Reflecting on the difficult decision the Zealots had to make when they ultimately committed suicide on Masada, we realized how important it is to protect Israel today so that the Jewish people will never again have to face the same tragic situation that occurred on Masada so many years ago.

I can recall standing with both my synagogue community and my closest Yavneh friends and looking off into the abyss as we davened a spiritual Shacharit service. I considered what I would have done had I been a Zealot, and thought about how amazing – how awesome – it is that despite centuries of defending our land against all odds, we can still stand proudly on Masada today with hundreds of other Jews. By feeling a special connection to Judaism on Masada, by sharing this experience with other Jews, and by going back again and again, I feel I am fulfilling a mitzvah. I realize the importance of living an active Jewish life that gets passed on through the generations so that the Jewish people will never again have to undergo the plight of the Zealots.

Jessica Hills is a senior at Newton North High School. She attended Temple Emanuel Nursery School, is a graduate of the religious school, and graduated Prozdor in 2007. She is also currently Co-President of the synagogue's USY chapter and a leader in the Youth Social Justice Initiative.



Mitzvot

Meredith Hills

ONE OF THE 613 MITZVOT IS KEEPING SHABBAT.

I HAVE ALWAYS THOUGHT ABOUT OBSERVING THIS COMMANDMENT BUT, WHETHER IT'S A HUGE STACK OF HOMEWORK, A WARM CAR RIDE TO SYNAGOGUE, OR THE NEWEST MOVIE IN THEATERS, SOMETHING ALWAYS SEEMS TO GET IN THE WAY.

However, during my summers at Camp Yavneh, a Jewish overnight camp in New Hampshire, the way I observe Judaism is a little different. I start off each morning with tefillot, something I normally wouldn't do at home, and say birkat hamazon after every meal. In addition, for the time spent at camp I am Shomer Shabbas. For me, as well as for the other campers who don't usually do this, the first Shabbat can be a challenge. It takes great self-restraint not to listen to i-pods and it can be frustrating when we need to get dressed but can't see because we cannot turn the lights on. The campers, however, are not the only ones struggling. The head counselors must be up before eight in the morning so that they can go around and wake each bunk since we are unable to use alarm clocks and, during meals, it is a great feat for the staff to get us quiet without the use of microphones. Though this mitzvah might seem pointless in the beginning, each Shabbat gets easier and easier and, by the time I get home, it seems strange to use electricity on a Saturday. Now that I have been spending my summers at Yavneh for six years I have come to love the long Shabbas days free from electricity. There is no experience like a Shabbat at Camp Yavneh and the relaxed nature of the day is one of the aspects that makes it so special. I love observing this mitzvah even though it is only for two months out of the year. Observing the Shabbat is wonderful and I encourage everyone to try it. It is really nice to take one day out of the week where you can stop rushing around and just enjoy and appreciate the day!

Meredith Hills is a sophomore at Newton North High School. She is a graduate of the Temple Emanuel Religious School and now goes to Prozdor. She is the Vice President of Israel Affairs and Programming for Temple Emanuel's chapter of USY.



The Mitzvah of Bikkur Cholim, Visiting the Sick

Nancy Cahners Hindman

I WENT TO SEE 98 YEAR-OLD LEAH (NOT HER REAL NAME) BECAUSE MY SOCIAL WORKER COLLEAGUE ASKED ME TO – NOT BECAUSE I WANTED TO. I WAS PART OF A CHAPLAINCY TRAINING PROGRAM AT HEBREW REHAB, BUT I HAD BEGUN TO DREAD MY DAYS AT WORK. I FELT NEARLY SUFFOCATED BY THE SADNESS ALL AROUND ME.

Even at a wonderful and loving place like Hebrew Rehab, the lives of our fragile elders seemed a cruel ordeal. I longed to return to the world of hospital chaplaincy, where there is at least the hope of a cure—if not for this patient, then maybe for the next. But no one gets cured of old age. Plus, in the hospital, the speed and complexity of making treatment decisions in a high-tech setting distracted me from my own terror of out-living the people and circumstances I love most. In long-term care, there was no shelter from the erosion of endless loss of health, loss of independence, loss of identity, loss of dignity, loss of loved ones, loss of home, loss of purpose.

My heart was broken by what I saw, and by what I feared would happen to me as I aged. My training told me that I had crossed a line. I had lost the boundary between “them” and me, and with it, my capacity to help. But I went to see Leah anyway, because I knew I had to. Yes, I wanted the training credential, but it's also true that I felt

obligated. Now that I had seen the loss-laden land of old age, I felt I had a duty to help. I couldn't turn away. But I wanted to.

More than once I turned to religious notions to keep me going. It helped me to know that I was fulfilling a mitzvah. I felt strengthened by attaching my actions to some kind of higher notion. To stave off my aching helplessness in the face of such suffering, I carried a prayer by Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen in the front of my mind: *May I trust that the way You have made me is the way that is needed.*

I let myself treasure little stories that I didn't actually believe, but that I desperately *wanted* to be true. For example, I tried to persuade myself that, indeed, each visitor carries off 1/60 of the patient's suffering. I tried to fortify myself by imagining the Shekhinah standing at the head of every bed, and that I, standing at the foot, could somehow reflect God's *chesed* – not because this scenario was all credible, but because I dearly wished for *something* greater and more powerful to offer. I visited Leah almost once a week for about 6 months. And we would talk. And I came to look forward to our visits. Nothing she told me led me to change my mind about the bleakness of this phase of her life, but over time, my affection for her hoisted me over my dread.

The program had a little graduation at the end of the training, and afterward, I brought my husband and son to meet Leah. It was just before her lunch, and I had to search her out in the dining room. That's when I noticed anew some things about her that I had stopped seeing: Leah was a tiny woman, at most only 4 and a half feet tall. And Leah was blind. In her room, where I usually visited her, I experienced her as regular-sized, and sighted. Now, seeing her looking ever so slight in her chair, with her clouded eyes opened wide and staring, I realized how much our relationship had transcended our physical selves.

DURING THE INTRODUCTIONS, LEAH CLASPED MY HUSBAND'S HAND AND SAID, "YOUR WIFE HAS BEEN MY SUNSHINE."

Every time I revisit this memory I feel like crying for reasons I have had trouble explaining to others, and to myself. No, it's not just the warmth of my fondness for Leah. No, it's not just the satisfaction that I did something helpful. It's something different, and it's something bigger. I felt at that moment that something magnificent happened to me and for me. I felt blessed with a wave of confidence that the world is a glorious place to be. And this experience has left me humbled and awash with gratitude. To tell you the truth, I'm embarrassed to talk about this. It would be easier for me to package my experience in the language of, let's say, Sociobiology. Then I could say something like, "Individuals derive psychological pleasure from sustaining weaker members, thereby furthering the success of the species." Now that sounds like something I could sign on for—but it doesn't begin to capture my experience.

Here's what I have learned about mitzvot: When the going gets tough, our tradition is a robust and sustaining source of support. The prayer that helped me surmount my sense of inadequacy, the notion that my service was useful (though imperceptible), and the reassurance that my puny efforts were amplified by the Shekhinah – all of these combined to hold me on course. The huge surprise for me was to discover that fulfilling a mitzvah carries a magnificent reward: I felt suffused with an enthusiasm for life that made everything feel possible – even dying. And if I were, as Heschel suggests, ever to meet God, I'll bet that's exactly what it would feel like.



Somewhere Between Having To and Wanting To

Sherry Berson Moss Holstein

WHEN I FIRST HEARD RABBI GARDENSWARTZ DISCUSS THE MITZVOT PROJECT, I WAS SITTING IN HIS HOME WITH TWENTY OF MY ME'AH CLASSMATES. ON THAT EARLY SPRING NIGHT, AS THE RABBI SPOKE, I BECAME AWARE OF MYSELF CLINGING ONTO THE MITZVOT OF MY CHILDHOOD.

My parents taught me to pray, and I believed that God would punish me if I lapsed in this duty. Similarly, if I lied about finishing my homework, if I stole my mother's perfume from her bureau top, I felt certain that God would punish me. I prayed even more fervently. But even then, I knew that amongst the admonitions, I also felt a calmness and compassion in my praying. Plus, there was something safe within such stark confines of right and wrong. So comforting, that to this day, I find myself tempted by a moral certitude. I still find myself wondering what God might think about something that I've done or am about to do; I still find myself praying for forgiveness. Even in decisions which do not have immediate personal impact: do I support a war, do I agree with a Court decision; automatically, in the back of my mind, is a picture of God (who, by the way, continues, after all these years, to look exactly like Dr. Foster, my gentile pediatrician); and I wonder what He would judge that I should think or do. God remains as the foundation within me, even as I recognize life's nuanced ambiguities.

There were two synagogues, the "shul" (Orthodox) and the "temple" (Conservative) in Portland, Maine, where I grew up. Portland then had a Jewish population of about 3,000. I knew nearly all of these people. We behaved similarly in our Jewishness. The Jews I knew were kosher, walked to services on the High Holidays, and no matter how poor, gave money to Jewish charities. My Jewish community in coastal Maine has been the most formative part of who I have become.

My parents experienced themselves as Jews of the Diaspora; my children do not. I fall in-between.

Somewhere, in the spirit of the "60's," in my need to leave home, I abandoned this no-questions-asked Jewishness of mine. I read existentialism. I ate cheeseburgers. No longer were nearly all the important people in my world Jewish. I'm not sure when I stopped praying, but I did.

HAVING CHILDREN TURNED MY COMPASS YET AGAIN. SOMEWHERE BETWEEN "WANTING TO" AND "HAVING TO," I WENT BACK TO SHUL. I FASTED AGAIN ON YOM KIPPUR. ON PASSOVER, I MADE SEDERS; I THREW OUT THE BREAD. AND WITH EACH TOSS OF A CEREAL BOX, I SURPRISED MYSELF BY FEELING MORE GROUNDED.

As the years spin by, I find myself thinking more about God. I remember those feelings of connection in belonging to a close Jewish community. I continue to believe in a supernatural God and in the commandments. But my beliefs have morphed and modified, as have I.

It remains an ongoing process for me: sorting out why I continue to do the Jewish things I do. Some is for that sense of Jewish community. Some remains duty; some is my instinctual belief in God. Much is for tradition, to pass on that essential part of myself and of my ancestors to my children. In the flickering flame of my Shabbos candles, I see my mother's hands. My father chanting in Hebrew shadows. My husband at the Seder table. I want my children to carry these memories. An invigorating, if sometimes puzzling, combination of duty, compassion, belief, love of family, tradition and study. All of it feels comfortable. It's identity.

Sherry Berson Moss Holstein is married to Ned Holstein; between them they have five children. Sherry practices and teaches psychotherapy.

Mitzvah as Both Commandment and Good Deed

Sid and Helen Kadish

WE ARE DELIGHTED TO HAVE AN OPPORTUNITY TO ENGAGE OUR MINDS AND HEARTS AND TO ENDEAVOR TO ANSWER THESE DIFFICULT QUESTIONS.

We see Mitzvah as both commandment and good deed. These are the two translations of the word. Commandment is literal, and contains the essence of the Seminary teaching. Mitzvah is also Yiddish parlance for good deed, a folk language extension of the first meaning.

We agree in the richness of nuance in the meaning of Mitzvah. To us, it means a concrete action or deed in which we seek Kedushah (holiness) and in a small way, achieve it. An example would be erecting a sukkah.

Since performance of Mitzvah is tangible and not just words, it is an example to children, and hence, a wonderful and effective educational tool to show how we “do Judaism.”

Some of us spend the time learning about the details and background of a Mitzvah. So erecting a sukkah implies knowledge of the rules of what makes a sukkah kosher and what will nullify it. This enriches the Mitzvah activity, and again educates ourselves and our children together.

Finally, performance of a Mitzvah is often a family event. We recently mounted a mezzuzah on our new vacation home. Our son recited the brachah. Together we imparted a sense of Kedushah to the new house.



Mitzvot and Memories

Eileen Kagno

WHEN THE LETTER CAME FROM RABBI GARDENSWARTZ SEVERAL WEEKS AGO I THOUGHT TO MYSELF: “THIS IS RIGHT UP MY ALLEY - IT IS EXACTLY WHAT I LIKE TO DO - SPOUT OFF ABOUT THINGS.” THE LETTER MENTIONED THAT THE ESSAY SHOULD FOCUS ON MITZVOT. THE ONLY THING THAT BOTHERED ME WAS - I NEVER THOUGHT OF A MITZVAH AS A COMMANDMENT. I THOUGHT IT WAS A KIND DEED THAT YOU DID - ONE PERSON FOR ANOTHER - OUT OF LOVE AND CONSIDERATION. SO, HERE WE GO.

First, I'd like to talk about my mother-in-law. It is from our parents that we learn about mitzvot. They learned from their parents, and we hope our children will learn from us. Every Friday afternoon, my mother-in-law would make time in her busy schedule to call two of her friends and wish them “Good Shabbas.” When she spoke to me about it, her face radiated happiness and joy. She had a pretty, round face - as did my husband Danny - and you could see the happiness in their faces when they spoke of things that pleased them. When I first came to Temple Emanuel as a member, I met Arline Shapiro, and as we talked about things, lo and behold, I realized that the friend my mother-in-law called on Shabbas was Mrs. Hann - Arline's *grandmother*. - *That's Jewish geography*.

Now I would like to talk about mitzvot that Danny and I performed together for friends at Temple Emanuel.

First I would like to talk about the Armets: Edith and Meyer. An older, retired couple, they spent their summers in Newtonville and their winters in St. Petersburg, Florida. Once, when they were in town, they mentioned that Meyer couldn't drive because he had trouble seeing and they needed a ride to the Temple. Would Danny be willing to take him and Edith every Shabbas? Danny said, “Of course!” And so, at 9:15 AM every week we went to pick them up. Our Shabbas morning began - not at the Temple - but

the minute they got into our car. They were delightful people, somewhat older than us, but such fun to be with. Over the years, our friendship grew. One winter they suggested that we visit them in Florida. Their apartment was glorious - on either side as we looked out we saw water - one side was the Gulf and the other was the ocean. We were able to be their “wheels” because any time they had to go someplace we were there with our car ready to go along with them. I even made them breakfast every morning because I was an early riser and they were not, so it was a win-win situation. We had a wonderful time there and I never forgot it.

After Edith died, Meyer asked if there were things Edith had used that I might want? When I got to their house, I noticed her Passover items - which I did not need - but which my daughter, Cynthia, might need because she was just starting out in her first apartment. Cynthia liked them and, to this day, she uses those dishes every Pesach. Last year, at the Sisterhood Donor event, my daughter and I sat with Judy Berlin, Edith’s *daughter*.

AND I THOUGHT TO MYSELF: HERE ARE TWO WOMEN, CHATTING AND LAUGHING, WHO HAVE THIS WONDERFUL CONNECTION THAT I CREATED WITH MY MITZVAH. JEWISH GEOGRAPHY AGAIN.

Sally Simmons had lived on Hobart Road when her husband was alive, but then sold her big house and moved to 280 Boylston Street. When she mentioned to us that she wouldn’t be coming to Temple regularly, because it was impossible for her to get there, Danny said “Don’t worry. I’ll pick you up.” And every Shabbas morning at 9 o’clock we were in front of her doorway at 280 Boylston Street. She was always waiting for us, dressed and beautiful. Like the Armets, our Shabbas morning began with *her*, because she filled the car with her small-talk that was always interesting, always charming, and always sweet. The few years difference in our ages meant nothing, because she was one of the crowd. She too passed away, but also left beautiful memories. Whenever somebody *tall* sits in front of me in shul, I think of her – because she was short and when she

sat in front of me every Shabbas, I could actually see *over* her.

And finally there was Alice Glazer - who died just a few months before Danny. Alice lived near us and we talked on the phone every day, sometimes two or even three times. We would discuss things about the Temple, about different people, and our lives. It was a wonderful relationship. We used to pick her up every Shabbas, too. Very often we did not take her home because she would meet a friend and they would go out to lunch. What I liked about Alice was her independence. She lived in a house by herself, took care of herself, and used The Ride to go wherever she had to go. But I said to her, “Not on Shabbas. On Shabbas, you are going to go with us.” I wanted her to walk into shul *with* somebody. The first Shabbas after her funeral, our car automatically went by her house on the way to shul because that is what we had been doing every week for so many years. Now, each Shabbas in the Sanctuary, I look over to where she used to sit and remember her.

I want to thank Rabbi Gardenswartz for asking us to do this because I’ve loved thinking about all of these wonderful people. And as soon as we get into the month of Elul, I start saying “Shanah Tovah” to people. It may seem a little premature, but why not wish somebody “Shanah Tovah” every day of the month? Every day of the week? Every day of the year? That’s the way it should be. We should wish each other good things. All the time. If you are still reading this, here is my wish for you for the New Year: “May it be all that you want. May you have good health and peace and happiness.”



Defining Mitzvot: Kaplan and Heschel; & My Personal Mitzvah

Vivienne Kalman

WE LEARN FROM MORDECAI KAPLAN THAT “RELIGION IS A SOCIAL PHENOMENON, A LIVING ENERGY WHICH EXISTS IN SOCIAL GROUPS.” THE FUNCTION OF RELIGION IS A CONSTANT REDEDICATION TO IMPROVING LIFE AND ELIMINATING SOCIAL EVILS.

In Jewish tradition all religious observances are designated mitzvot (or commandments). The commandments pertaining to relations between man and God are referred to as “folkways.” Jewish life creates new and additional folkways depending on the times and circumstances. Folkways often evolve from new interpretations of the traditional commandments. Judaism is the social heritage for Jews.

We learn from Abraham Joshua Heschel that God can be revealed in nature, in Torah, in sacred deeds, and in history. These four categories comprise the nucleus of Judaism and our faith as Jews. In the **doing** of sacred deeds (mitzvot), Heschel believes God’s essence is present. By the doing of mitzvot man learns to accept the *hereness* of God. Mitzvah is an act which God and man have in common in a spirit of *togetherness*.

My personal mitzvah was to be the primary caregiver to my husband when he became a hospice resident. I did this mitzvah because “visiting and caring for the sick” is a commandment, because marriage vows are sacred, and because I wanted to be a role model for my three married children. I knew my husband would do the same for me if our situations were reversed, and I felt it was the Godly (right) thing to do.

In August 2000, my husband, Albert Kalman, was diagnosed with a condition known as Shy-Drager Syndrome. Shy-Drager is a progressive neurological disease resulting from degeneration of certain nerve cells in the brain and spinal cord. These cells control blood pressure, heart rate, and bladder function; also balance and muscle movement. The cause of the disease is not known, it is not inherited, it is not contagious, it cannot be prevented, treated or cured.

In retrospect, I now realize that what we had thought were normal signs of aging and stress, were actually the beginning of Al’s deterioration. As long as five years ago, before his diagnosis, he was experiencing some of the symptoms, albeit in a mild form.

Al lived at home. He had aides that cared for him in two twelve-hour shifts each day. He was in a wheelchair by day and in an electronic bed at night.

MY GOAL WAS TO KEEP HIM COMFORTABLE AND PAIN FREE. I WANTED HIM TO ENJOY EACH DAY AND PARTICIPATE IN AS MANY EVENTS AND ACTIVITIES AS HE WAS ABLE. HIS MIND WAS CLEAR AND HE COULD COMMUNICATE WITH FRIENDS AND FAMILY WHO CAME TO VISIT.

In the Fall of 2001, Hospice at Home was contacted and Al was visited by a primary care nurse who came to the house at least once a week. I was thrilled to have health care professionals only a phone call away. They responded within 10 minutes to every mini-emergency. An R.N., a physical therapist, a home health aide and a social worker were available as needed, as well as pharmacy services, medical equipment and supplies. My husband’s primary physician (his internist) and his neurologist were available as consultants. The mission of the Hospice movement is to keep terminally ill patients safe, clean, comfortable and pain-free. Although Al’s personal aides continued to bathe him, dress him, feed him, take him for a walk and watch TV with him, the long stressful doctors and hospital visits were over.

By January 2002, I knew that Al could no longer remain at home. He was too frail and disabled. He could not move his arms, hands, feet. His body

was dead weight. He was too heavy for his aide to lift him on to the commode or the wheelchair. We talked about the options. Two aides on each twelve hour shift at home? A nursing home? Hospice?

I visited the Wayside Hospice Residence and was impressed by the facility, the staff, and the welcoming environment. Each resident had a private room and bath. Each person is made to feel at home. There is a telephone in each bedroom. Disruptive or abusive behavior is not permitted. The Hospice is a place of calm and comfort.

Basic services include a home environment where kitchen, dining room, den and parlor are shared with other residents. The main meal is served at midday. Residents can choose to eat in the dining room or in their own private room. Twenty-four hour caregiving service is provided. Cable TV connections are available in each bedroom. Weather permitting, there is a beautifully landscaped garden to visit on site.

But Hospice Residence care is expensive. Although Medicare covers nursing costs, medical equipment and medications, it does not pay for board and room. Hospice care for my husband reduced his life's savings to a bare minimum.

As the months passed, my husband's mind remained clear and he understood everything that was going on. However, he did have a difficult time speaking to others. In a feeble voice he often fumbled for words and rarely smiled. I put together a word book with categories spelled out. When I pointed to a category like "Food", and he nodded his head, then I would select from a list of words pertaining to "Food" like "a drink" or "ice cream" – his favorite. When I picked what he wanted, he would let me know by nodding or blinking his eyes. I visited him every single day, weather permitting, and we enjoyed our limited time together as best we could.

My husband died peacefully in my arms on April 19, 2004. He had been a resident in the Hospice for 15 months. Because he was alert until the end, he witnessed and understood what was happening to him. How did I ameliorate his physical pain, emotional turmoil and social isolation? At the

Hospice, I hired Godfrey, a personal aide who came 7 days a week to bathe him, dress him, feed him and take him out of his room into the common areas and, weather permitting, outside into the garden.

Godfrey kept his room in order and was with him at all times. They talked together on many subjects and became good friends. Godfrey helped me bring the world into my husband's hospice room. There were family photographs, a large color TV and video player, a large wall clock, a large wall calendar, a radio. Bird feeders outside on his window pane beckoned to birds of many colors and strains. Clergy came weekly. Friends, colleagues, children and grandchildren came to visit. Birthdays and anniversaries were celebrated in the hospice. Religious holiday meals, especially on Shabbat, were prepared and served in the hospice dining room where Al sat in his wheelchair at the head of the table. With my family gathered around the table, we recited the blessings and ate a traditional kosher meal.

As his condition deteriorated, he was unable to hold anything, move his hands, arms or legs. He could not chew food or talk. He sent for Barbara Levine, the funeral director, to make a few changes in his original funeral directive. While his illness was untreatable and incurable and his bodily functions deteriorated, I was able to fulfill my promise to keep him safe, clean, comfortable, and pain-free. He was surrounded with love and he was included in all family events that could be held at the hospice.

Aside from the satisfaction that I gained from knowing my husband had the best possible care in the Hospice residence, I personally benefited from the experience.

I LEARNED TO BE MORE PATIENT AND FORGIVING.

I LEARNED THAT TO BE A CAREGIVER FOR OTHERS, I HAD TO TAKE CARE OF MYSELF FIRST, PHYSICALLY, MENTALLY, AND EMOTIONALLY. I LEARNED TO ESTABLISH A NEW SET OF PRIORITIES FOR LIVING. AND I WATCHED A KIND GENTLE MAN OF FAITH DIE WITH GRACE.



Why I am a Bar Mitzvah

Hy Kempler

I WAS RAISED IN AN ORTHODOX HOME AND ATTENDED YESHIVOT UNTIL I WAS EIGHTEEN. EVERY FACET OF MY LIFE WAS ASSOCIATED WITH MITZVOT, COMMANDMENTS TO BEHAVE IN A CERTAIN WAY SPECIFIED IN THE TORAH AND SHULCHAN ORUCH. AS AN ADULT I EVOLVED AWAY FROM ORTHODOXY. I HAD TOO MANY TROUBLING QUESTIONS.

HOW AM I TO SQUARE OUR CHOSEN STATUS WITH OUR HISTORY OF SUFFERING AND VICTIMIZATION? DID THE HOLOCAUST HAPPEN BECAUSE GOD ABANDONED US? WHAT IS GOD REALLY LIKE AND WHAT KIND OF GOD DO I BELIEVE IN?

It is essential that the Jewish people survive and thrive. We contribute a lot to the world. Through Mitzvot we express our core values. A Mitzvah involves behavior that seems right for me and other Jews to practice. The performance of a Mitzvah should contribute to the well being of the Jewish community as well as my own. Ultimately, Mitzvot should lead one to becoming a mensch. These are some that I practice.

1. It's a Mitzvah to study and support the study of Jewish texts, culture and traditions in their various forms. Learning is a fundamental value in our tradition and study enriches us. I study Jewish texts regularly.
2. It's a Mitzvah to live the Sabbath as special. For me it's a day for prayer, for physical and spiritual nourishment, and communal engagement.
3. It's a Mitzvah to help fellow Jews through charity and other means. I believe that Jews are responsible for one another wherever they are, especially in Israel. I make significant monetary contributions to Jewish causes.

Important Jewish influences include my maternal grandfather, Shlomo Weil, who treated me with great warmth and encouraged my Jewish learning. My parents' commitment to a Jewish life, despite financial hardship, made it clear that Judaism was important. My mother's tears when lighting Sabbath candles and praying suggested that a personal God was a possibility. Yankel G, my club leader, taught me philosophy on Shabbat afternoon when I was a teenager. He modeled humility and religious devotion. The two years I studied Talmud at the Mirer Yeshiva in Brooklyn with scholars who escaped the Nazis left a great impression on me. They demonstrated their love for the study of Torah. I have been fortunate to have had other wonderful teachers over the years and benefited from their wisdom.

Hy Kempler, born in Czechoslovakia and raised in Brooklyn, is a clinical psychologist and has been a member of Temple Emanuel for almost thirty years. Married to Sheila, they have two married daughters and six fabulous grandchildren.



A Mitzvah is a Joke

Burton Klein

A MITZVAH IS A JOKE – ON GOD. WE HAVE THE ABILITY (GIFT?) TO DO GOOD; WE HAVE THE ABILITY (GIFT?) TO DO EVIL.

When we do a mitzvah, it is not to gain yikus for me, nor is it to show rachmanus to the recipient. Rather, it is to play a joke on God. Since we are fashioned in the image of God (per the book of Genesis), then, when 'committing' a mitzvah, we are imitating God, in a small but significant way. We get the personal, inner honor (maybe 'privilege' is a better descriptor) of reaching out beyond ourselves, and being able to do something (big,

small, doesn't matter) for someone else. And if that isn't God-like, then what is?

But God gets the joke. How do I know? You have to ask?

Burton Klein (and honored to be able to try and play a joke as often as I can).



Tzedekah: Giving Tzedek: Doing Mitzvot: Priceless

Diane Korelitz

*Basov Jewish Community,
Romania 6/2007*

I CAN'T HELP BUT APPLY THE MASTERCARD AD TO MY OWN LIFE AND CONCLUDE THAT MITZVOTH ARE PRICELESS.

As a young child and young adult, my parents instilled in me Jewish values – tzedekah and tzedek. Doing mitzvot helped me to become the person I am today.

Ever since I can remember, I did some type of volunteer work. Volunteering was always a word in my vocabulary. Room mother at the local elementary school, teaching knitting at a senior housing complex, transcribing books for blind children, library volunteer, and knitting blankets for hospice patients are a few things that I did and continue to do.

In 1999, my dear friend Carol, a breast cancer survivor, and her husband, Bob, gave an endowment to the BIDMC to open Windows of Hope, a specialty shop that would offer products and resources designed for cancer patients and their families. She asked her friends if they would like to volunteer. I said “yes,” not knowing what was in store. I was apprehensive about working at Windows of Hope on Shapiro 9. Cancer is a scary word. What would the patients be like? What's the

unit like? Would I be in the unit while patients are having their chemo or other treatments? All those questions and many more were going through my mind.

I took the “job” and have been the “every other Monday girl” for the past 6 years. I love working at Windows. Some days are harder than others. Each person has his/her own story. There are tears and there are smiles. Listening to a mother talk about a daughter who is waiting for a stem cell transplant is agonizing for me; I can't imagine the mother's anguish. Talking to a young mother with small children who has just been diagnosed with breast cancer is difficult. That young mother is determined to beat it and be there with her husband and family to watch her children grow up. Listening to an elderly woman who is bald, has no health care insurance, and needs a wig is heart-wrenching, but the shop has funds for this situation. She leaves wearing her new wig and has a smile on her face.

No one knows what the future holds. In April, 2004, I was diagnosed with endometrial cancer, had surgery in May and 6 weeks of daily radiation. Shortly after, I was back to my regular routine of “doing.” I am one of the lucky ones!

TZEDEK IS MY SMALL WAY OF GIVING BACK. MY LIFE HAS BEEN ENRICHED BY VOLUNTEERING. SO MANY PEOPLE ARE AN INSPIRATION FOR ME. THE SUPPORT AND PRAYERS OF FAMILY AND FRIENDS WAS A PRECIOUS MITZVAH GIVEN TO ME. I'VE RECEIVED SO MUCH MORE THAN I'VE GIVEN.

All of us need to think about others and get involved in some kind of community service. If we start to instill these values – tzedekah, tzedek and mitzvot – when our children are young, we can make the world a better place for each and every one of us.

Diane Korelitz has been married to Ted for 51 years. They are parents of three daughters and grandparents of two. She is thankful for being able to continue “to do.”



Mitzvah Statement

Nancy E. Kummer

HOW LUCKY I'VE BEEN, AS A JEW, TO HAVE A PROFOUND SENSE OF FULFILLING A MITZVAH IN MY DAILY WORK. I'M A PSYCHOTHERAPIST, AND WHEN I'M WORKING WITH MY SAD, LONELY, WOUNDED, OFTEN HEROIC PATIENTS, IT CAN BE TOUGH GOING, SLOW, REALLY HARD WORK. BUT SOMETIMES (JUST OFTEN ENOUGH TO SUSTAIN ME!), THERE IS AN ELECTRIC MOMENT OF DEEP CONNECTION, HUMAN TO HUMAN, WHEN I KNOW I HAVE MADE A REAL DIFFERENCE IN SOMEONE'S LIFE.

When I realize that I have helped another person to draw on his/her own God-given inner resources, to overcome pain and sorrow and re-shape his/her life, then I believe that I have been doing a mitzvah, – the mitzvah of tikun olam, which to me is the most important mitzvah of all. Then, too, is one of the times when I feel most deeply in communion with a divine source, and most deeply Jewish.

I have to confess that the older I get, the less patience I have with letter-of-the-law ritual observance, as an end in itself. Perhaps it is because I was brought up in a “fa-brente” Reform home and synagogue, where the emphasis was on prophetic teachings. Morality, ethics, human values -- these were infused in my veins as the lifeblood of my Jewish identity. I never even heard of Rabbinic Judaism until my college years. Imagine the culture shock when I married a Conservative Rabbi! In short, I survived, and so did he, and we both “evolved.” I have come to respect mitzvah observance in a different light. For instance, I choose to keep a kosher home not because of a personal commandment from God, but because, to me, my kosher home is a time-honored sign of my membership in the Jewish community, a reminder of that membership, and in a sense, it thus safeguards and protects the collection of mitzvot which to me are most crucial: the mitzvot which guide us in our interpersonal conduct.

As hard as I've tried, I've never been able to believe in a personal God who issues commandments, approval and disapproval, wrath and revenge, etc. (I do have trouble with the language of our prayer books!) But I do have a strong belief in a divine order of the universe, both scientifically and morally, along with a super-strong connection to our history as a people and civilization. These beliefs and connections form the foundation of my commitment to tikun olam. As a Jew, I am committed to do my best to leave this world a little better for my having been here.

If I could, I would be out there rabble-raising for political change and environmental protection. But given my own particular talents, the best I can do is to perform my mitzvot via one-on-one connections-- through the love of family and friends, the help of neighbors, and the therapeutic connection with clients. I don't feel holy, and I never feel I've done enough, but I do feel completely Jewish in this commitment.



Doing Mitzvot: Making Positive Human [and Therefore Divine] Connections

A. Van C. Lanckton

Hebrew College Rabbinical School, Class of 2009

ACCORDING TO THE STORY IN EXODUS, GOD TOLD MOSES TO MAKE AN ARK FOR THE TABLETS OF THE LAW. ON THE COVER OF THE ARK, MOSES SHOULD PLACE TWO CHERUBIM FACING ONE ANOTHER, SCULPTURED WITH HUMAN FACES. IN THE SPACE BETWEEN THEIR FACES, THE TEXT GOES ON, THE PLACE OF ENCOUNTER BETWEEN TWO HUMAN FACES, GOD SAYS “THERE I WILL MEET WITH YOU.” Ex. 25:22.

I believe that the essence of mitzvot is human connection. I believe, inspired by such thinkers as Rabbi Harold Kushner and Rabbi Neal Gilman, that God operates in this world only through the work that we human beings do, serving as God's partners in the continuing effort to perfect an imperfect creation. How do we do this work? Through mitzvot, including the prayers that we pray in order to inspire ourselves to better efforts, and the acts of human kindness we perform in our relationships with other people.

God created a world that was necessarily imperfect. Why "necessarily?" Because the world is real. By the very definition of the term "real," the world is not ideal. If it were ideal, it would not be real.

As a result, amidst all the glory and wonder and daily miracles that are inherent in the world and sustain us all, there are also terribly unfair ways in which nature betrays us and even worse ways in which we humans betray each other. But what force works against those tragic or evil events? The force of a caring humanity, guided by Torah, to carry out all the mitzvot by which human beings strive for partnership with the Divine.



My Religious Principles

Cynthia Levinson

MY ATTITUDE TOWARD MITZVOT HAS BEEN SHAPED BY THE RELIGIOUS PRINCIPLES THAT I HAVE CONCEIVED DURING MY ADULT YEARS. THESE INCLUDE A BELIEF THAT GOD IS THAT FORCE WHICH BRINGS ORDER OUT OF CHAOS. GOD HAS GIVEN HUMANITY A LAWFUL AND ORDERLY UNIVERSE. HOW WE USE THIS GIFT IS UP TO US.

Behavior is part of the physical world and, as such, is also lawful and orderly. The number of variables involved in human behavior is so large and the interactions of these variables so complex

that the human brain has, to date, not sorted them out and probably will never sort them out. That does not mean the laws do not exist.

If behavior is lawful and orderly, it is a reasonable extension to assume that there is also a moral order that places one behavior qualitatively above another. The "best" behaviors are those that promote lawfulness and orderliness.

Humans must realize that they are inextricably involved in the rest of the cosmos. They are here a short time and the way to "find meaning" in their short stay is to work hard to intuit and uphold that part of the moral order of which they can make sense. Primary concern about self restricts one to such a minute part of the cosmos that it is highly unlikely to be a satisfactory manner of living.

I participate in organized Jewish religion because it gives me 5,000 years of roots and community and because it, among other things, is apparently the first attempt of humanity to try to sort out the moral order in a way that makes sense to me. The injunctions to treat each other decently in Leviticus 19 are of critical importance to me.

I believe it is preferable to live a life of radical amazement and gratitude for what is around us. I take guidance in my personal conduct from Micah 6:8 – to do justly, to love (and therefore do) *chesed*, and to walk humbly with your God. The operative words for the latter are "humbly" and "your" – not Yahweh, not the god of the patriarchs or matriarchs, but God as conceived by you.

Cynthia Levinson is a clinical neuropsychologist who became an adult Bat Mitzvah under the tutelage of Hadassah Blocker in 1990 and who has been an active member of Temple Emanuel since then, most recently as Secretary of the Board of Trustees/Board of Directors. She and her husband, Dan, are the parents of Richard, 22, and Emily, 16.

I Have Always Found Happiness

Roz Leshin

FOR ME LIFE IS ALL ABOUT THE LITTLE MOMENTS, OR EVEN, THE MOMENTS BETWEEN OTHER MOMENTS...

If we're distracted or preoccupied, we'll miss those moments ... they'll simply pass us by ... our child's sweet innocence will go unnoticed, as will a disarming smile and trusting glance. Your toddler reaches out to you, trying to get your attention, trying to engage you ... but you don't notice, you're too busy multi-tasking, you're too distracted. What could be more important than those precious moments of connection with your child?

I try to make a difference in the world by filling those seemingly inconsequential moments with meaning. When, for example, I check out at a supermarket cash register, I make an effort to connect to the person on the other side of the conveyor belt – to connect to their humanity. I smile and look for some commonality to touch on ... I aim to level the playing field between us, and thereby restore their dignity, often bruised by customers carrying on their business over a cellphone while checking out, completely ignoring the employee. Whether I'm at the dry cleaners, ordering a meal at a restaurant, or running into a janitor at work, I try to embrace these moments to communicate (indirectly) that our stations in life do not define who we are or how much we matter; we all deserve to be treated with dignity. In this small way, I try to make the world a better place. When people feel good about themselves, that is in and of itself a wonderful thing; it also will bring out the best in them, which will benefit someone else. And so, in small ways, we can help repair the world.

The little moments count. If your heart is in the right place and you're attuned to it, you can make a positive difference in people's lives as well as in your own.

What Inspires Me to Lead a Jewish Life?

Phyllis Miller-Somers

MY NAME IS PHYLLIS SOMERS. I AM THE SIXTY-TWO YEAR OLD MOTHER OF ARON MILLER (AGE 34) AND TAMARA SOMERS (AGE 22). I GREW UP IN THE JEWISH GHETTO OF CHELSEA, MASSACHUSETTS. I AM ALSO A MAY 2000 BAT MITZVAH OF TEMPLE EMANUEL.

Who were my religious mentors? In actuality, I didn't have mentors in the sense that I was not taught about Judaism; rather I learned by observing. In my family, we observed only significant Holidays – namely: Pesach, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur – with relatives and friends. I never attended religious or Hebrew school, only Sunday school as a very young child.

My religious experience and learning of mitzvot were thus taught to me by my grandfather, who would sneak me in with the men in the downstairs of the Synagogue. Occasionally, I would also go to Rosh Hashanah services with my grandmother and her sisters. I was taught to respect God and to observe holiday traditions such as fasting, walking on Shabbat and not eating any leavened food on Pesach. Throughout my teenage and early adult years, I observed the above commandments more out of fear than out of respect, understanding and love. **What do mitzvot mean to me?** In 1994, when my daughter, Tamara, started her religious training here at Temple Emanuel and, simultaneously, when I started a new career in research at The Dana Farber Cancer Institute (DFCI), I began to find new meaning in mitzvot. Through both my daughter's engagement in mitzvot and my personal relationships with both women and men dealing with cancer, I began to truly understand the profound meaning that religion can have on one's life. I learned the true meaning of humility, finding peace within oneself and why one should do good deeds. I consider myself a humanistic Jew, i.e.; observing most holidays, going to Shul on Shabbat

(usually twice a month) and being a kind and caring person.

For these reasons, I come to Temple for the camaraderie of meeting and talking with friends and acquaintances. I love the singing and the melodies of the liturgy and have fond remembrances of my childhood experiences sitting with my grandfather and hearing the same nuances of the trope. Lastly, and perhaps the most compelling reason I come to Shul, is that I always leave with new knowledge of practicing mitzvot, participating in Tikkun Olam and/or becoming more informed about worthwhile current events.

HOW DO I SEE GOD? I SEE GOD AS A SPIRIT OF MY DECEASED LOVED ONES AND FEEL HIS/HER UNIVERSAL SPIRIT.

I often question whether there is a God, especially one who could have allowed atrocities to occur, such as The Holocaust and the other tragedies which are currently taking place. However, I cannot dismiss the times when I pray for His/Her help and feel comforted knowing there is some power larger than all human beings; someone whom we can rely on to quiet our fears.

Growth areas. Now that I am close to transitioning to a new phase of my life, I would like to be involved in two diverse areas of growth. I would like to renew my learning of Hebrew and I would also like to continue the work I enjoyed and found fulfilling at DFCI by getting involved with both bereaved and infirmed congregants to help comfort them in their times of grief and sorrow, thus fulfilling the mitzvot of studying Torah and visiting/helping the sick.

I also have a very strong desire to visit Israel and hope I will be able to travel with our synagogue group in 2008.



Friends, God, and Mitzvah

Wendy Mnookin

WHEN I WAS FIRST MARRIED, BRINGING JEWISH OBSERVANCE INTO OUR NEW HOME FELT TO ME LIKE AN IMPORTANT PART OF CREATING THAT HOME. I WAS RAISED IN A REFORM HOUSEHOLD, WITH VERY LITTLE OBSERVANCE, AND THOUGH MY FAMILY FELT CULTURALLY CONNECTED TO BEING JEWISH, I WANTED MORE.

During the early years of our marriage, our Jewish observance centered around Friday night Shabbat dinners. We continued that tradition when we had children, and expanded some of the family-centered traditions, such as more elaborate Seders, complete with our own family-written Haggadah. Our children celebrated their B'nei Mitzvah.

In more recent years, since our children have grown up and left home, I have felt the need for greater connection, both to tradition and to community. I started taking classes at Temple Emanuel, and this led to my adult Bat Mitzvah several years ago, a project in which my husband, Jim, also participated. This coming year, we are studying together in Me'ah.

I have enjoyed and benefited from the learning, but I expected that – I have always loved reading and studying and discussing ideas. The real surprise for me is how important the connection to community has become. I feel connected to women in my Bat Mitzvah class, volunteers and professionals at the Temple, people I see at services. In my life as a writer, I spend a lot of time alone. When I am not working, I prefer to walk or garden or read a book rather than more social activities. Especially now that my children are grown, and I don't have the same built-in community of parents, I appreciate the new friendships I have made at Temple Emanuel.

I do still wish for a greater sense of connection to God. When I consider my answer to the question

about mitzvah, about God's role in my life and whether I feel personally commanded by God to observe mitzvot, I have to say that I am still searching for an understanding of God.

AT THIS POINT IN MY LIFE, ALTHOUGH I EXPECTED MY OBSERVANCE TO BE DRIVEN BY BELIEF, ENFORCED BY MY LEARNING, I FIND THAT MY OBSERVANCE IS MOTIVATED MORE BY WANTING TO BE PART OF COMMUNITY AND TO CONNECT WITH FRIENDS, AND BY THE SATISFACTION THIS BRINGS.

Wendy Mnookin is a poet. She is married to Jim, and they have three grown children, Seth, Abigail and Jacob. Seth was married on September 2nd to Sara, whom we welcome into our family!



Mitzvah Statement

Dan Nesson

HONOR YOUR PARENTS – ONE OF THE ESSENTIAL TENANTS OF JUDAISM. IT IS SO OBVIOUS THAT IT NEED NOT BE MENTIONED. IT IS SUCH A STAPLE OF CIVILIZATION THAT IT IS PART OF THE FABRIC OF EVERY SOCIETY. YET, IN JUDAISM, IT IS MITZVAH, A COMMANDMENT, NOT JUST IN COLLOQUIAL USAGE, BUT IN ITS LITERAL ITERATION.

Why? Many of us are in the “sandwich generation,” simultaneously raising children while caring for elderly, sometimes failing, parents. The two have more commonality than difference. It is easy to be frustrated with, yet accepting of, childish behavior from children. It is much more difficult to accept childlike behavior from an adult, and harder still, when it is your own family. Therefore, the Torah defines for us what we must do – treat them with dignity and respect, as much for who they once were as for who they might at present be.

The second bracha of the Amidah has a hold on my psyche. This is the blessing in which we bespeak and define “Gevurah,” often rendered “power.” The Talmud depicts mortals as “Gibor” – powerful (I learned the word to mean ‘hero’) – when we control our passions. The most powerful ancient gods were those that destroyed the gods of other nations. The God of Israel displays God’s power in diametric opposition; not the destroyer, but as the one who not only creates all life, but also the one who brings the dead back to life.

Gevurah paints a picture of an inner strength, of the individual hero whose daily life reflects the control of passions, so that actions are directed toward establishing a greater good, a utopia, “Yemai ha mashee’ach” – a messianic era. These are the daily unsung heroes. In our shul, they are people like the Minyan-goers, who arrive at Minyan each and every day, ready to respond to or do anything and everything on behalf of the Kahal. There are those that lead the davening or read Torah with a quiet aspect of awe. There are those that serve on Hesed and Bereavement committees, bringing comfort and caring into fractured lives. These are “Geboreem.”

In my own life there are heroes as well. I take daily drafts of life from our dog, Kilo, whose love is limitless, and our daughter, Emma, whose energy and curiosity are palpable. Most especially is Sue, whose sense of what is right, of what should and needs to be done is always on the mark, and who keeps me always aimed in the right direction. Though I may miss the target, it is never for want of effort on her part.

So, what leads me to a life aimed towards Mitzvot? In the immortal words of the great philosopher Tevye, “I’ll tell you – I don’t know.” But I would suggest that it is the inspiration of the Giboreem around me, who have learned far better than I the teaching from the Torah, and echoed in Shakespeare – “Na’aseh V’Nishma,” the doing is the thing.

IF WE PURSUE THE IDEAL THROUGH ACTION, WE JUST MIGHT SOMEDAY COME TO UNDERSTANDING.

Dan Nesson is the Hazzan Sheni and Ritual Director at Temple Emanuel. He lives in Newton with his wife, Susan Carp-Nesson, daughter, Emma, and faithful dog, Kilo.



Our Mitzvot

Nancy and Harold Parritz

HOW LUCKY WE ARE TO BELONG TO A TEMPLE WHICH GIVES US SO MUCH IN INSPIRATION IN SO MANY WAYS! HAROLD AND I HAVE BEEN MEMBERS FOR OVER 45 YEARS AND HAVE PARTICIPATED IN MANY ACTIVITIES DURING THAT TIME.

Harold has served on the board for many years. In the past five years he has co-chaired the Israel Action Forum with Denise Telio – this committee provides support for Israel by way of educational programs. They also raise funds to help our sister congregation, Temple Moriah, in Haifa, for the Bar and Bat Mitzvahs for special needs children, as well as scholarships to Kibbutz S'ar to honor the memory of David Lelchook, who was a member there, and was the son of our member, Doris Lelchook. Harold has served the congregation as President of the Brotherhood and served as chair of the Temple Cemetery Committee.

Nancy has been a member of the adult choir since its inception and served as President of the Sisterhood. She also served as Hadassah Blocker's assistant in teaching the B'nai Mitzvah adult classes for many years, which she found to be extremely rewarding. For the past two years, Nancy has been attending the dress rehearsals of the Bar & Bat Mitzvah children to coach them in the delivery of their divrei Torah – she co-serves in this capacity with Ruth Diengott.

The word mitzvah means to us an opportunity to serve the Temple Emanuel religious community! We were both raised by parents who, themselves, set examples of service to their communities.

Harold's father, in the mid 1930's, was a founding member of Temple Emanuel. Nancy's father served the community of Worcester as President of Temple Emanuel, there.

Leading a Jewish life and performing Mitzvot is an essential part of our lives.



Mitzvah: Commandment and Jewish Core Value

Mollie Peddar

I THINK OF DOING MITZVOT AS A "JEWISH CORE VALUE" MOST LIKELY LEARNED FROM MY PARENTS AND GRANDPARENTS.

French writer Antoine de Saint-Exupery in his work *The Wisdom of the Sands* said: "In giving you are throwing a bridge across the chasm of your solitude."

For me, a mitzvah is about one's selfless capacity to respond to what is needed by others at a given moment in time. It is often a spontaneous opportunity to bring light and assistance into someone else's life in a way that edifies my own.

One doesn't always know when someone else will need his/her help, or who it will be. Choosing to respond to the person or circumstance in need requires empathy and action.

While I believe that doing a mitzvah should not be motivated by a need for recognition, generous and courageous mitzvot should be publicized as an example to the public to care about others and to become involved.

People who perform mitzvot through philanthropy or heroism are important role models. Aaron Feuerstein exemplified this when he continued to pay his employees after the Malden Mills fire nearly destroyed his factory. Wesley Autrey, the New York citizen who threw himself in front of a train to save a stranger, was

a breathtaking example of mitzvah and heroism. Others perform mitzvot in dying, when there is no thank you, as do organ donors or brave soldiers who sacrifice their lives to protect those with whom they serve.

In Judaism, I believe that the mitzvot God requires of us involve self discipline and the will to serve according to the commandments.

I FEEL GOOD WHEN I DO A MITZVAH, AND I APPRECIATE THOSE WHOSE DEEP COMMITMENT TO DOING MITZVOT FOR GOD OR OTHERS EXCEEDS MY OWN. I AM ALSO GLAD OF THE KNOWLEDGE THAT THERE IS NEVER A SHORTAGE OF OPPORTUNITIES TO PERFORM MORE MITZVOT AS WE CONTINUE TO EVOLVE AS JEWS AND AS HUMAN BEINGS.

Revisiting Saint-Exupery's message, in giving, we do throw a bridge across the chasm of our own solitude, because who we are in large measure is a function of how we serve God and relate to others.

Mollie Peddar attended Temple Emanuel as a young girl, going to Hebrew school and becoming a Bat Mitzvah. Her children did the same.



A Plug for the Heschel View, Almost

Bernard D. "Butch" Pemstein

THERE'S A LINE IN THE SIDDIR, WE READ IT DAILY AND ON SHABBAT, AND IT'S IN THE MACHZOR, TOO, THAT STOPS ME IN MY TRACKS. FOR A MOMENT OR SO, SOMETIMES SHORT AND SOMETIMES LONG, BUT EACH AND EVERY TIME I READ IT. I LOOK AT IT, I WONDER WHAT IT REALLY MEANS, WHO INSERTED IT IN THE LITURGY, WHAT WAS THE MOOD, THE STATUS, OF THE JEWS WHO MADE SURE IT WENT INTO THE SIDDIR AND STAYED THERE. IN ENGLISH: "HAPPY THE MAN WHO OBEYS YOUR MITZVOT, WHO TAKES TO HEART THE WORDS OF YOUR TORAH."

For that moment while I rest my eyes on those words, the mood of the service changes. From praising the Lord, from beseeching the Lord, from a communal statement, to the personal relationship I have with the rules that our people have honored for twenty or more centuries. The service is, for that moment, not a rehash of the wondrous things that God has done for us; it is no longer a series of requests for health or peace or rescue; it is not learning what the parsha has to say to us. It is, quite simply, a reminder that as meaningful as each of those ideas may be, it is my personal relationship that must in the end be satisfied. That personal relationship with the rules can elevate anyone who seeks it to a personal relationship with the One who made the rules. I am not at all sure that we can have a personal relationship with the Lord if we do not make peace with the rules.

I suspect that the writers of the prayer did not mean gleefulness or giddiness or even pleasure when they said "happy." I hope that they meant something like contentment, ability to experience joy from actions in our daily mundane existence, capacity to gain gratification from honoring and participating in age-old tradition. I want the "happiness" that is ascribed to this perfect man to be available to every one of us who strives for a closer and more meaningful relationship. I want that goal of "happy" to be at least partially achievable on a regular, human, basis.

And, I suppose that peace with the Mitzvot could be almost anything depending upon the times, upon the place the Jews find themselves in, and of the individual Jew's milieu. It need not mean the same thing for every one of us, and thus, it cannot be that anyone's striving for "happiness" can be deemed inadequate by any other person. It does require, however, some adherence to the concept of obligation, and some acceptance of being a part of a community, together being the twin focal points of Mitzvot. Neither point of view, that the Mitzvot are only God-decided obligations, nor that the Mitzvot are nothing but habits and traditions that have become the glue that holds us together, can stand alone; each needs the other in order to create that hoped for personal relationship.

IN FACT, PEACE WITH THE MITZVOT IS AN EVER PRESENT GOAL: NEVER QUITE ACHIEVABLE, ALWAYS ONLY SLIGHTLY OUT OF REACH, AND SOMETIMES THE FOUNDATION FOR TRUE "HAPPINESS."

Bernard D. "Butch" Pemstein: Coordinator (one of three or four) of the Chapel Minyan for three or four years; Chairman, Temple Emanuel Cemetery Committee; Member, Temple Emanuel Board of Directors.



What Moves Me to Live a Jewish Life

Helene Altschul Reisler

I AM A BLESSED AND GRATEFUL 64 YEAR-OLD HEALTHY JEWISH WOMAN, MOTHER, GRANDMOTHER, SISTER, AUNT, COUSIN, FRIEND, PUBLIC SCHOOL MUSIC TEACHER, AND TEMPLE EMANUEL CONGREGANT.

What moves me to live a Jewish life? You have to know a little bit about my background and how that influenced my concept of God in order to understand what moves me to live a Jewish life. Twelve years ago, I went through several family crises, all happening at once. I was very anxious and felt very scared and alone. My best friend, Karen, my former husband's sister, having gone through her own personal trials, walked and prayed me through this difficult time. Karen and other dear friends helped me to find a personal God who I could count on in good times and bad times.

A rabbi once said to me that everyone has their own personal concept of God. That was very freeing for me. I would like to share my personal concept of God. God, for me, is a God of grace, who loves me, with all my weaknesses and faults (thank God). I believe that God wants me to be

close to Him and wants me to pray to Him and listen to Him and ask Him for help with everything and anything. God is with me in the good and bad times. God wants me to be joyful. Without God in my life, I am weak and helpless and I don't know what to do. I am strong with God in my life, and I can do all things in good times and bad times when I ask God to help me. I also believe that God works through people and that God puts people in my life to help me and pray with me and for me. I have biblical affirmations that I say out loud almost every day that strengthen my faith in God and give me confidence to live my life. Some of the scriptures that I use to affirm God's presence for me are the following: Jeremiah 29:11; Proverbs 3:5 & 6; Isaiah 54:17, and a prayer from 1 Chronicles 4:10. Karen and other dear friends are my prayer partners and we pray for each other and our families on a daily basis. We have walked with each other through some pretty hard stuff and for me the sun is shining today. It's a miracle as ten years ago I was so frightened. I am radically amazed, amused, and proud that with God's help, I am 64 and I can still sing and work, etc.

I agree with Abraham Joshua Heschel's teachings that God is in search of us and we are in search of God, as I have talked about this in the past with my friends. I believe that God wants us to lead a good life and we become partners with God by doing Mitzvot/good deeds. I pray with my voice like Abraham Joshua Heschel prayed with his legs when he walked with Martin Luther King, Jr. in the 1960s. I pray to God every day and I ask God to help me do everything and then I feel that I can do things like taking care of myself, being a good parent, grandparent, friend, and music teacher, because God is helping me. I believe that God created this beautiful planet for us and that God gave each one of us special talents and gifts to use during our lifetime on this planet. I believe that God wants us to take good care of ourselves and do good deeds/mitzvot for other people. I believe that by doing good deeds/mitzvot, for myself and others, I am doing God's will and I am helping God to make the world a better place. I particularly feel like I am doing good deeds for others, as an

Elementary Vocal Music Teacher in the Newton Public Schools, when I see and hear my students experiencing the joy of music through their singing and/or playing an instrument in music class or at school assemblies and concerts.

I FEEL VERY BLESSED TO BE ABLE TO DO THIS KIND OF WORK WITH CHILDREN. BECAUSE I AM AN IMPERFECT HUMAN BEING, I SOMETIMES FALL SHORT OF DOING GOOD DEEDS/MITZVOT FOR MYSELF AND OTHERS. I AM BLESSED TO HAVE DEAR PEOPLE IN MY LIFE WHO, ALONG WITH MY PRAYING TO GOD, HELP ME GET MYSELF BACK ON THE MITZVAH TRACK.

I love going to Temple Emanuel synagogue services on Shabbat and other holidays, because I feel connected to other people and not all alone, but part of a wonderful spiritual family community. I consider myself a work in progress with regard to my relationship with God, my spiritual development, and doing mitzvot. I pray to God that I will keep growing in getting closer in my relationship to God, keep growing spiritually, and keep growing in doing more Mitzvot.



The Mitzvah of Music

Jeri Robins

WHAT DOES LIVING A LIFE OF MITZVAH MEAN TO ME?

I believe that Judaism is a way of life – a dynamic religion and faith, which is why we’ve survived more than 5000 years. Reflecting upon how these beliefs then translate into my daily life, there are many ways in which mitzvot appear – choosing to keep a kosher home, attending services, volunteering my time, or actively creating a Jewish home in which to raise our children. There is much that I don’t understand about our world and its

history, but a belief in God, for me, provides a foundation upon which to build.

Hearing God’s voice through song has always been a part of my life. Going to services and expressing my love for God through the melodies is my primary source of prayer. I love to sing and feel blessed that I have this way not only to reach out to God, but also to reach out to others in the congregation.

I am currently pursuing studies at Hebrew College in Hebrew and the music of the liturgy to be able both to participate in and to lead services more fully. I feel called to pursue this avenue without knowing exactly where this path will take me, but I have faith that I am in the right place. When I think of singing in shul, I pray that God will use my voice as a channel of inspiration and not only provide an opportunity for me to live a life of mitzvot, but also to help others to do so.

Jeri Robins has been a member of Temple Emanuel for ten years and currently serves on the Board of Directors. She leads the Marketing and Publicity Committee for the Temple and also sits on the Music Committee and sings in the Temple Choir. She has been married to Steven since 1988 and they have two children, Corey and Jordan.



With Open Arms

Michelle Robinson

WHEN I WAS A CHILD, MY FAMILY SPENT SEVERAL YEARS IN JAPAN. ONE OF THE TRADITIONAL JAPANESE

CUSTOMS THAT CAME HOME WITH US WHEN WE RETURNED TO THE STATES, AND BECAME A NON-NEGOTIABLE FACT OF OUR HOUSEHOLD, HAS COME TO PROFOUNDLY SHAPE MY SENSE OF THE MEANING OF MITZVAH.

Every night, when my father returned home from work, he would stand at the threshold of our doorway and call out, “Tadaima” (I’m home). Wherever we were at that moment, no matter what we were doing or how far from the door we were, my sister and I were required to get up and come to the door. “Okaerinasai” (I greet you), we’d respond as we met our father with a hug. Whether we felt like it or not, whether as enthusiastic little kids or disaffected teenagers, it was the same: our father was home and it was our job to greet him like we meant it.

Through the years, I’ve come to see that greeting as not just an archaic Japanese ritual but as a profound meditation on the meaning of love. Love, after all, is about doing things we don’t always want to do, the simple deeds we do for another, reflecting our care, our respect, our gratitude. It is about trusting that they have our best interests at heart and that their love can help us become the better person we know we can be.

FOR ME, MITZVAH IS ABOUT LOVE. NOT JUST THE LOVE I FEEL TOWARD GOD, FOR GOD’S HAVING GRANTED ME THE GIFTS WHICH FILL MY LIFE, BUT A DIRECT, CONCRETE EXPERIENCE OF THE LOVE GOD FEELS FOR ME.

As the words of the Ahavah Rabbah prayer reflect, “*God loves us with a great love,*” the highest expression of which was God’s having shown concern for our spiritual, moral and physical well-being by giving us Chukei Chayim, the rules of life – the mitzvot.

When I perform a mitzvah, it is surely about giving thanks and about being in relationship. But even more so, it is about walking the path God has asked me to walk, the mitzvot are the steps on that path – a path which, if I walk it correctly, is intended to bring me right up to the door where God is calling to me “Tadaima,” waiting for me to arrive. Every mitzvah I do is my way of running to the door, holding out my arms, and responding, “Okaerinasai.”

Rabbi Michelle Robinson has been blessed to be a part of the Temple Emanuel community for the past 8 years where she has been inspired and amazed by this warm and wonderful community every day. Her husband, Mike, and their daughters, Alexandra Maya and Noa, are her greatest blessings.



Mitzvah: Helping Others

Cantor Elias Rosemberg



EVERY DAY, WHEN I WAKE UP, I THANK GOD FOR ALL OF THE BLESSINGS THAT I HAVE IN MY LIFE: MY WONDERFUL WIFE AND SON, MY PARENTS AND RELATIVES, MY FRIENDS, AND ALSO FOR BEING HEALTHY, WHICH IS THE MOST IMPORTANT GIFT.

I especially thank God for the privilege of doing what I do, where I do it. Being a Hazzan is a wonderful and rewarding experience as well as a very spiritual and meaningful one. One of the ways of doing a Mitzvah is helping others when they need it. But it is up to us to decide what type of help we give them. This is what most resonates with me.

The possibility of helping others with my profession here in this country is tremendously rewarding.

Since I moved to the States, I have been honored with the possibility of helping my friends in the Jewish community in Argentina. I organized and sang in concerts to provide relief and help to synagogues, schools and institutions that have suffered impoverishment over the last six years. I feel proud of this accomplishment, especially because of what this meant to them.

The possibility that I can help others through fundraising is fantastic, but what is more meaningful for me is the idea and the concept

underneath: you are not alone; I'm here to help you. I have you in my thoughts every day. For me a Mitzvah means we are connected, we care about each other, and we are never alone.

Cantor Elias Rosemberg was born and raised in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Since July he has been the new Hazzan at Temple Emanuel. He and Lorena are grateful for the wonderful gift of their son, Michael.



The Meaning of Mitzvot: The Mitzvah of Caring

Sue Rosenbaum

GROWING UP, MY PARENTS AND GRANDPARENTS INSTILLED IN ME THE IMPORTANCE OF CARING FOR OTHERS: FAMILY, FRIENDS, AND STRANGERS ALIKE.

My grandfather was a man of little means but he proudly collected little blue pushkes of money for the Jewish National Fund and the State of Israel. My mother taught psychology at the local community college and spent much of her “free time” counseling her students. My father was a lawyer in town and he was always the first person people called when they needed legal advice. He didn't consider his friends and neighbors as clients and no money was ever expected. Both my parents were (and still are) very active in synagogue life and their community, and contributed their time and energy to countless committees and Boards. It is not surprising that I have followed in their footsteps, serving on a myriad of committees. To me, it is a mitzvah to care about others as much as you care about yourself.

Not long after my husband and I started dating, I told my parents that I had found the person that I would marry. They were surprised because I hadn't been dating him for very long. But it didn't take long for me to realize that David, my boyfriend

at the time, cared for me as much as he cared for himself. What more could one hope to find in a mate? Having children really illuminates this idea, as it is impossible not to care for your own children more than you care for yourself.

But, in addition to one's own family, belonging to a community is a blessing as well as a responsibility. For this reason, in 1994 David and I donated a small sample of blood in order to enter the Bone Marrow Donor Registry. For three years we did not hear from the registry. In 1997, David did receive a call and his caring attitude was truly apparent. On July 23, 1997, the first day of our summer vacation, instead of heading to Cape Cod, David took a detour to New England Baptist Hospital. There, he had surgery to remove a large amount of his bone marrow, which was immediately flown to a stranger in Ohio. Later, we learned that the woman waiting at the other end had been told that her own blood would not sustain her much longer, a week or two at most. A year later we received the good news that she had recovered and was doing well. Although she is not Jewish, she now wears a Magen David and has celebrated the B'nei Mitvot of our two daughters with us. She even brought her grateful ninety-two-year-old father with her to Rachel's Bat Mitzvah last year.

As a member of Temple Emanuel and the Newton community in general, I feel that it is important for me to contribute to the community as fully as I can.

*WE ALL NEED TO CARE ABOUT OUR NEIGHBORS
AND HELP TO MAKE THEIR LIVES EASIER AND
HAPPIER IN ANY WAY WE CAN. WE SHOULD ALL
TRY TO PASS ON THE MITZVAH OF CARING TO
OUR CHILDREN AS MY PARENTS DID TO ME.*

B'shalom.

Sue Rosenbaum: I am a scientist and have been working in the biotech/pharmaceutical field since 1991. I am currently President of the Newton League of Women Voters and a newly elected member of the Board of Directors of Temple

Emanuel. I have been happily married to David Rosenbaum, a pharmaceutical executive, since 1986. We have three wonderful, caring, children, Benjamin, Sara, and Rachel, ages 19, 17, and 14. We have enjoyed being members of Temple Emanuel since 1992.



Taken From a Quote We Often Hear

Frank Rothstein

“I WEPT BECAUSE I HAD NO SHOES UNTIL I MET A MAN WHO HAD NO FEET.” THIS IS WHAT I BELIEVE.

YOU CAN GO TO TEMPLE AND PRAY, LISTEN TO A SERMON AND BE INSPIRED, BUT I STRONGLY BELIEVE THAT IT HAS NO REAL MEANING UNLESS YOU DO SOMETHING, TAKE ACTION I.E.; GIVE TO CHARITY, VISIT THE SICK, GO TO THE PINE STREET INN, HELP SOMEONE IN NEED, ETC. I THINK MOST OF US KNOW WHAT TO DO, IT IS FINDING / MAKING THE TIME.

One prayer that impresses me the most is Shema Koleinu; I think about it all year long, not just on Yom Kippur.

All you have to do is to go into a nursing home. There, you will see and feel the essence of this prayer. “*Take not thy holy spirit from us.*” “*Cast us not off.*” “*Be with us yet until the end.*” I hear the endless cries into the night, I see a man sitting in a wheelchair with one leg, and I notice someone else, who I think is around my age, slowly walking aimlessly, going nowhere.

When I visit my friend, it is so meaningful for both of us, especially when he is able to recognize me. He repeats over and over “*Thank you, Frank,*” “*Thank you, Frank.*” Then I tell myself “*Look at what’s going on here. Why can’t you be happy with what you have? What would you do if you were like this? Be grateful that you have your health.*” Why don’t you change, just try to be a little better,

this is what I struggle with. Yes, Frank, if you are so moved by the experience, do something about it; that is what your religion and the prayers are telling you.

A couple of weeks ago, I saw something that really shook me up. Without going into details I heard this: “*Nursing home, no way.*”

Now that’s what I call a mitzvah, that’s what I call love, and that is what I call setting a real example of how to be a good person that we can all look up to.

In conclusion, I hope that my experiences, thoughts, and philosophy will have meaning and relevance. Better yet, when actions and good deeds follow, only then will the real fulfillment of a mitzvah exist.

Frank Rothstein: I have been here at Hebrew school in the 40’s, became a Bar Mitzvah in 1950, and associated with my Family throughout the years. I have been a member after my Father passed away in 1989. After many years in the furniture industry, I am now semi-retired.



Mitzvah® in Word and Deed

Zick Rubin

HOW CAN YOU TRADEMARK A MITZVAH? AS A TRADEMARK LAWYER, I THOUGHT I SHOULD REPORT TO THE COMMUNITY ON THIS IMPORTANT QUESTION.

As we all know, mitzvot are to be shared, one good deed leading to another, not to be monopolized. And yet, American trademark law enables each of us to obtain exclusive rights to particular Mitzvot. In the past five or six years, for example, the U.S. Trademark Office has awarded

federal trademark registrations for Mitzvah Kitz® (for Judaic gift packages), MitzvahVision® (for Bar and Bat Mitzvah instructional videos), Mitzvah Ball® (for social events for Jewish adults), and Mitzvah Mensch® (for fundraising services), among others. Start your own Mitzvah Farm to produce kosher meats, cheeses, or milk, and you may well be infringing on the exclusive trademark rights of Mitzva Farms® in Waukon, Iowa.

It looks like more and more Mitzvah trademarks are being grabbed every day. According to the Trademark Office's database, the Office is getting close to granting registrations for SpaMitzvah bath and beauty products, Mitzvah Pens, the RockMitzvah band, and (I'm not kidding) Bark Mitzvah for the laudable service of "conducting parties for the purpose of dating and social introduction for pets."

No, Mitzvah trademarks are not reserved for the Jews. One company is well along in the process of registering Mitzvah Earth as a trademark for dozens of houseware items, including Christmas tree ornaments and figurines. Since I'm pretty ecumenical in my own view of mitzvot, I view the broad dissemination of Mitzvah marks as a good thing. There are, after all, plenty of Mitzvot to go around.

But, and here comes the moral of the story, not every Mitzvah is successfully registered. Under U.S. trademark law, as in Judaism, Mitzvah® privileges come not from talk but from action. In recent years, the Trademark Office had provisionally approved registrations for such products and services as Mitzvah bicycles, Mitzvah plush toys, Mitzvah Loans, and Mitzvah Mortgages. Each of these Mitzvah applications was submitted on an "intent to use" basis, which means that the applicant declared that he or she had a *bona fide* intent to use the mark in commerce. But these registrations were never issued because the applicants never followed through on their best-laid plans. And so, sadly, the Trademark Office database lists these Mitzvot as "abandoned."

WHETHER MITZVOT ARE GIFTS FROM GOD OR FOLKWAYS OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE IS A QUESTION ABOUT WHICH THE TRADEMARK OFFICE IS PROPERLY AGNOSTIC. EITHER WAY, YOU GET THE BENEFITS OF A MITZVAH®, WHETHER IN THE TRADEMARK OFFICE OR IN THE WIDER WORLD, ONLY WHEN YOU STOP TALKING AND ACTUALLY DO THE DEED.

Zick Rubin is a publishing, copyright, and trademark lawyer. He was formerly a professor of psychology at Harvard and Brandeis.



Why I Sent My Children to Jewish Day School

Jill Kerner Schon

SEVENTEEN YEARS AGO, MY OLDEST DAUGHTER, JACKIE, STARTED KINDERGARTEN AT THE SOLOMON SCHECHTER DAY SCHOOL OF GREATER BOSTON. THE DECISION TO SEND HER TO SCHECHTER CAME IN THE FINAL DAYS OF AUGUST, JUST AS SCHOOL WAS ABOUT TO BEGIN.

Jackie was enrolled in the Devotion School on Harvard Street in Brookline. Though the school's name has a religious connotation, it is indeed a public school, albeit a famous public school, briefly attended by President John F. Kennedy.

I was excited to send Jackie there. The orientation materials were in six languages, including Hebrew. It was within walking distance of our condo on Verndale Street, and it had a great playground. Perfect.

I could not have imagined the events of the week leading up to the start of school.

My mother was very sick, facing death after a five-year courageous battle with cancer. Rabbi Max Lipschitz, the beloved rabbi from my childhood congregation, Beth Torah of North Miami Beach, came to visit her in the hospital.

After some time with my mom, he came out to the hallway to talk to me. He asked how I was doing. I told him it had not been easy, helping my mom through this illness and caring for small children. I mentioned that Jackie was about to start kindergarten.

He asked where she was going to school. I told him. He then said something that completely changed the course of her childhood as well as her sisters', Mia and Hannah.

He said, "You should send your children to Jewish day school."

I asked him why he thought so. After all, I had not gone to Jewish day school. And, besides, we didn't even own a house.

He said, "Even if you never own a house, you should send them to Jewish day school. It will be an invaluable Jewish experience, not only for your children but for you as well."

What began as a one-year experiment for Jackie in kindergarten, turned into a 17-year family experience at Schechter. Looking back, I can only thank Rabbi Lipschitz for his wisdom.

The experience of sending children to Jewish day school incorporates their Jewish identity into their day-to-day lives. It is an integrated means of educating them as citizens and as Jews. I believe they emerged as strong, committed Jewish adolescents, ready to mix in the larger world with those of other faiths and beliefs.

We can only know what is, not what might have been. My children went to Schechter based on the opinion of one person. But they were enriched by the love, knowledge, and spirit of an entire community.

And so was I.

Jill Kerner Schon is the mother of Jackie, Mia, and Hannah, ages 22, 20, and 14, all of whom (thankfully) say they are grateful for the opportunity to attend the Solomon Schechter Day School of Greater Boston.



More

Bob Singer

MITZVAH — "A GOOD DEED."

I WAS TAUGHT AS A JEWISH BOY, AND SO I THOUGHT, "A LIFE FULL OF GOOD DEEDS WOULD BE A GOOD LIFE, A LIFE WORTH HAVING BEEN LIVED, A LIFE THAT IS PRAISEWORTHY."

So why does it rankle me when I hear that mitzvot are also commandments? It is deeply ingrained in my Jewish identity that I shall bow to no man, but only to God. And even to God the times of bowing are few and far between. And when you get in the habit of not bowing, it becomes difficult to bow at all – even to God.

The core of the matter for me is the difference between mitzvot which seem to be present for the purpose of creating a structured life – a habit of obedience – in juxtaposition to the mitzvot which represent good deeds in God's lovely world.

"See, I have set before thee this day life and good, and death and evil, in that I command thee this day to love the Lord thy God, to walk in God's ways, and to keep God's commandments and God's statutes and God's ordinances; then thou shalt live." Deuteronomy 30:15-16.

Choose life. Choose the good. Free will. But if it is a choice, how can it be a commandment?

Defiance of human authority gets one in the habit of defiance. Defying the mitzvot that represent custom, and not good deeds, is part of what makes me . . . Jewish. Defiance means free choice, clarifies that I am an independent agent . . . and yet.

To what does it profit me to defy God?

Defiance of custom I understand. Does a modern man need customs? If I can behave correctly, morally, ethically, in God's image, then what need for customs? As a family doctor, I have treated many poor patients for free over the years, spent extra time comforting the sick and their families,

made home visits to the elderly who struggle to get out. I have reveled in the sight of my children making ethical, Jewish choices in their lives.

And yet.

I am not always selfless. Sometimes, I think of myself before others. At times, I understand what a comfort it could be to live a life of rules. Never to make a mistake, or take a misstep because the mitzvot compel me to act in a rigid and defined way, even if it is against my selfish instincts. To avoid all choice – to live a life constrained to goodness. If I give up choice and just follow ...

And yet.

I believe it is Jewish to struggle with this tension. Freedom – and duty. Independence – and humbly walking with my God. If following the customs of our people were truly unnecessary for me, then I would be someone who invariably chose the good, who was at all times exemplary.

BUT I AM NOT THAT MAN. I HOPE TO BE GOOD. I LONG FOR MY CHILDREN, MY WIFE, MY FRIENDS, MY FAMILY, MY SYNAGOGUE, TO LOOK AT ME AND SAY "THERE GOES A GOOD MAN, WHO STROVE WITH GOD AND TRIED TO BE GOOD. THERE IS A CHARITABLE MAN, A HUMBLE MAN, A QUIET MAN WITH A KIND HEART." I LONG FOR THAT DAY.

And yet.

Imperfect as I am, with moments of selfishness which embarrass me, perplex me, and occasionally torment me, I ask the question – How much mitzvot do I need in my life? How much custom can I bear as a guide to the good life, a Jewish life, a life worthy of praise? And as imperfect as I am, the answer is – more. More than now. More than yesterday. Enough for tomorrow.

Because if I add mitzvot to my life, whether customs, commandments, or good deeds, then I will become closer to becoming the man I long to be – the one worthy of praise. How much mitzvot do I need? How much do I need mitzvot? I need more.

Bob Singer is a family doctor and medical educator who has worked for 26 years in the city of Everett, husband to Anne Rayman, who has been an unending source of joy, and father to Adam and Rachel, for whom the world was created.



A Trust Found

Alberto Socolovsky

PSALM 146 STATES IT CLEARLY: "PUT NOT YOUR TRUST IN PRINCES."

But I hadn't read this pithy psalm when growing up in Argentina during Peron's elected dictatorship. His rule, modeled on Mussolini's fascism, demanded trust in the Leader and commanded unquestioning obedience, enforced through a police regime and people of moral turpitude. The strategy for Jews was to keep a low profile and hope for a change. In my family, we took Hebrew lessons for a possible Aliyah to the new State of Israel. But, even after Peron was ousted by a military coup, the country could not find its way to a functioning democracy; it still hoped for a charismatic leader.

That's why, after we immigrated to the United States half a century ago, learning to appreciate and internalize the concept of individual freedom was a mind-liberating experience. The change we had hoped for had come, proactively. Slowly, we learned how freedom pervaded every aspect of our lives, especially in religious expression, and how it required us to take responsibility for our actions.

My wife and I joined a synagogue to provide a Jewish education for our children, and we learned along with them the meaning of our prayers, and how acts of kindness and taking responsibility are codified in mitzvot. We had had children, unaware that we were fulfilling the first Mitzvah: "Be fruitful and multiply."

BUT THE MOST IMPORTANT CONCEPT, ONE THAT DEVELOPED SLOWLY, WAS GRATITUDE. GRATITUDE FOR REACHING EVERY STATION IN OUR LIVES, FOR GOOD HEALTH, FOR THE CHILDREN, FOR THE FOOD ON OUR TABLE AND A ROOF OVER OUR HEADS. THE KIND OF GRATITUDE THAT DICTATORS ASSUME IS DUE TO THEM. WHEREAS GOD, AS THE PROPHET MICAH APTLY PUT IT, REQUIRES ONLY "TO DO JUSTLY, AND TO LOVE MERCY, AND TO WALK HUMBL Y WITH HIM."

It's a slow, ongoing process. I remember wondering why do we bow at the "Aleinu," until its Hebrew text and the English translation started to acquire meaning. Same with saying Kaddish for a loved one, after wondering why it contains much praise but no words of consolation. Learning the Birkat Hamazon to give thanks for the food, plus laying on tefillin, and finding both commandments in the Torah. And studying Torah all along, discovering in every word a meaning I hadn't found in the Spanish edition I had read at age 10.

The first time I sat for Seudah Shelishit at a small synagogue in Israel, I was surrounded by the apparent cacophony of the blessings everyone said every time they took a cookie or a cracker to eat. It sounded trivial at first, but it became clear when our good friend and Temple member, Ben Chinitz, told me that his father would admonish him in Yiddish: "gazlan (thief), mach a brooche" if he took a bite without saying a blessing. I am still learning the blessings, but I already feel that food tastes better when preceded by a Bracha. And, little by little, the connection of our actions to mitzvot becomes clearer and stronger. Na'aseh veNishma.

It will probably be in Messianic times that the world will get rid of dictators who deny freedom to their subjects. Psalm 146 stipulates the liberating formula: "Put not your trust in princes" making evident Who deserves our trust.



"Conservative" About Mitzvot

María A. Socolovsky

THIS ASSIGNMENT LED ME TO EXAMINE MY OWN EXPERIENCE IN EVALUATING MITZVOT AND TO CRITICALLY WEIGH MANY VIEWPOINTS TO ARRIVE AT MY OWN. THE JOURNEY HAS BEEN EMOTIONAL.

SINCE CHILDHOOD, THROUGH ADOLESCENCE, AND EVEN NOW, I WAS ATTRACTED TO THE OPTIMISTIC (SOME MAY CALL IT "NAÏVE") VIEW OF THINGS. I COULD FIND SOMETHING GOOD IN EVERYTHING. I EVEN THINK I WAS LUCKY ALL MY LIFE THANKS TO THAT ATTITUDE.

And I thought that I should, even in small ways, help others be more optimistic by helping them out. As an older coworker once told me: "*You do little things for people.*"

Were those little things Mitzvot? I didn't think of them as such when I was younger, until I started learning more about our tradition. As I learned, my concept of Mitzvah evolved. Wherever I belonged, it meant a call to action, to join a group, to lead, to work towards a goal.

Coming from Argentina almost 50 years ago, my "great leap northward" was driven by the belief that life could be better in the United States. But it also opened for us a new concept of Jewish life that added a Kehila to what, until then, had been centered in the home. This added a new dimension to my practice of Judaism and fulfilled our main goal of providing a Jewish education for our children. I learned there that this was a Mitzvah, straight from the Shema – "you shall teach them diligently unto your children." We were following tradition. We are Jews because our parents were Jews. We want our kids to be Jews, to follow in the same tradition.

In my old age, I feel very good about my activities which include Mitzvot, such as:

A - I come to shul on Shabbat, including Talmud

class in which I continue to learn.

- B – I practice physical activity at the JCC, where I can follow Philo the Elder’s admonition to care for the body as the container for the soul.
- C – Assign Torah readings at Temple Emanuel during the summer.
- D – We spend half of our time in Israel supporting our family there, and the other half working with our family and friends here.



The Mitzvah Highway

Marc Stober

GROWING UP, WE WEREN’T KOSHER, ALTHOUGH WE KNEW OTHER FAMILIES WHO WERE. AT SOME POINT, BEING AN ANNOYING TEENAGER, I STARTED TO CORRECT THE OTHER MEMBERS OF MY HOUSEHOLD: FOOD “IS KOSHER,” PEOPLE “KEEP KOSHER.” IT’S A FINE POINT, BUT JEWISH LEARNING IS ABOUT QUESTIONING THE FINE POINTS, AND I THINK THERE’S A REAL DIFFERENCE.

While knowing who “is religious” makes menu planning easier, observing mitzvot isn’t an ascribed characteristic or something to be treated as a shellfish allergy. Life is a journey, and mitzvot are the way God has given us to get somewhere. “Halakhah,” which means “Jewish law,” literally translates to something more like “The Way.” It’s ironic that we tend to focus on its limitations. I prefer to think of it as a highway: you are constrained to follow the road, but there is no limit to how far you go.

My own religious path has had many stops along the way. My mother’s family has attended Reform synagogues in Connecticut since the Victorian era. My father converted to Judaism. I began to explore my own Jewish identity in high school and college. I participated in the March of the Living, traveling

with several thousand young Jews to Poland and Israel. This experience opened my eyes in two ways: first, by seeing the range of Jewish practices among my fellow travelers; and second, by learning how traditional Jewish life was present in pre-Holocaust, twentieth-century Europe. Tradition hadn’t been incompatible with modernity; it was simply wiped away with the people who practiced it. In college, I started going to the Conservative minyan at Hillel, and, after a variety of twists and turns, majored in Jewish and Near Eastern Studies. I traveled throughout Israel for a semester, where I absorbed enough Hebrew and culture to feel comfortable anywhere in the Jewish world.

AS AN ADULT, MY LIFE IS A LITTLE MORE STABLE, BUT I STILL FIND WAYS TO GROW. THIS YEAR, OUR FAMILY IS PLANNING TO BUILD OUR OWN SUKKAH FOR THE FIRST TIME.

It can feel like the Goldenfelds always build a sukkah (or some other observance) and the Rosensmiths don’t and, when we’re in synagogue, we don’t ask about it. Well, I need to ask things. How do I make it so it won’t fall over? What do I use for sckach? Will you come and eat with us, even if our level of kashrut isn’t rabbinically correct? What if we invite a family member who doesn’t keep kosher and they bring a dish? We Jews have always had questions, Halakhah is literally a book of questions (the Mishnah), and wrestling with our real questions can only be a good thing.

In fact, I think that’s what this project is all about. We say that the Conservative movement is a “halakhic” movement, but what does that mean? It doesn’t mean that other movements recognize our authority, and it certainly doesn’t mean that we all keep all the mitzvot. There’s a common myth that our grandfathers went to shul every day in Brooklyn, our mothers were scrupulously observant at home, and we all had a second-to-none Jewish education; we just lack willpower. But this underestimates the difficulty of doing mitzvot in the real world. Perhaps there’s a fear that if we talked about Halakhah, people would say it’s not for them. But this is a simple interpretation of

mitzvot as something you feel guilty about. What binds us together as Conservative Jews is that we care about Halakhah; it is special and holy. Whether you are observant, want to be observant, or even if you just want to know that the Rabbi and Cantor are observant, Halakhah and mitzvot are central. Discussing our relationship to mitzvot – including how we find them challenging – can only strengthen our commitment.

Marc Stober, along with his wife Cheryl, has been a member of Temple Emanuel since 2003 and you will most often find him with his daughter in Tot Shabbat. He lives in Newton Highlands and is employed as a software developer.



Another Game Tomorrow

Rick Thau

IN PARASHAT VAYERA (GENESIS 18: 1 -2), ABRAHAM IS VISITED BY THREE STRANGERS TO WHOM HE SHOWS GREAT HOSPITALITY DESPITE BEING IN TERRIBLE PAIN FROM (WARNING TO ALL MALES: YOU’LL SQUIRM AT WHAT COMES NEXT, THOUGH YOU LIKELY KNOW THE STORY) HIS RECENT AND SELF-ADMINISTERED CIRCUMCISION. THOUGH THE THREE STRANGERS ARE INTERPRETED BY MANY TO BE THE PRESENCE OF GOD, IT’S UNCLEAR WHETHER ABRAHAM KNEW THAT AT THE TIME. REGARDLESS, HE ACTED AS A MENSCH, AND HIS ACT OF KINDNESS – HIGHLIGHTED BY HIS CONDITION AT THAT TIME – MAKES HIS ACTION EVEN MORE SIGNIFICANT.

He had an easy out, but he chose not to take it. Faced with a similar situation this past summer – meaning having a stranger presented to me, though a half century after my own bris – I took the easy way out. I was given the opportunity to be a mensch, to show that the words of Torah have meaning for me, and I failed the test.

The facts ... while ushering on Shabbos back in July, a stranger entered the sanctuary. He was British, and here in Newton for a few weeks taking a course at Hebrew College. He’s the Ritual Director at his shul in London and a really nice guy with whom I talked for several minutes both before services and during kiddish. We gave him an aliyah that morning, which was very much in keeping with the spirit of Abraham’s kindness to strangers. But that was a shul response. The following Friday night, the gentleman was there at services in the Gann Chapel. I wished him good Shabbos and we talked a bit. As I was speaking with him, I thought of Abraham’s example. I knew this chap (British for “guy”) was staying at Hebrew College, but I did not know whether he had a place to come for Shabbos dinner. I debated whether to invite him to our home. He’s Shomer Shabbos and the long walk might have precluded him coming, plus I would have had to buy more food were we to have a guest. I decided against inviting him, and it embarrasses me to this day. If he had to walk to our house, it might have taken him an hour – but we could have waited. If we were short of food, I could have stopped and picked up more.

It was an easy test for me, and I blew it, made worse because I knew the answer to the test going in. Fortunately, the great thing about life is that, like baseball, there’s another game tomorrow and another test.

My story of the stranger from England isn’t that dissimilar to Abraham’s, though mentioning me in the same breath as Abraham is akin to mentioning whoever’s playing first for the Yankees these days in the same breath as our *lansman* Kevin Youkilis. Was this Englishman God, as Abraham’s three guests were thought to be? At the risk of being turned into a pillar of salt as I type this, I sincerely doubt it. And it’s beside the point if we’re all God’s creatures.

The Torah is filled with these incidents, these tests. The characters who lived these stories are held up to us as models for what they can teach us not in some supernatural existence, but in the day-to-day world – to provide hospitality to a

stranger in Abraham's case, for instance, or not to throw your kid brother in a hole because Dad gave him a nicer coat than he gave you, or the big one – to mend the world. The burning bushes and the pillars of fire, or pillars of salt for that matter, are great stuff, but the real lessons come from how to live, act, and deal with others in the course of normal life.

WE'RE PROVIDED THESE TESTS ALL THE TIME IN OUR LIVES. HOW WE ANSWER THEM, I THINK, SPEAKS AS LOUDLY AS ANYTHING ELSE OF OUR JEWISHNESS. THAT'S HOW I SEE IT ANYWAY.

I pray – literally – that I will give a better answer the next time I'm tested and that I can stand, like Abraham, as a good Jew and a mensch. May this serve as my cheat sheet for future tests.

Rick Thau is blessed to be married to Sandy Cohn Thau for the past 25 years. They begat David and Michael, who have yet to do any begetting themselves. He likes the egg salad at kiddish a lot.



A Jewish Death ... A Jewish Life

Sandy Cohn Thau

THE MITZVAH PROJECT STARTED ME THINKING ABOUT WHY I DO WHAT I DO JEWISHLY. MANY OF THE RITUALS I ADHERE TO ARE AUTOMATIC TO ME – I HAVE BEEN DOING THEM ALL OR MOST OF MY LIFE. STILL, I FIND THEM MEANINGFUL.

I have kept kosher throughout my life, because it always meant something to me to be mindful of what I am eating. I light Shabbat candles because I am honored to possess my great-grandmother's candlesticks – one of the few possessions she took with her when she left Poland alone as a girl –

which I light along with candlesticks my parents gave me when I got my own apartment and one candlestick that belonged to my sister, which I am holding until my nephew wants it. I am always moved by lighting the candles, singing the bracha to the tune I learned at Camp Ramah, because the moment brings together so many powerful aspects of my life – my rich childhood memories, thoughts of loved ones no longer here and my gratitude for how blessed I am in my life.

These were mitzvot I knew – I grew up with them – so they were comfortable to me. But as an adult, in a situation I never hoped to be in, I found the most transformative experience in the mitzvah of saying Kaddish. Beyond the heartbreak that I felt when my sister died, I was conflicted about saying Kaddish. I didn't think it would mean anything to me as I had never really found comfort in prayer. Rabbi Warmflash told me that when his father died, someone told him that when he stood for Kaddish, he stood as a monument to his father's life. That resonated with me. I wanted to honor my sister's life, and if saying Kaddish could do that, I had to give it a try. What started as a comforting environment where everyone understood my grief evolved into an experience that changed my view of prayer and my connection with the shul. Going to shul daily reminded me – or perhaps taught me for the first time – that I enjoy the experience of being part of this community. Some days it was just nice to see the friends I made, while other days I really connected with the prayer experience. During the 11 months, I learned to daven mincha and maariv – maybe not a huge accomplishment, but by learning those services, I have experienced the warm satisfaction of helping a grieving family by davening at a shiva minyan.

MUCH OF WHAT I BELIEVE LEADS ME TO LIVE A JEWISH LIFE NOW, AS AN ADULT, I LEARNED OR REALIZED DURING THOSE 11 MONTHS OF SAYING KADDISH – THE POWER OF BEING PART OF COMMUNITY, THE COMFORT FOUND IN PRAYER, THE JOY I FIND IN BEING AT TEMPLE EMANUEL – SINGING, LISTENING, LEARNING. EVEN FROM A DEVASTATING LOSS CAN COME SOMETHING

*POSITIVE. LIVING JEWISHLY HAS TAUGHT ME THAT,
AMONG SO MANY OTHER LESSONS.*

Sandy Cohn Thau is married to Rick Thau, the winningest pitcher in Temple Emanuel softball history. And the losingest. They have two wonderful sons, David and Michael, who hope to play on the TE softball team some day.



★

What Obligates Me To Do Mitzvoth?

Helene Tuchman

**THESE ARE MY REPLIES TO A SERIES OF QUESTIONS
POSED BY RABBI GARDENSWARTZ TO THE TUESDAY
MORNING SISTERHOOD TORAH STUDY GROUP.**

We were presented with the thoughts of a woman named Sheila, who mused that she lived her life following her own ethical system, doing things that felt good to her.

My answers:

1. I am not Sheila. I am willing to submit to a religious system not of my own making.

Do you wish to share sovereignty with any other obligating power?

2. I don't think of it as a choice. My inner self does not feel alone, and when I mentally reach out for help I feel connected or a part of another power. I feel a sense of connectedness to the historical ideas and sensitivities of the Jewish people.

What mitzvoth do I currently observe because they teach me a discipline that is healthy and wise?

3. Sabbath observance. To observe the Sabbath in

some way every Shabbat as paramount before some other desire that I have. To come to a stop and think about the stopping as a time when I should rest and observe a hiatus and perform Jewish activities such as Shul going or Bible study. I think this is healthy and wise rather than thinking of it just as a "sacred time" commandment.

Relationship with God.

4. Attend a Shiva minyan to comfort the mourners, the sick, and the weak. Take time to be part of a group that welcomes everyone rather than just to concentrate on the work goal of the group. To make room for everyone to feel connected and useful.

Communal norm.

5. The mitzvah of washing the hands before breaking bread. I used to resist washing the hands when part of a Jewish group who observed this, thinking I had just washed my hands and this prayer and ritual washing was not necessary and was very conformist. Then, through watching Christian ritual at various church functions I had to attend, I came to realize that ritual hand-washing was a remnant of the Priestly rituals in the ancient Temple, and that the Christian Church had retained this ritual and carried it over into their liturgy and ritual. Two thoughts then occurred to me:

a. How could I give up a long-standing Jewish ritual that even the Christian Church had retained?

b. I am willing to perform this mitzvah because the community I often participate in performs it.

What obligates me to do mitzvoth? What rationale motivates me to do mitzvoth?

6. I am a member of the Jewish people who committed to these mitzvoth in the Torah. This sense of historical connectedness will often motivate me to perform a mitzvah even if I don't understand or derive meaning from it, e.g., Kashrut.

Example of a mitzvah I do, that is a burden or inconvenient or not pleasant, that I do anyway.

7. I have run a library, as a volunteer, at a senior citizens center for 14 years. I do this in memory of my parents who used and derived great pleasure from this center. I come to this center regularly once a week for an afternoon. It takes me half an hour to drive there, 10 miles each way. During the first 10 years, more than 150 senior citizens used the library and I befriended them, sat and listened to them, brought books to their homes when they could not walk to the library, etc. I thought of myself as everyone's child who had the time to listen to the stories that no one else wanted to hear anymore.

As these people aged and began to die, English-speaking readers did not replace them. The numbers who come to the library has dropped to about 10 people, of whom only one person comes regularly. She is an intelligent, but embittered person who was very partial to her older son. He died tragically a few years ago. Her younger son, who lives nearby, she treats and speaks of harshly, but I know him and see he is a good, respectful and attentive person. My life has more obligations now than when I began to volunteer at this senior citizens center, and I could easily use the time for myself and for my family. But when I think of this embittered woman who derives pleasure from our friendship, I cannot stop coming. I fulfill a role in her life by listening to her memories and telling her about my life and family, and so I will continue to spend this one afternoon a week with her as long as she continues to come to the center.

Helene Tuchman: I was born in Brooklyn, NY, and raised by parents who came from observant Orthodox homes. They emphasized the importance of Jewish ethical values over ritual, a love of the Jewish holidays, knowledge of Jewish history and the idea of the Jewish soul.



The Purpose of Mitzvot

*Maurice (Murray)
Tuchman*

I GREW UP IN AN ORTHODOX HOME AND WAS TAUGHT MY FIRST HEBREW WORDS, THE HAVDALAH, BY MY GRANDMOTHER WHEN I WAS THREE YEARS OLD.

I attended the Yeshivah of Flatbush Elementary School and High School, an Orthodox and Zionist school, whose administrator was an educator, not a Rabbi, and instruction was in Hebrew and English. While in college I attended and graduated from the Jewish Theological Seminary where I received a B.H.L.

We find as we study the Torah that there are two types of mitzvot or commandments: those between God and the individual and those between people, as is clearly noted in the Ten Commandments. I believe that the mitzvot that are important to follow are those commandments that specifically are concerned with these two relationships. One of the major goals of the mitzvot is to forge a bond between people and between individuals and God for the purpose of forming a Jewish community. The goal of the Jewish community is to be inclusive even though individual members may disagree with one another as demonstrated in Talmudic discussions. The community is not meant to be a group that proclaims only we are right and everyone else is wrong. The mitzvot that center on relationships are guiding the community to develop ways in which we can get along together.

One of the ways of binding people together is through prayer. When we travel, some of us go to synagogue in far away places both in the United States and in foreign countries. Many times, my family has observed, though we are far from home, the fact that the prayers are the same and/or the melodies are similar and/or the interior of the synagogues are familiar. We clearly recognize a bond with our fellow daveners.

I believe that Abraham Heschel has touched on the essence of the mitzvot that concern relationship. It is not only we, the individuals, who are struggling with the idea of relationships, but God is also. The titles of two of his books says it bluntly, God in Search of Man and Man in Search of God. It is a double search for the meaning of relationships through mitzvot. It is incumbent on all of us men, women and God to find that relationship that will bring us together as a community.

Maurice (Murray) Tuchman, Director of the Hebrew College Library, 1966-2001. Graduate of Brooklyn College, Columbia University, School of Library Service, Jewish Theological Seminary and Simmons College School of Information Science.



Credo

Eric E. Ungar

IN THINKING ABOUT WHAT AND WHY I OBSERVE, I HAVE COME TO REALIZE THAT THE DEVELOPMENT OF BELIEFS AND

OBSERVANCES, JUST LIKE ALL OF LIFE, IS A JOURNEY. THUS, I FOUND MYSELF COMPELLED TO REVIEW HOW I ARRIVED AT MY PRESENT OUTLOOK.

When I was growing up in Vienna, Austria, my family was totally assimilated. I do not recall my parents or grandparents observing anything, except for my father attending synagogue services briefly during the High Holidays. However, I always knew that we were Jewish.

When Hitler's Germany annexed Austria I was twelve-years-old. I remember praying for the first time when I was scared by loud engine noises at night while the city was under curfew and blacked out and I thought that we were about to be bombed. I silently prayed for protection and felt

sure that God heard me. I prayed similarly in many other times of fear.

My parents, brother, and I were fortunate to be able to leave Vienna near my thirteenth birthday and, within a few months, settled in St. Louis with the assistance of an Immigrant Aid Society. There, my parents made contact with a synagogue near where we lived and arranged for my Bar Mitzvah. I started attending Shabbat services (usually without my parents, who were working most of the time) and I had a watered-down Bar Mitzvah when I was fourteen. I learned the brachot for an aliyah, but no haftorah, and gave a short speech that had been written for me. When I was presented with a siddur from the Sisterhood, I promised to use it daily – just like I had heard several earlier Bar Mitzvah boys say – and I meant it.

After my Bar Mitzvah, I davened and put on tefillin every morning. The tefillin, incidentally, had been given to me by our landlord in Vienna, who wanted me to “liberate” them. Had I not had these, I would not have begun, much less gotten into the habit, of laying tefillin. I also observed Shabbat punctiliously. I was the only one in my family who took up these observances and I really don't know what motivated me. Perhaps I was grateful for our escape and simply felt that God wanted me to do these things.

I have persisted with these observances since my Bar Mitzvah, including whenever possible throughout nearly four years of Army service. After I met Goldie, who comes from a traditional Jewish family, she introduced me to more Jewish practices and, among other things, invited me to the first Seder I ever attended. During our first two years of marriage we lived in Albuquerque, New Mexico, where we did not keep kosher. But after we moved to New York, where keeping kosher was relatively easy, we began to observe kashrut simply because we felt that it was right for us.

When we relocated to Newton we explored various synagogues in the area and chose to join Temple Emanuel. Here, I had my first exposure to Conservative Judaism, which to me was like

a liberating breath of fresh air compared to the Orthodox practices with which I had been familiar. I felt freed from some of the troublesome ritual constraints to which I had been subjecting myself unquestioningly and began to realize there was some latitude to observances. For example, I permitted myself to drive to Temple on Shabbat and holidays – but it took some time before I ceased feeling guilty about this.

During my adult years, I have done a considerable amount of reading and studying, in the hope of developing some understanding of the place of our planet, of people, and of Jews in the universe – trying to comprehend how it all came to be and for what purpose, if any.

ONE OF THE PASSAGES IN THE DAILY PRAYERS THAT ALWAYS RESONATES WITH ME STRONGLY READS AS FOLLOWS: “WHAT ARE WE? WHAT IS OUR LIFE? WHAT IS OUR KINDNESS? ... WHAT IS OUR STRENGTH? WHAT IS OUR MIGHT? ... ARE NOT THE WISE AS DEVOID OF WISDOM, THE PERCEPTIVE AS IF DEVOID OF INTELLIGENCE? ...”

I am convinced that we shall never know the absolute truth, that we shall never have the ultimate answers, and that science, philosophy, and logic will always have limits. But I still feel that we need to employ all of our intellectual resources to search for meaning and direction. Perhaps the purpose of life is to inquire into the purpose of life.

I have come to believe that the written and the oral Torah – the Tanach and the Talmud – were not handed down to us by God; rather, they are the work of people who lived long ago in different cultures with different needs and who did not have access to the knowledge that mankind has accumulated since their time. Therefore I do not feel irrevocably bound by dictates, for which I cannot find a reasonable basis. Nevertheless, I respect both Torahs for the wisdom and human insights they contain, and I let myself be guided by them.

I have tried to be an ultra-rationalist, but have learned that this really does not work for me. I find that I simply don't feel right if I do not observe

Shabbat or daven as usual or fail to wash my hands and say a bracha before eating. In the background of all of my observances there always is a feeling of mysticism and of connectedness to God. It is clear that my “leaps of action” – following mitzvot initially unthinkingly – have led me to at least a modicum of spirituality.

Eric Ungar, a recent Me'ah graduate, and his family have been members of Temple Emanuel for more than forty years; he has been a trustee and has served as chairman of the Adult Education and of the Youth Activities Committees; all four of his daughters and several of his ten grandchildren are graduates of the Prozdor of Hebrew College. He holds the Doctor of Engineering Science degree and has participated in the development of second-generation atomic weapons, served on university faculties, and for the past forty years has been a senior member of research and consulting firms in Cambridge, winning international recognition for his work in the fields of vibration and sound.



Brief Reflection on My Jewish Life —July 2007

Roslyn G. Weiner

**I DO WHAT I DO JEWISHLY FOR
ME, WITH GOD, WITH AND FOR OTHERS AND TOWARDS
THE REPAIR OF OUR WONDERFUL AND TROUBLED WORLD.**

I am motivated by love, gratitude, obligation, faith, history (mine and our peoples') and tradition when I experience it as flexible. I am consistent in some practices – *kashrut*, Shabbat, *tzadekah*, holiday observances, life-cycle markings – but even in my constancy my practices are a refinement of the laws set out in the Torah and reinforced by our Conservative movement. I feel obligated to

understand for myself why I do what I do and to claim it; practices without intentionality don't work for me.

Why do I do what I do? It fills the space between what I know and feel and the parts of life which are full of mystery and beyond our human knowing. It keeps me in relationship with people. It organizes me and keeps me steady. It connects me to the deepest and purest part of myself, which I believe is the manifestation of the Divine in me. I do some of what I do because my parents taught me to do it and then because it continues to give me sustenance and purpose. If it didn't, would I still do it? Yes, if my ceasing to act in particular ways would cause harm to others, particularly my children. In fact, I have at times modified or extended my practices in order to work towards peace in an important personal relationship. I also note that there are times when I do things by rote. Becoming aware of "roteness" usually stimulates a process of reassessment, and sometimes I discard a practice and sometimes the consequence is a deepening of what was previously a casual action.

What is Jewish about the things I do? I don't think I actually think when I am nice to another person that I am doing this because I am Jewish or because a divine source expects me to do this. But I am writing this at a relatively mature time of my life, and, perhaps, I needed the Jewish pathway or Jewish structure in the same way I needed my parents' guidance when I was a child and then eventually I began to do things because they were and are a part of me.

Being in relationship with God means a lot to me; I almost typed "right" relationship because there is this "still small voice"—call it conscience or deep stirring, which is always operating in me but never more vividly than in the month of Elul when I begin the accounting of my soul. Prayer is an action which connects me to the Source of All Being but it is not really the liturgical type of prayer which compels me or connects me, though our liturgy is often the spring board for my deepest communication.

What kind of relationship with God do I want, need or desire? I struggle with how "me-centric" this all seems to be but in truth it starts in me, flows out, flows back. I call God many different names – My Rock, Compassionate One, Divine Source, Essence – as just a few examples. Sometimes I need to imagine God and God's teachings as a guide; other times as sustenance; sometimes I experience the whole relationship as a great challenge and even burdensome.

HOWEVER, THROUGH EXAMINING THIS RELATIONSHIP IN CONVERSATION WITH MY SPIRITUAL DIRECTOR, WITH OTHERS ALSO WILLING TO CONVERSE ABOUT THEIR SPIRITUAL QUESTS, AND IN THE QUIET OF MY OWN HEART, I HAVE DISCOVERED THAT THIS RELATIONSHIP IS LIKE ALL OF MY IMPORTANT RELATIONSHIPS: NOT EASY, SELDOM STATIC, TIMES OF DRYNESS, MOMENTS OF JOY, NEEDING MY INVESTMENT AND SOMETIMES ABLE TO CARRY ME ALONG WITHOUT GREAT EFFORT ON MY PART.

I hope I will always want to invest in relationship with the Sacred and I pray that God will invest in me for a long time to come.

Roslyn G. Weiner is a mom, grandma, psychologist, spiritual director and 35-year Temple Emanuel member. The Morning Prayer Modeh-Ani expresses her gratitude that she has been given yet another day to engage with life.





Reflections About Mitzvot

Louise Wolfe

I WROTE THIS JUST AFTER RETURNING FROM THE MILLIONTH REUNION OF MY BROOKLYN PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL CLASS, WHICH WAS ALMOST COMPLETELY JEWISH. THE REUNION WAS HELD IN A BROOKLYN HOTEL, AT WHICH A SIMULTANEOUS CONVENTION WAS TITLED “HALACHAH AND REPRODUCTIVE TECHNOLOGIES.”

The latter convention featured huge numbers of anxious-looking men with long beards milling in long dark coats in the lobby. As often happens to me in such situations, I felt my usual mixture of joy on encountering these distant kinsmen, reflection about the oddity of a group of men appointed the arbiters of reproductive issues affecting women, respect for their sincerity, and a thought something like “Thank God I’m able to choose not to submit my decisions to these men’s thought processes.”

An Orthodox husband of one friend joked that our high school reunion felt to him like his Maimonides School reunion, and a Reform kindergarten classmate, now glimpsed in his middle age, joked that he would have felt right at home if he had wandered into the Halachah convention instead. We were back in Brooklyn. My attitude about this law-making group reflects my multiple reactions to the idea of mitzvah.

There is something very odd about posing questions about theology in the twenty-first century and beginning by contrasting the institutionally-supported theologies of two men, Abraham Joshua Heschel and Mordecai Kaplan, with the self-described “little” voice of a lay woman, named “Sheila” by the sociologist Bellah, whose “ideology of the sovereign self” was questioned in our Talmud class. The character named “Sheila” in these writings strove to describe her theological beliefs. What went unstated here was that Kaplan’s and Heschel’s words might be viewed by some as

alternative “ideologies of the sovereign self;” it’s just that their sovereign selves were institutionally-backed. It ought to be more troubling to us as a group that no female theologian was featured here. Why is a female who self-describes as “little” the representative of thinking for oneself?

American rabbis should regard “Sheilaism” as a strong and appealing position for a Jewish individual and should welcome it more wholeheartedly. Many people, for better or worse, have undergone life changes which convince them that they cannot believe in a personal God who cares about them or about their actions, and thus the word “commandment” has at least partly dropped out of Jewish law for them, and they may struggle to find a way of understanding Judaism which will preserve some other concept of God.

When I was a teenager, many of my childhood friends had lost families in the Holocaust, and I had experienced significant family losses. I noticed that some older relatives and friends who had undergone severe losses could not accept traditional beliefs. Given the enormous appeal of Judaism to me, I had to evolve a way of thinking about religious practice which permitted me to continue in spite of my response to personal loss.

THERE IS A GREAT NEED IN OUR COMMUNITY FOR MUTUAL RESPECT FOR THE IDIOSYNCRATIC LESSONS OF A LIVED LIFE, AND A RECOGNITION THAT SOME INDIVIDUALS, WHO ARE REGARDED AS LESS PIOUS IN THIS PARTICULAR FORMULATION OF A “PERSONAL” GOD, MAY HAVE BEEN BROUGHT TO THEIR SITUATION, REGARDLESS OF THEIR WISHES, BY THE EFFECTS OF PERSONAL EXPERIENCES WHICH YOU DO NOT KNOW.

In my experience, those who know something about Judaism are rarely untouched by the concept of commandment. Often they feel torn about what their obligations as Jews could be, and, often, they are capable of awe about the weight of Jewish law’s survival through history whether or not they have embraced it as their own.

When I was young, I can’t emphasize enough what a powerful comfort Judaism seemed to

promise, because it offered to substitute a lawful community guided by concerns about justice, for parents who had died, and to offer the comfort of clear laws and standards for human behavior, in place of the anarchy and lack of protection of the social milieu of the late 1960's college campus.

The Judaism of my youth, in spite of its appealing aspects, seemed unfortunately to convey the message that women were expected to be invisible servants, since many aspects of communal life depended upon the invisible labor of women to function, while many of the community's endeavors excluded women. I believe that the Jewish community is still too complacent about the communal cost of foregone contributions of female talent when there is predominantly male leadership.

As a child and teen, I especially loved certain Jewish ideas about anonymity, like the idea of the thirty-six just men whose good deeds, done in obscurity, could redeem the world. "Say little and do much." The highest form of charity is performed anonymously. There is a conflict between this focus on the goodness of acting without calling attention to yourself, and the requirements of professional survival and contribution. I now consider these particular Jewish traditions to be potential handicaps and adaptations to political powerlessness. The Orthodox idea of separate spheres for men and women potentially serves women terribly once their children are grown, resulting in vastly underused talent, and marginalizing women from productive spheres in later life. It therefore seems necessary to be a "Sheila."

The most important reason why Sheilism should be respected is that the alternative – discouraging individuals from self-reliance – disserves individuals who do not enjoy the support of a community. I would like the leaders of the Jewish community to see the virtues of Sheilism, by recognizing that if I am not for myself, very often no one is for me.

I am most moved by the human significance of Jews performing acts of loving kindness, Tikkun Olam, "healing the world." A high school friend's

college professor father had lost his first family in the Holocaust, and had run an orphanage for Jewish children in Eastern Europe after World War II, before emigrating. His demeanor toward young people, when we traveled in Israel together, and when I saw him with his daughter's friends in New York, was so filled with love and caring, that I felt that his behavior with the young fit my idea of what was sacred.

When I perform Mitzvot, I do them to join or support my community, and because I believe from experience in the phrase from Pirke Avot which my daughter learned in day school – that one Mitzvah begets another. I have a visceral response to Jews who feel alienated from the Jewish community completely. For me, the phrase in the Haggadah in which the wicked son is described as the one who sets himself apart from the rest of the community, is completely emotionally compelling. When I travel or meet people from other places, I can't stop myself from exploring the Jewish community in those places, trying to connect, and caring.

Louise Wolfe: I have degrees in law and landscape architecture. My interests include environmental policy and Jewish history. I am married and the parent of a teen-aged daughter. I am currently involved with educational programming as a participant in Temple Emanuel's Israel Action Forum.





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