

Kol Nidre- 2007

If you've been talking to your friends about the sermons that Rabbi's, specifically Conservative Rabbi's, have been giving this year, you have likely heard that they have been talking about the word Mitzvah, its meaning and context for a contemporary Conservative Jew and therefore for the contemporary Conservative Movement. This is because the new Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, Dr, Arnold Eisen, has made this something of his theme and asked Rabbi's to do the same. Although I am slightly perplexed by this phenomenon, since I can't believe that we Rabbi's have ever not talked about Mitzvot, what they are, how to interpret them, how to apply them, etc, etc. during not only the Holy Days but most days; I certainly believe I have done so. Never-the-less, I would like to begin tonight by doing my part to honor the Chancellor's call. But I am not going to speak to the lowest common denominator. I know that you all know that a Mitzvah is a commandment. Specifically, it is one of those acts derived through either what we call the Written Torah or the Oral Torah, that traditional Judaism ascribes to God's Will. Since Mitzvot are ascribed to God's Will and traditional Judaism also takes for granted that God's Will is Good, Mitzvot came to colloquially be defined as good deeds. That we are commanded to do good deeds is a no-brainer; that the specific commands of the Torah tradition are, at least, part of the good deeds we are commanded to do, is less obvious or has been less obvious for post-enlightenment Jews. Because the status of mitzvot that are not obviously ethical in character has been questionable for post-enlightenment Jews, their status as having been commanded by God has been equally shaky. That is, if the post-enlightenment Jew even has a notion of God, let alone a God Who commands. I would argue that I have spent a good part of my intellectual power throughout my career precisely trying to elaborate a very real notion of being commanded that I believe underlies the uniquely Jewish religious dynamic of law in a way that eschews the literal reading of our core texts while at the same time takes the metaphoric meaning of those texts as being profoundly true. Therefore, in order for me to do my part in talking about Mitzvot I must further unpack the complex metaphoric nexus into which the word Mitzvah falls and in which it functions.

But what, you are now asking yourself, does this have to do with transformation? Or with bicycling? Or even with the difficulties of dealing with intermarriage in one's

family? Those are the things I spoke about last week and I spoke about them from the heart. I also indicated that this week I would speak about one of the issues in the world about which I would like to ask the same kind of transformational questions as I asked in my own life; specifically the frightening prospect of environmental disaster that we are told looms ahead of us as a result of our industrial life-style. There is a very real connection. In speaking about myself last week I wanted to model transformational behavior, rather than preach about transformation. In so doing I tried to indicate that my own will was not the critical element in either personal or inter-personal transformation. Rather, it was the recognition of the commandment, what I called the breath of God breathing down my back that sustained and will continue to sustain transformation. In other words, it was the recognition of the element of Mitzvah that inhered within the particulars of my life, just as there is an element of mitzvah that inheres within every element of your life. Therefore it makes sense that we understand more fully what I believe mitzvah means.

Let me tell you about one of our bike rides: Two weeks before the Hazon bike ride, Annie and I signed up for what is called a metric century – that's a 62.5 mile ride. This was the Lancaster Covered Bridges Metric Century – a ride through the “rolling” hills of Lancaster county, through seven covered bridges covering the requisite 62.5 miles. That the last 30 miles were covered in the pouring rain I will not dwell on tonight. That the word “rolling” in “rolling” hills requires very large scare quotes, I will only mention in passing. That we got our son-in-law to join us was a joy that should speak for itself. But just as it was not about the bike last week, it is not about the ride tonight. Rather, during the ride on a Sunday morning we passed many Amish and Mennonite families returning from Church. They waved to us from their buggies or their kids stared at us from their bicycles dressed in their long skirts and black suits as they trailed the buggies presumably home. We have all passed the Amish in their buggies at one time or another. We have all thought how quaint they looked, that is when we were able to contain our annoyance if they blocked our path. But from the seat of a bicycle going up one of those “rolling hills,” the ability to pass the buggy brought home just what an advance the mechanical horse that I was riding really was and at the same time, raised for me the really interesting question: at what point, if ever, does one simply say no to

technology? How fast is too fast? How far away to travel to work is too far? How powerful the machine is too powerful and what are the criteria for making such decisions? Don't get me wrong; while there may have been a moment when I considered the extraordinary defects of society's decision to embrace the automobile: pollution, unbridled power, suburban sprawl, decay of the cities, breakdown of local community, breakdown of local farming and manufacture; I am no Luddite. Still, the questions were interesting and stayed with me.

Two weeks later we spent Shabbat at the Hazon retreat before riding the 105 miles over two days from Connecticut to Manhattan. Let me tell you a bit about Hazon. Headquartered in NY Hazon raises money, primarily through a series of bicycle rides like the N.Y. Ride we rode, another in the Washington D.C. area and one from Jerusalem to Eilat in cooperation with the Arava Institute, Israel's premier environmental organization. It disburses these funds through grants to local Jewish organizations engaged either in environmental education programs, environmental service programs, and local environmental initiatives such as programs to "green" synagogues or communities. It also directly funds and runs a series of what are called CSA's. Community-Supported Agriculture is a co-operative agreement between a farmer and a group of urban members where members pay in advance for a share of a farmer's produce for the season. The arrangement guarantees members fresh (often picked the same day!) organic produce, while supporting local farmers and sustainable agriculture.

Perhaps the most interesting project it helps fund is called *Adama*, a number of small organic farms where Jewish college age youngsters can become fellows for a year, learning how to work the farm and imbibing the ethics of life on the land. One of those farms is located at the Isabella Freidman Camp where we stayed; another is located at the Pearlstone Retreat Center outside of Baltimore where our congregation has had its last two congregational Shabbatonim.

I went on the Hazon ride for the ride; it was the culmination of the riding I had been doing all year and had been a goal that helped motivate me. But the experience of the Shabbaton is what was truly transformative in the end. And the environmental education was only part of what moved me. What moved me most was observing Shabbat with 300 Jews. Not that I haven't done this before, but I had never done it in a

community that harbored no judgmental expectations about what constituted Shabbat for any of the participants. There were Orthodox minyanim, Equalitarian minyanim, and people who took farm tours, went bike riding, dancing or slept through it all. And no matter what they did with the time it was somehow palpably Shabbat for all of them and when we came together to make Havdallah it was a Havdallah like none I have ever experienced. A havdallah of pure love; love of the Jewish people, love of whatever piece of God each Jew held in his or her soul. That in this ritual all of the weight of what we ideally mean by mitzvah was contained was simply unarguable. And the weight of that Mitzvah was precisely the imperative to sensibly and sensitively work together to create a more sustainable world as the very notion of being stewards of creation – the 1st commandment testified to in the Book of Genesis.

So what do I mean by Mitzvah. Let me return to the beginning.

The question that must be asked before one can ask the meaning of Mitzvah is: What is Torah? And the answer that I have come to believe and teach, drawn from within the most profound Jewish writings that I have encountered over my years of study is that Torah is a spiritual garment. That is, Torah is precisely the state of having been transformed by answering the call of the other; the call of God lodged in the physical presence of the other human being as God called to Abraham through the face of Isaac or called to Moses from the bush bearing the slavery of Israel and each of them answered Hineni, I am here, I am present and I accept my responsibility. Deep within the Jewish tradition is found the notion that until a Jew perfects his or her middot or ethical qualities, he or she cannot don the garment of Torah: it won't adhere. But if he or she endeavors to perfect those qualities then the garment begins to adhere and the Mitzvot articulate the range of areas wherein response is necessary. Some Mitzvot incorporate the responsible act itself, say leaving the corners of the field unplowed for the poor to gather food, other Mitzvot interrupt the self-absorption that threatens to block out our view of others, like kashrut, or tefillin, or Shabbat. Learning to respond to a command means learning to interrupt ourselves. Finally, in this schema, Halacha, the process of Jewish Law, provides a process for constantly evaluating the efficacy of mitzvot to express Torah, that is, to help us perfect our middot within each changing historical situation.

So here we are, poised between the Amish definition of a mitvah vis-à-vis technology and the secular notion that there is no limit to technological advance. This is a place that we Conservative Jews often find ourselves in but usually it is between the Fundamentalist Jews and the secularists. How do we apply who we are to our situation in a meaningful way? Isn't that what Chancellor Eisen is asking us to ask? I hope it is. I hope he is not simply asking us to accede to the definition of mitzvah as fixed in some other historical moment, in other words privileging halacha above mitzvah and mitzvah above Torah. The little I know of him suggests this is not what he is asking. Rather, he is asking us, and I am asking us, is to re-imagine what Torah means in the context of our concern over the environment. Torah must always mean the spiritual garment we can adorn ourselves in when our actions are directed by our concern for others. Then we can begin to discern the specific mitzvot that address that concern. There are many within the tradition already and require no invention. They require action and, more importantly, in a multi-religious democracy they require translation into norms that might be very beneficial to our secular culture despite their origin within religious practice. The first of these mitzvot are blessings, berachot. As long as we cultivate a sense of gratitude and awe in the natural world, an attitude facilitated by reciting the many berachot we have, then the indifference that is among the most pernicious aspects of the environmental crisis may be impacted. But we have more mitzvot: all leading experts recognize the impact of a day without cars each week; we call it Shabbat. Similarly, a day when machines are turned off each week would also have a very positive impact on the problem of greenhouse gases without overly straining either our lifestyles or our economy. We call it Shabbat – the day we remember fundamentally that we belong to creation rather than own it. It is from this realization that transformation flows, that Torah adheres and engenders Mitzvot.

What those Mitzvot are, the mixture of new and ancient projects, programs and activities that may be helpful in the current situation is evolving and has been championed by more expert, famous and prestigious people than me. From a Congregational point of view, we certainly need to organize ourselves in such a way as to use our resources to the extent possible to participate in the general concern for the environment. I hope that there will be a renewed spirit that some of you may want to

contribute to the formation of a “green” committee that would help us make sure that the synagogue and our community is doing as well as it can in regard to these issues. But there is a deeper issue that I want to conclude with. One of the great frustrations that our concern with the environment raises is remarkably similar to a concern raised by the more general notion of Mitzvah and responsibility that I have been developing. How can I act responsibly, how can I fulfill my Mitzvah obligations, when I realize that the act of an individual is dwarfed by the actions or inactions of the larger community? What is the relationship between the breath breathing down my back, in this case in the form of a compulsion to reverse the seemingly inevitable despoiling of the natural world and its potentially catastrophic impact on all life, not just human life; and the knowledge that the real forces of our society appear to be impervious to this breath; it seems not to be breathing down the backs of our government, our captains of industry, even many of our so-called moral exemplars? And this despite what they may say; for if it were, if it were truly breathing down their necks, then things would change. This question not only haunts us, it can dis-empower us. When we feel dis-empowered we are likely to feel impotent and become paralyzed. Therefore the obligation for Mitzvot, even when addressed to the community and envisioning community response, is always and only comprised of acts of individuals. This is a central truth in the present environmental context. We can only act as individuals knowing that it will ultimately take whole communities of people, communities of nations acting together to make a real difference. But we can as individuals keep alive the breath of God breathing down our backs until others feel it as strongly. Similarly, as I have already intimated in my Shofar article, we must be aware that our acts of transformation as individuals need to be sustained by their impact on our community and vice versa. This dynamic of individual and communal transformation as it impacts this specific community I will address in my remarks tomorrow.