

## Re-imagining a Mitzvah Practice

### Taube New Visions

New Visions is an opportunity to think imaginatively about issues of relevance to the Jewish community. It is generously funded by the Taube Foundation for Jewish Life and Culture.

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September 2004 Tishrei 5765 To subscribe: 877-568-SHMA www.shma.com The Me'or Eynaim (Rabbi Menachem Nachum of Chernobyl), a Hasidic master who lived in the Ukraine from 1730 – 1797, taught:

Commandment, after all is called mitzvah because it joins together (mitzvah/ tzavtah) the part of God that dwells within the person with the infinite God beyond.... The truth is that the real fulfilling of any commandment lies in the greeting of the Shekhinah (the indwelling aspect of God), in becoming attached to God or joined together. Thus the rabbis said "The reward of a mitzvah is a mitzvah," meaning that the commandment is rewarded by the nearness to God that one who performs it feels, the joy of spirit that lies within the deed. This indeed is a "greeting of the Shekhinah" and without it the commandment is empty and lifeless, the body-shell of a mitzvah without any soul.... In all service of God, whether in speech or deed, both body and soul are needed to give it life."

How many non-Orthodox Jews today feel that mitzvot bring them close to God? How many consciously perform mitzvot? How many non-Orthodox Jews have a deep and comfortable understanding of God and God's presence in their lives? Not feeling God's presence creates a problem for the spiritual lives of Jews, for Judaism, and for the vitality of Jewish life. It creates an obstacle to maintaining a liberal Jewish perspective, energy, and conscience in public life.

How might we re-imagine mitzvot in a way that draws a wider and deeper pool of Jews toward exploring and creating a practice of mitzvot observance? First, we redefine the purpose: Mitzvot are the Jewish way of paying attention — to the truth of this moment, to the truth of our lives, to our highest sense of purpose. Second, mitzvot are the Jewish form of spiritual discipline. Observance creates an opportunity, not an obligation, to expand our awareness of and integrate the personal and social dimensions of our lives. We teach and practice mitzvot in communities that consciously cultivate the divine middot, or attributes, of compassion, generosity, humility, and truthfulness through meditation, reflection, study of Hasidic and mussar

texts, and social action. Our teachers can also share their search, not just their knowledge. Today we are all "Jews by choice." And we should model how to seriously choose mitzvot for our lives. Few of us inherit automatic rules for being and doing Jewish. So we can choose to commit to living in partnership, or covenant, with God. We can choose to take on the mitzvot that make us constantly conscious of that covenant, and to do them in a way that is consistent with our deepest humanitarian and ethical values. We can see that mitzvot link us with our people and our tradition, with each other, and with God, as we come to understand God.

Personally, I have chosen to make kashrut, Shabbat, and prayer my central personal mitzvot. I link them to the ethical mitzvot of pursuing justice, seeking peace, and loving my neighbor as myself. Keeping kosher is a daily practice of paying attention to what and how I eat. By using certain plates, by not eating or mixing certain foods, and by saying blessings before and after I eat, I am reminded again and again of the gift of life, of the fact that I am not master of my fate, that ego is a delusion as well as a force for good and bad. By linking this private act to an awareness of God's presence in the world, I am also reminded of my responsibility for social and environmental conditions under which this food was grown, harvested, and distributed. I become aware of the boundary between sufficiency and excess.

By making Shabbat a time for study, reflection, prayer, and community, I am reminded that my life is joined through history to creation and the Creator. I challenge the acquired habits of overwork, over-commitment, and over-consumption. I experience every week what it would be like to live in peace. Working for peace in the world flows from that openhearted experience of peace in the soul.

For me, daily prayer begins with silent meditation in the morning and includes blessings throughout the day, an afternoon *minchah* of three silent minutes in my office, and a reflective recitation of the *sh'ma* when I go to sleep, pausing to think of those whom I need to forgive, including and especially myself. Holidays offer their own opportunities for prayer and reflection, like Yom Kippur when

I sit in shul as a day-long retreat for *heshbon hanefesh* — a personal spiritual accounting.

While each of us can develop a mitzvah practice consistent with our own understanding of halakhah, it requires community — honest and supportive companions on the journey — to discover the inner depths of self and soul. Although a mitzvah practice alone is not enough to give sacred meaning to life, it is a sacred discipline that helps us serve God with soul and body. Thus, we create a living practice, a practice for life.

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Bringing together myriad voices and experiences in a sacred conversation provides Sh'ma readers with an opportunity in a few very full pages to explore a topic of Jewish interest from a variety of perspectives. To facilitate a fuller discussion of the ideas, we offer the following questions:

- 1. How does our observance of mitzvot relate to our relationship with God? Are we covenantal partners with God in the transmission of mitzvot?
- 2. How do we approach a mitzvah that unsettles our Jewish sensibility?
- 3. How does Jewish law broaden the scope of personal responsibility?
- 4. What is the interplay between ethical behavior and the observance of mitzvot? Has the category of ethical ideal lost its power to obligate?

Please note that the phrase "wild patience" is from a poem of Adrienne Rich, not Maxine Kumin, as reported in Minna Scherlinder Morse's essay, "God's Marbles" (Sh'ma, June 2004).

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