

**Mitzvah Means Jewish Responsibility**  
**Shabbat Mishpatim 5779 – 2/2/19**  
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The late President Calvin Coolidge was known to be a man of few words. One Sunday he attended church without his wife. When he returned home she asked, "How was church today?"

The president answered, "Good."

"What was the sermon about?"

"Sin."

Mrs. Coolidge pressed for more details. "What did the preacher say about it?"

"He was against it."

And now, the Jewish version.

Mr. Schwartz goes to shul on Shabbat and falls asleep two sentences into the rabbi's sermon (Hypothetically, of course!). When he returns home, Mrs. Schwartz asked, "How was shul today?"

"Good."

"What was the sermon about?"

"Uh, Mitzvahs."

"What did the rabbi say about it?"

"He's in favor of them."

If you fall asleep now, you *can* tell your spouse that. I *am* in favor of Mitzvot. And that *is* the subject of my sermon.

But today I want to take a deep dive into the idea of Mitzvah because while it's clearly a major component of Jewish living, the definition itself is cloudy. Finish this thought: Mitzvah in English means... If you said "commandment," you're half right. And if you said "good deed," you're half right too. The word itself means both. We're familiar with the commandments piece: honor your parents, celebrate Shabbat and holidays, don't steal, keep Kosher, and *many, many* more. It's a long list, 613 in all, but the Mitzvahs-as-commandments are discrete and transparent. There's a set list.

And we're also familiar with the good-deed or act-of-kindness idea: helping a parent with a stroller up and down the stairs, volunteering, donating blood, signing up to be an organ donor. There's no official list here. But a Mitzvah-as-good-deed is any answer to the question, "What's the Mensch-like thing to do here?"

*These* are the two halves to this crucial concept of Mitzvah. But how are they related? What's the connection between Mitzvah as commandment and Mitzvah as good deed?

I think we must begin by redefining the word Mitzvah. The Hebrew word itself *does* mean commandment. For me personally, that's enough to move me to do something. I understand Mitzvot as the Jewish People's understanding of G-d's expectations. So I do them. It's not always easy, or convenient, or inexpensive, or intuitive, or meaningful, but I do them. By the way, sometimes keeping the Mitzvot is most of the above.

But for many of us, and for many more Jews not in shul now, the word "commandment" doesn't work. It doesn't poll well, as it were. Nobody likes the idea of being told what to do. Many who were born Jewish wonder, "Why am I obligated to do 1-613 when I didn't personally sign up for this?"

If we have questions or doubts about G-d, about a Commander, this complicates the idea of commandments too. Also, we are practitioners of democracy, which is a bottom-up process. This grates at the notion of commandments, which are top-down. A critical question is, how can we preserve the core idea of Mitzvot as commandments while shedding these problematic connotations? I believe we can.

I believe there's an expression in our vocabulary that does all the above. The translation I prefer for Mitzvah is "Jewish responsibility." Responsibilities are serious obligations we have to other people via being born into a relationship or opting in to one.

For example, all of us have or had parents, and because we do we are expected to provide and care for them in many different ways. This speaks to most of us who had loving relationships with our parents. Nobody wonders, "Do I have to take care of my parents if I didn't sign a contract?"

All of us intuitively understand that we are born into certain responsibilities and obligations. We owe responsibilities to our parents, siblings, neighbors, community, and fellow citizens. We also understand that we choose to enter other relationships that likewise carry expectations: to our friends, our spouses, and our children, for example. Like Mitzvot, carrying out these responsibilities is not always easy or enjoyable, but we do them. We have to because that's part of being in any relationship.

I believe Mitzvot, Jewish responsibilities, are incumbent upon us simply because we're Jews. Period. This applies to both those born Jewish and those who chose to join this faith. Our Jewish identities axiomatically put us in relationship with other Jews, with G-d, and Israel. Understood this way - Mitzvot as Jewish responsibilities - we do away with the problem of a covenant signed millenia ago, and also even a complicated relationship with G-d. Neither is this undemocratic. I'm not just rebranding the word Mitzvah, I'm articulating its *Ikar*, essence.

Jewish responsibility is the foundation shared by commandments and good deeds. Here are some examples of commandments just from our Parsha, Mishpatim. It overflows with Mitzvot, 51 in all, according to Maimonides:

- We are commanded not to taunt or oppress the stranger, as we ourselves were strangers in Egypt;  
today a related act of kindness might be teaching an underprivileged child how to read.
- We are commanded to help raise up a donkey struggling under its load belonging even to someone we don't like;  
today a related act of kindness might be salting or shoveling part of the driveway of a neighbor who struggles to do it, even if we don't get along with them.
- We are commanded to let the Land of Israel rest in the seventh year, as the land belongs not to us but to G-d;  
today a related act of kindness might be picking up litter.

Mitzvah as commandment and good deed are two halves of the coin of Jewish responsibility. We need both.

It reminds me of a joke:

A Polish immigrant goes to the Department of Motor Vehicles to apply for a driver's license, where he's told that he has to take an eye test. The examiner shows him a card with the letters:

C Z J W I X N O S T A C Z

"Can you read this?" the examiner asks.

"Read it?" the man says, "I know the guy!!"

To understand the joke, you have to know that eye exams feature random letters *and* that Polish names are uniquely hard to pronounce. You need both.

The notion of Jewish responsibility also connects two seemingly disparate sections of the Torah. Until this Parsha, almost all we've read has been narrative, *Aggadah*. *Breishit*, Genesis, is all about beginnings of humanity and the Jewish family. *Shmot*, Exodus, until this point has largely been the story of *Yetziyat Mitzrayim*, the departure from Egypt. Narrative with a small side of Mitzvot. *This* is where Hollywood turns for a good script. Not Mishpatim! Too many rules, not enough

characters. However, this Parsha is significant as it becomes the axis on which the Torah turns. It's fair to say the entire rest of the Torah is primarily a set of laws, *Halacha*, with some narrative mixed in. But what connects the Torah's iconic, cherished stories with the laws that follow? Responsibility. Or to be more precise, the long painful process toward a whole society taking responsibility for itself.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks teaches that Genesis is a series of acts where individuals are confronted with responsibility. And again and again, humanity fails.

Adam and Eve eat of the forbidden fruit. G-d asks Adam, "*Ayecha?* Where are you? Did you eat from the fruit?"

Adam basically says, "It was Eve's fault. And it was kind of Your fault, G-d, because You created her."

Then Eve said, "It was the serpent's fault."

So Adam and Eve fail the test of *personal* responsibility, for neither owned up to their actions.

The Torah's message: We *are* responsible for our own actions.

Soon after, Cain kills his brother Abel. G-d asks Cain, "Where's your brother Abel?" Cain answers, "I don't know. Am I my brother's keeper?" Cain fails the test of *moral* responsibility. Of course he's his brother's keeper!

The Torah's message: We *are* responsible for our family's welfare.

Later on, G-d instructs Noah to build an ark for the wicked world will be washed away. Noah is obedient - he builds the ark - but he remains silent. He doesn't encourage his neighbors to repent; he doesn't ask G-d to reconsider or forgive. Noah is the best around, but he fails the test of *collective* responsibility.

The Torah's message: We *are* responsible for the well-being of our neighbors too.

Fortunately Abraham steps up and answers G-d's opening question, "*Ayecha*-where are you?"

Abraham said, "*Hineni*-I'm right here." Abraham then takes responsibility for himself, his family, and his neighbors. It's no accident that the first Jew, Abraham, is also the first one to take responsibility. For to be Jewish is to live with a core of responsibilities to G-d, to oneself, to others. That's why there are so many Mitzvot. They train us to do the right thing, the *responsible* thing.

The Book of Exodus marks the transition between the Jewish family and the Jewish People. The People of Abraham must assume the patriarch's commitments on a national scale. All the Mitzvot found throughout this Parsha and beyond answer the question, "How can a whole nation demonstrate taking responsibilities for themselves, to G-d, and to the larger world?"

Modern Hebrew has a word for responsibility, *Aharayut* (אחריות).

My friend taught me the following:

The first letter is *Aleph* (א).

This letter stands for G-d, who is the One, just as *Aleph* is letter number one of the alphabet.

So we are responsible to G-d.

The next letter in this word is *Chet*(ח) .

*Aleph Chet* spells *Ach* (אח) , brother.

We are responsible to our families.

The next letter is *Resh* (ר) .

*Aleph Chet Resh* spells *Acher* (אחר) , other.

We are responsible to each other.

The next letter is *Yud* (י) .

*Aleph Chet Resh Yud* spells *Acharai* (אחרי) , follow me.

Sometimes the responsible move is to lead.

The next letter is *Vav* (ו).

*Aleph Chet Resh Yud Vav* spells *Acharav* (אחרי) , follow him.

Sometimes the responsible move is to follow.

The word *Aharayut*, (אחריות) responsibility, contains all of this.

How's that, President Coolidge and Mr. Schwartz?

There's a whole sermon in just one word.

Shabbat Shalom.