

ROSH HASHANAH
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“The Power of Rosh Hashanah Unleashed: The Meaning of Mitzvah”

Rabbi Nina Beth Cardin once wrote, “On Rosh Hashanah we are reminded of the eternal possibilities of renewal”. What she is saying is that Rosh Hashanah is the holiday of hope par excellence, presenting us with endless possibilities for rejuvenation, transformation and renewed vitality. It is a day pregnant with optimism. The magic of Rosh Hashanah is that during this holiday our dreams become real again. We can lift up our eyes that have been focused on simply putting one step in front of the other and aspire to a new vision of what could be.

However, Rosh Hashanah’s power goes even beyond this notion of hope and rejuvenation. According to tradition, this day of individual spiritual renewal occurs on the very day that the rabbis have marked as the birthday of the natural world – Yom Horat Olam. Today we light a new candle on the cake of our lives at the very moment that we celebrate the renewal of the existence of life itself. Rosh Hashanah, therefore, acts as a nexus of meaning, linking the individual, each of us, to the eternal nature of the entire universe. It therefore speaks to the notion of ultimate beginnings and invokes the power of the wondrous mystery of the purpose and meaning of our creation. It begs us to ask ourselves why we are here and what we are here to do. If we take this endeavor seriously, Rosh Hashanah can help guide us down the true journey of life; it can help re-align us along the path towards accomplishing what it is we were created to accomplish.

For those who do not know, since last Rosh Hashanah, my wife Erica and I had our first child, a baby boy named Ari. During Ari’s birth I experienced the miracle of creation unfold right before my eyes and let me tell you all the clichés are correct. The birth was a true miracle, the event was indeed life changing and the day of his birth was truly one of the happiest days of my life.

I will not bore you with my reflections on the event, as meaningful as they are to me, except for one idea that has followed me ever since that moment and which has given me a new sense of awe for how the world works and specifically for the symbolic power of Rosh Hashanah. During each stage of Ari’s growth, from moment number one to just last week, Erica and I have often looked at him and then at one another and said something like, “You know, we actually made him. Before we decided to have a baby he simply did not exist. And now here he is, in the flesh, a new being with a personality and a soul”.

Each time we say it, we are overcome with a feeling of radical amazement – a spiritual feeling of awe, power and joy. And each time I contemplate the birth of my son I am astounded by the marvel of creation itself. This often reminds me of the rabbinic teaching that states that there are three partners in the creation of another human being, the father, the mother, and God, with God being the most powerful force of the three. Ari’s birth reinforced in me that it is the spiritual aspect of birth that elevates human biological reproduction to miraculous divine creation. It is the prospect that we are partners with

God, in a Divine act, that gives us the radical amazement we feel. In viewing birth this way we become part of an eternal process, as opposed to simply engaging in the mundane practice of reproduction. Ari's birth rekindled in me a distinct awareness of God's presence in my life and renewed in me a commitment to continue to seek my Divine purpose as one of God's creations.

Thus, for me, this experience has brought a whole new meaning to Rosh Hashanah. For I feel more aware than any other year that the spiritual goal of this holiday, no matter how much I may fall short of it, is to develop a better understanding of why we have been created and how we are to actualize our Divine purpose. I appreciate now the true genius behind making the Jewish New Year, the celebration of the birthday of the world as well; why the renewal of our lives, is celebrated on the day the existence of life itself is renewed. As a day commemorating the ultimate act of creation, Rosh Hashanah begs us to contemplate why we as humans and as individuals are here and how we should spend our time on this earth.

In fact, the effort to answer these important questions of ultimate meaning is the primary purpose of religion. Judaism, at its spiritual core, is an integrated, multi-faceted approach and guide to living life in the context of such ultimate meaning. Judaism, therefore, contains for Jews many keys to unlocking these answers as well as the tools for helping us to live lives of deep spiritual significance. And for us as Jews, this approach is not characterized only by a philosophical approach, or by a particular frame of mind; it includes a set of mitzvot, commandments, that teach us deeds of action that can be performed in the everyday to enhance our lives. Judaism believes that our actions shape our impressions even more than the other way around, and that how we live our life is vital in our attempt to address matters of ultimate meaning.

Rabbi Larry Kushner, an author and motivational speaker, once gave an interview dealing with this subject. During the interview he addressed, in his own way, how he feels Judaism and the commandments help us along this journey of discovering our ultimate purpose. He said:

"I [believe that I] have been created to do something that only I can do, just as you have been created to accomplish something that only you can do. [Judaism] is founded on the notion that each life has a sacred, unique and never-recurring possibility. . . . [But] It is rare that people are given a clear and focused sense of what their purpose is [so we must seek such purpose. To illustrate], An Atari computer game produced years ago was similar to Dungeon's and Dragons. There were different mazes and puzzles to be figured out. Our kids . . . thought it was neat to get tips and tricks from their classmates. My daughter came home with what was called an undocumented trick . . . it was received by word of mouth. In this Atari game, if you went into one of the rooms and moved the cursor up against what looked like a wall and hit certain keys at the same time, you could walk through the wall and go into an otherwise inaccessible room in which there were a rainbow and the initials of the game's creator. That stayed with me as a metaphor for the religious search that we're discussing. In other words, what do you have to do to access the initials of the Creator that presumably are encoded within everyone

and everything at all times? The name of the game is to find the presence of the Creator and then act in ways to help others find it, too. . .

[He continues,] At the beginning of the main prayer segment of Jewish liturgy, before reciting the primary bouquet of prayers, a passage is read from psalms which says, "Oh, God, open my lips that my mouth may declare Your praise." It's a beautiful and a curious teaching that invites us to relinquish control of running our lives, saying that we are prepared to simply be . . . an agent of the Divine. You move from learning how to serve others joyfully to learning how to serve the Holy One of all being. In the way Judaism structures religious life, this becomes the fulfillment of God's commandments. Each day is [thus] filled with a myriad of opportunities for secret observance, and each one of them is an opportunity . . . to be a joyful servant."

Kushner points out that placing ourselves in the context of being creations and servants of God who have been charged with taking care of the universe and the creatures within, reminds us that we are here for a sacred purpose. This knowledge should act as an inspiration, imbuing all of our daily actions with great meaning, as each moment is another opportunity to participate in such a holy and significant endeavor.

However, he also points out that the attempt to discover our true purpose and our Divine nature sometimes requires us to acknowledge that we are not in total control. We, paradoxically only become empowered when we accept that there is indeed something beyond us. We gain strength from recognizing that the wisdom of a tradition that has been passed down from generation to generation by millions before us has something valuable to teach us about making life meaningful. We find meaning and guidance in committing ourselves to a life of fulfilling the commandments. Kushner is saying that an awareness of God, knowledge of the Torah and participation in mitzvot are great assets to us in this greatest of spiritual journeys.

Every time I meet with students who are about to celebrate becoming Bar/Bat Mitzvah I have a discussion with them about what it means to become a "son or daughter of the commandments". I try to press them to envision for themselves the power and the importance of inheriting a tradition made up of such commandments. I ask them to confront the idea that modern Americans, in particular, like themselves, don't like being told what to do. I tell them that the challenge is not to see the mitzvot simply as a list of do's and don'ts, but rather as halakha, the name given by the rabbis to our system of law, which literally means the Way or the Path. A mitzvah is indeed a commandment, I tell them, but fulfilling the mitzvot is not only about the simple matter of what we can and cannot do.

The new Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, Arnold Eisen, is on a campaign to enter into dialogue with Conservative Jews specifically about the concept of Mitzvah. He, like most Conservative rabbis, believes with a passion in the power of living a life engaged in mitzvot and their ability to direct our spiritual life. However, he points out that many people are drawn into two particular harmful and false dichotomies that pit certain values against each other, which need not be in conflict. Thus, preventing them from engaging seriously with the mitzvot. The first, which he traces to the

philosopher Immanuel Kant, is between Law and Independence. Somehow the idea has become accepted that if you follow commands, laws or rules it means you are no longer an autonomous and independent being. Second, he said, is the unfortunate acceptance of the dichotomy of Law vs. Love. There is an equally harmful belief that law actually interferes with love, so that in order to capture the ideal of love you need to discard the law.

These false dichotomies, according to Eisen, are unnecessary obstacles between Jews and their participation in mitzvot. He believes that too many of us look at the mitzvot simply as restrictions on our independence and that too many of us think that love can only be expressed through spontaneous feelings of passion for another and thus believe the mitzvot interfere. Yet, often it is the law, seemingly restricting, that frees us in a much more important way. For example, the Torah prohibits work on Shabbat so that we are free: free to spend time with family, free to rest and free to study. By requiring us to pray, we are given space and time to take a moment for reflection and meditation, time we would likely not make for ourselves. By prohibiting unethical practices we are given the freedom to choose what is right: the strength to ward off temptations to do otherwise. Freedom and independence are only meaningful when we are given clear alternatives from which to choose that when considered reveal one or two to be superior to the others. If everything is equally fine, permissible and good, what kind of choices are we really making? What would be the difference if e picked on over the other? Quite the opposite of reducing our independence, the law frees us to be the kind of person we wish to be. It allows us to make meaningful decisions.

In regard to the false dichotomy of love vs. law, often it is our mitzvot that guide us to an enduring sense of morality and justice, which are lasting mature expressions of the way we value and love our world and the other human beings who inhabit it. As in a marriage, passionate moments of great feeling are important and desirable but it is the bond of support, “the rules of engagement” agreed upon that shape how one spouse treats the other, that really make for a lasting relationship. Love is more than passion and requires stability and a lasting agreement. According to Judaism, therefore, we do not give tzedakah, charity, only when we feel moved to do so, for one day we may not feel moved. We do it always, no matter how we feel, because that is the proper way to live. We do not reach out to those in need only when we are moved by the desperate situation of others. For one day we may not be moved. Rather, we do so constantly out of an ingrained sense that this is how a good person approaches the world. Love, in the face of the eternal is not only fleeting feelings of passion but, more importantly, the way we approach God and the other creatures of this world. Therefore, as Jews, we believe that law actually encourages love and that the mitzvot contribute to autonomy. They are a gift from God to our people and if we see them as such they can add a great deal of meaning to our lives and help us make the world a better place in which to live.

In fact, for me, the centrality of mitzvot to Judaism is a source of pride as it expresses the fact that Judaism is a religion of action, of deeds performed in response to the commandments. I am delighted that Judaism pushes us beyond the concept of faith. Thoughts and convictions mean very little in our world if they are not acted

upon. Participating in a religious system that is based on deeds epitomizes our commitment to performing Tikkun Olam, the active repair of the world. It signifies our proactive desire to engage in holiness and to realize our true purpose. We make a difference in the world by our actions, Judaism teaches us. Through the mitzvot, we act as God's partners in our deeds and not merely by what we profess.

Similarly, by phrasing the guidelines for living a holy life in the form of commandments, the Torah is attempting to give us extra incentive, a little extra motivation, to do that which is right, even when it is hard or inconvenient. The reality is that a command is stronger than a suggestion. Often we are confronted with situations in our lives when, intellectually, we know what is the most meaningful use of our time. Yet, despite this, we are overcome by the temptation to give in to apathy and we choose the easiest path instead. Do we do our homework or watch TV? Do we go shopping or take advantage of a volunteer opportunity? Do we choose recreation or study? Do we do what is right or give in to doing what is only in our self-interest?

Don't get me wrong, in each of these cases Judaism acknowledges the balance between caring for the self and making time for leisure on the one hand, and participating in good works, selfless acts, ritual and study on the other. Yet, the command is there to help you overcome the feeling of indifference, or the temptation towards evil, at that moment when you want to make the right choice but are feeling a tug in the other direction. If you accept the authority of the commandments it gives you a moral and spiritual basis for doing what you know to be right even when you don't feel like it or are tempted, as humans often are, to do the opposite.

Commitment to mitzvot also helps build community. They help unite people in the best way, through the shared pursuit of something meaningful. When people come together around a shared sense of values to which they are committed, a tremendous amount of good can be achieved. In a community dedicated to the mitzvot, both in spirit and in deed, those in mourning are comforted, the sick are visited and the poor are given services. Happy occasions are heightened, holiday celebrations are made vibrant and spirituality is nourished. And those who partner together in the pursuit of such deeds, and in the participation of such Jewish rituals, bond closer together and form more intimate connections with each other. Connections with others in turn are another true path to spirituality and to connecting to God. Thus, the mitzvot again function to further the goal of living a holy life and helping us to fulfill our *raison d'être*, our reason for being.

Finally, the existence of mitzvot, including even the ones that do not make sense to us today, remind us that we are not God, that our own desires and egos should not totally dominate our actions, that there is more to the world than our lives and what we want. An acceptance that we are commanded leads to the awareness that there is a greater power beyond our understanding that we must acknowledge for the sake of the betterment of the world. It is this same entity, what we call God, that links every living creature together and whose existence in the world demands that we act with our true purpose in mind.

However, in an overly intellectual world we often convince ourselves that to participate in a Jewish tradition, to engage ourselves in a mitzvah, we must possess a full and complete understanding of it before we undertake it. Yet, in order to function in life in general we must often depend on the wisdom of those who came before us. The truth is that during our lives we do many things that are meaningful to us because of tradition: family, cultural, religious or otherwise. Yes, we must be in dialogue with our tradition and yes we can challenge individual traditions that we may find objectionable. Yet, to really access the power of Judaism, for example, we must place ourselves firmly within it. The true meaning of a particular deed can only be genuinely understood once it is actually undertaken. The true meaning of living a life of mitzvot cannot be assessed unless we try it. We cannot know what something will mean to us until we actually do it. That is why our great teacher and scholar Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said, that in Judaism what is required is a Leap of Action and not a Leap of Faith.

So where does one start, or more properly, where do we go from here? There is no single answer. We are all different and have different relationships with our Jewish heritage. So I say begin by asking yourself a few questions: What do I do out of love now? What do I currently do out of a sense of commitment? What do I call holy? What do I call religious? Without even thinking about doing something more, look at what you already do and start to see it in a different way. Begin by re-imagining your actions in the context of Judaism, in the context of mitzvot, in the context of spirituality. Dwell on those things and learn from that which you already do that helps you live in tune with your ultimate purpose.

And then take a leap of action; try something new and incorporate a new mitzvah: light Shabbat candles, take a class on Judaism (we have a great adult ed program at Beth El and other tremendous learning resources in this community), participate regularly in a community service effort (we have an active committee at Beth El with a plethora of offerings which are/will be displayed in the brochure that (is/will be) on your seat), kosher your kitchen (I can help you), say the shema before bed, spend time with your children or spouse on Shabbat just playing a game or taking a walk, come to synagogue more often. Give whatever you choose a real try. See yourself as doing a mitzvah; see your action as an attempt to reach out to God, as a step towards actualizing your true potential. Look upon your tradition and upon these mitzvot as a framework for helping you to accomplish what matters most.

And if you need a little more help, pick up a book by Ron Wolfson, called God's To Do List. Basing himself on a similar premise he presents us with a process that culminates in actually making a tangible list of what we think we can do in our lives to help bring holiness into the world. Basing himself on the Torah and rabbinic teachings he identifies several categories of holy action in which we can participate to partner with God that will inspire our lists: To bless, to create, to rest, to call, to care, to comfort, to forgive, to wrestle, to repair and to give. Surely, he says, each of us can find several concrete things, within and beyond these categories, that we can do to add holiness to the world. He begs us to write them down and place them on our list of things to do, as mitzvot -- deeds we will undertake which we have give priority in our daily life.

There is a beautiful rabbinic teaching that Wolfson presents about the creation of human beings. The Talmud tells us that an angel of God sits next to each one of us in the womb and teaches us in-utero everything we need to know to be God's partner. Yet, when we are born the angel taps us under the nose, forming the indentation there that all human beings have . . . and we forget everything. Our life then becomes our personal mission to re-discover our role as a partner with God. That is what life is all about; it is what sets us apart from the angels whose roles are specific, clear and therefore limited. Our angst experienced during our journey of self-discovery, life, is what gives us a special passion and creativity and is paradoxically what makes the road to holiness so fulfilling and rewarding. We don't embark on this journey alone, we have each other and the presence of God, which intermingle in our lives through the mitzvot.

Yes, mitzvah means commandment, but what Wolfson is saying is that the mitzvot are more than that. They are blueprints for how we are to be God's partners in caring for humanity and repairing the world; they are guidelines for fulfilling our ultimate roles in life. God, as expressed through the Torah and Jewish tradition, wants you to do them all. But we understand that everyone is on a variant path of still re-discovering the instructions given to them by the angels. Thus, it is not all or nothing. Sit here and think about your life. Think about what you are trying to do with your life and think about how you can, and already, participate in God's work. Make a list and check off whatever you can on God's to do list – adding mitzvah after mitzvah after mitzvah, fulfilling your own unique role in being God's partner in Tikkun Olam, the repair of the world. In that way you will surely put yourself on the path to discover your ultimate purpose. Shanah Tovah, a happy, healthy and meaningful New Year to you all!