

**Loving God and Other Reasons for Mitzvot**  
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Okay. I will start, and you join in: *Hold the pickle hold the lettuce special orders don't upset us all we ask is that you let us... ..Have it your way, have it your way....*

I am not singing this to recommend Burger King to you. First of all, today, tomorrow and Saturday you should be having lunch at home with your family. And for Sunday I recommend you have a kosher burger at Abba's!

I sang that song for a different reason: Anyone in this room who was at least 6 years old in 1974 knows that jingle. That little ditty catapulted an unknown rival to McDonalds into the stratosphere, overnight making it one of the largest fast food chains in the world. McDonalds may have had its secret sauce, but the secret behind Burger King's success was its celebration of personal choice. Burger King recognized that they were marketing themselves to children of the 60's who were part of the me generation. We grew up in an era that distrusted authority and resisted conformity. The more different you could be, the more hip you were. Nothing embodied that spirit more than the way we wore our hair. Do you remember the musical?

I want it long, straight, curly, fuzzy  
Snaggy, shaggy, ratty, matty  
Oily, greasy, fleecy  
Shining, gleaming, streaming  
Flaxen, waxen  
Knotted, polka-dotted  
Twisted, beaded, braided  
Powdered, flowered, and confettied  
Bangled, tangled, spangled, and spaghettied!

Our hair was the ultimate symbol of our independence; and we each wore it differently. Today kids may wear their hair much shorter, but they are no less autonomous. If we were the me generation, this is the I generation, as in IPOD, IBOOK, IPHONE. The difference is that in the 60's and 70's me-ism was a form of rebellion. Today, I-ism is in the mainstream. We no longer fight for the right to be independent, we expect it. Life comes at us ala carte and we expect to be able to choose and customize every detail of how we live it. Remember when coffee was regular or decaf, cream or sugar? Now Starbucks offers some 2000 combinations. Yes, I'd like a half caf sugar free nonfat dry foam white mocha with cinnamon please. You can fly into town on one airline and out on another. You can buy a single track without committing to the whole album, and you can listen in blissful solitude on your earphones. Everyone has their own phone and their own email account so no one ever has to know your business.

Our love affair with personal autonomy predates the sixties. It goes all the way back to the Enlightenment of the 1700's, to the age of reason. The great European philosophers of that era argued that science and reason would ultimately explain everything in the universe and that there was therefore no real need for religion. Though they did not wear their hair in the style of the 60s, they too rebelled against the authoritative traditions of their day. Among them was the philosopher Immanuel Kant. He argued for the complete

autonomy of the individual. Each and every person should be free to reach their own conclusions about the nature of the world in which they live and to make their own choices about how to live. The founding fathers of this country were deeply affected by Enlightenment thought. Kant's ideas became part of the notions of freedom that form the underlying foundation of American life. We live in a society which is defined by freedom of choice. Have it your way...

Of course, the Jewish view of the world is a little different. Judaism extols the virtues of reason and science, and sees no conflict between science and religion, but unlike western society which is built around notions of personal freedom, Judaism is built around a notion of obligation, of mitzvah. Unlike Kant we rely upon an authority outside ourselves. According to tradition God gave the Jewish people 613 mitzvot – commandments that we are expected to fulfill. Some of these commandments can be arrived at by reason. Even if we were not given the Torah, concede the rabbis, we would through reason conclude that it is wrong to murder and steal, or that we share an obligation to help those less fortunate than ourselves. Others of God's commandments are less clear. Why can't I mix meat and milk? Why must rest on the Sabbath? Why should I not wear shatnez? Why should I shake a lulav on Sukkot?

For the modern Jew, the idea of mitzvah – of obligation to a sacred tradition – goes head to head with our notions of personal freedom and choice. If I can have my burger, my coffee and my music my way, why can't I have my religion my way too?

In the words of Rabbi Elliott Dorff, "Even those who believe in God are often not happy with the tradition's insistence that God demands obedience, for that takes away one's right to decide what to do... The tradition's claim that Jewish law is commanded by God, in other words, eliminates one's autonomy, one's right and ability to make one's own decisions."

As a result we live in a society that increasingly practices salad bar religion. Take what you want, leave the rest behind. Just as we choose which vegetables will grace our plate, so too we choose which elements of Judaism will find their way into our daily lives. We do *what* we want *when* we want when *we decide* it is meaningful to us. It is an expression of our own autonomous being. In such a religious system there is no room for mitzvot.

Yet our sages taught: *Gadol metzueh v'oseh mi-she-ayno metzueh v'oseh* – Greater is the one who performs an act out being commanded than one who does it as an expression of free will. Why? What is so powerful about the idea of commandedness?

Dr. Arnold Eisen, the new Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, has challenged Conservative Jews to explore this very issue. What does mitzvah mean to us in the twenty-first century? He has set forth some questions which I have handed out. I hope that you will take them home and talk about them. We will discuss them at our High Holiday Forum before Neilah. I look forward to hearing your thoughts about mitzvah. But for now I want to share with you my own personal perspective on why, as a child of the 60s and 70s, *gadol metzueh* – it is greater to feel commanded.

First, for me, commandedness is an expression of love. That's right, love. You know, we have been brainwashed by the culture in which we live to accept a Christian dichotomy between our two faiths that has no basis in Judaism. Christianity teaches that theirs is a religion of love and that their God – the God of the Christian Testament – is a God of love, whereas our God, the God of the Hebrew Bible is a God filled with anger and retribution. That could not be farther from the truth. The Jewish God is a God of deep and unending unconditional love. We say in our prayers *Ahavah Rabbah Ahavtanu* – you love us with a deep love, and *Ahavat Olam*, an eternal love. The God of the Hebrew Bible loves us so much that despite our sins and failings he forgives us again and again. It is because God loves us so deeply that he gave us the commandments to guide our lives, much as a parent seeks to offer guidance to their child. And like a child, or a lover, when we feel that love we feel compelled to respond to that love with our actions.

What does it truly mean to love someone? When Rabbi Lawrence Kushner wants to explain what love is, he recalls when his wife Karen was pregnant with their second child. And as pregnant women sometimes do, Karen woke him up in the middle of the night and told him she couldn't sleep – in part because she had developed a craving – for a Hershey's chocolate bar with almonds.

As Rabbi Kushner tells the story, "She'd been schlepping this baby around in her belly, and I was getting off easy, so I figured it was the least I could do. Before she completed enunciating her request, I said, "Don't worry about a thing, honey." I put my Levi's on over my pajamas, threw on a sweatshirt, snow galoshes, and my down parka, hood, gloves and muffler.

"I ran down the few flights of steps to the car and to my chagrin, saw there were about three inches of wet sloppy snow all over the car. I cleaned it off, started the car, and then had this horrifying realization—I had no idea where I was going to find a store open in the middle of the night.

"I drove up Route 20 and remembered the Holiday Inn out on Route 495 had a candy machine. I can still picture the night clerk watching this car skid to a stop in a snowstorm, a man runs in, waves, pumps quarters into the candy machine, grabs a handful of candy bars, runs back to the car, and drives off into the blizzard. I got home and gave my wife the candy bars.

"For about an hour on a wintry night, I, Lawrence Kushner, who normally has a very well-developed ego, did not have an ego. Instead, I was a servant of Karen Kushner's ego. I did not stay in a warm bed. I drove around looking for candy bars. Here's the crazy part. [I bet you thought that WAS the crazy part!] Doing what my lover wanted made me happier than doing what I wanted. It was more fulfilling. It was transforming. By letting go of myself and serving someone whom I loved, I reached a state of humility and an otherwise unattainable fulfillment."

In his book, *The Star of Redemption*, Franz Rosenzweig comments on the commandment You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your might. He asks: Can love be commanded? ... and he answers his own question: Yes, love can be commanded, but the commandment to love can only proceed from the mouth of the lover.

Only the lover can and does say: love me! – And he really does so. In his mouth the commandment to love is not a strange commandment; it is none other than the voice of love itself. The love of the lover has in fact no word to express itself other than the commandment. In other words, the experience of feeling God’s love is so powerful that we feel compelled to respond. And that sense of compulsion, of obligation, is one meaning of the word mitzvah.

My love of God is not the only reason why I keep the mitzvot. There are other reasons why I keep the mitzvot as well.

I want you to try something with me: O-H! (Congregation responds: I-O!).

Why did you do that? It’s a silly little ritual. And yet every day it is done by lawyers, doctors, accountants, rational professional adults! Why? You can do that cheer anywhere in the US – maybe anywhere in the world – and someone will answer. You didn’t even think about it when you responded to me. If you went to Ohio State or are a Buckeye fan it is so engrained that you just do it naturally. That is the beauty of rituals. They become part of who we are; and they create a common language that bonds us together.

For Jews, mitzvot is our common language. When I walk down the street and see a kippah I feel instantly connected. When I choose what I will and will not eat, I feel connected. When I refrain from work on Shabbat, I feel connected. When someone says a blessing and I answer “Amen” I feel connected. The mitzvot frame every action we take all day long, so that at every moment we are conscious of the fact that we are part of something greater than ourselves. They link us to a vast community – a people – that shares common values and beliefs, a common history and a common destiny. And just as they link us horizontally to Jews throughout the world, so too they link us vertically through time. They connect me with my past and my future. When I perform mitzvot I become one more link in a vast chain stretching back to Sinai, and I ensure that that chain of continuity will continue on after me.

Finally there is for me a third meaning of mitzvot. I keep mitzvot because they add meaning and direction to my life. They help to frame my world view, to help me remember my priorities and my values. They serve as my moral compass. For some of the mitzvot, the underlying morality is self evident – thou shalt not steal. For others the symbolic acts are laden with meaning that is inherent in their symbolism. Kashrut, for example, teaches me the value of all life. Still other mitzvot, those with no seeming rational explanation or symbolism, serve as reminders to me of the need for humility, for a recognition that the ultimate source of morality must lie outside the self.

Some of you know the story of how I came to be observant – not how I became a rabbi – but how I came to keep the mitzvot. In High School I had two great loves. The first was my music. I was first chair trumpet in Marching band, jazz band and orchestra. I also was very active in USY and in particular in a group of USYers called “Shabbat Troupe.” This group of young people from throughout Southern California traveled to different Conservative synagogues to lead Shabbat services and conduct a Shabbat program for their teens. So I led this schizophrenic life: One weekend I was teaching about the beauty

of keeping Shabbat, the next weekend I was violating Shabbat, marching on the football field or in a parade.

Then one day I was asked to run for regional office. To be a regional officer in USY you had to meet certain requirements. You had to attend services three times a month. No Problem. You had to be in a synagogue study program. No Problem. You had to eat dairy out when you were with three or more USYers. I was already doing that, too. You had to keep Shabbat. That was a problem. I could not keep Shabbat and still be in my school music groups. I went through months of agonizing confusion trying to decide what I wanted to do. I spoke with my parents, my youth advisor, my rabbi, my band director, who thought I was nuts. In the end I decided it was more important to me to be observant than to be in the school band. Why? Because keeping God's commandments gave me a kind of joy and satisfaction that I could not get anywhere else; and because when I kept Shabbat I felt such a strong bond of friendship and community, and because keeping the mitzvot gave me a sense of direction in my life.

For these three reasons mitzvot play a central role in my life as a Jew. They are an expression of my love of God, a common language connecting me to my community and my history, a moral compass to guide me. You may have other definitions of mitzvah, other reasons why mitzvah is important to you. We will talk about them on Yom Kippur afternoon.

Whatever our reasons, one thing is clear. Mitzvah is central to who we are as Jews. That means to be a Jew in America is to fly in the face of the zeitgeist – of the spirit of the times. It means recognizing that Kant was wrong. That autonomy is not always best. That, as the rabbis said, *gadol metzuveh v'oseh* – it is greater to do out of a sense of obligation, to feel the call of God's commandments.

*As a senior citizen was driving down the freeway, his car phone rang. Answering, he heard his wife's voice urgently warning him, "Herman, I just heard on the news that there's a car going the wrong way on 280. Please be careful!"*  
*"Heck," said Herman, "It's not just one car. It's hundreds of them!"*

Sometimes we may feel like Herman. All the cars are going the other way. And we are tempted to turn around and follow them. But many of you know what I like to say about a kosher fish. A kosher fish has to have fins and scales because only a fish with fins and scales can swim against the tide. To be a Jew means to be able to swim against the tide, to be different, to stand against conventional wisdom, to stand up for greater, eternal truths. *Gadol metzuvah* – great is the one who hears God's call. May we hear that call this Rosh Hashanah, and may we respond with love.