

Mitzvah: Lost in Translation

Parshat Ki Tetzei 5769

By Rabbi Mark B Greenspan

For me, the first step in writing a sermon is coming up with a catchy title. So, at my secretary's suggestion, I've decided to name today's sermon, "Lost in Translation."

It's been said that reading great literature in translation is like kissing a beautiful bride while she's wearing a veil. Scholars of language will tell you that there is no such thing as an 'exact' translation; every translation is, at best, an interpretation or an approximation of the original.

Yiddish speakers often remind me of this when they tell me their favorite joke – but they preface it with the proviso, that it's going to lose something in translation. In effect, what they're saying is: "I'm going to tell you a hilarious joke, possibly the funniest joke in the world - but you're not going to get it because you don't speak Yiddish."

With that in mind, I'd like to talk to you this morning about a Hebrew word which we use all the time but which defies translation. It's the word, "*Mitzvah*." *Mitzvah* is one of the most common Hebrew words in Jewish life and culture. We talk about *Bar* and *Bat Mitzvah*; we thank others when they perform 'a *mitzvah*,' for us, and, of course, the word pops up again and again in our great literature. The sages are constantly counting *mitzvot* in the Torah and arguing about their interpretation. Even non-Jews know this word; it's made its way into the Oxford English Dictionary. Like Levi's Rye Bread you don't have to be Jewish to love *mitzvot*!

But what does *mitzvah* actually mean? The best way to translate a word is to look at it in context rather than trying to offer an exact English equivalency for the word. *Mitzvah* has different meanings depending on how it is used, who uses it, and when it is used.

If there is one topic about which we are preoccupied in this week's *Parashah* it is, "*Mitzvah*." Actually the word never appears in *Ki Tetzei* but this Torah portion along with the preceding parshiot, contain a collection of the '*mitzvot*' that Moses presented to the people at Sinai and again at the Jordan River.

As Austin pointed out, there are 72 *mitzvot* in Parshat Ki Tetzei, more than in any other Parashah in the Torah. They address every aspect of life: how we act in times of war and peace, at home and in a place of business, how we dress, cut our hair and build a house. We are not only told what to do with a condemned criminal's body and how to handle lost property, but how to lend money and to put tassels on our garments. If there is a common denominator for all these '*mitzvot*' it is 'life' in all its diversity. No aspect of life is devoid of religion; every moment is an opportunity to sanctify life.

So how do we define this word? That depends who you ask. This is probably the single most controversial question one can ask about Jewish life. For how one understands this word will define its authority and place in how one lives.

The average Jew hears the word *mitzvah* and thinks good deed – though it is clear from our Parashah that while most good deeds are *mitzvot*, not all *mitzvot* are good deeds. What's more, *mitzvot* are often contextual. They depend on circumstances. Many *mitzvot* in the Torah portion begin, 'when X, Y, and Z takes place then you shall do A, B, and C...' Parshat Ki Tetzei reads like a how to book of life.

So maybe, 'rules' or 'precepts' or 'instructions' is a better translation for *Mitzvah*. What we find in *Parshat Ki Tetzei* and throughout the Torah are small and large rules for daily life. Some are big – like, 'honor your father

and mother' – and others are small and seemingly inconsequential – like, 'when you take an egg from a nest chase off the mother bird first.' And yet in both of these cases the Torah tells us that 'the reward' - if we can speak of it as such - is that 'you will live long in the land that the Adonai is giving you...' This led the sages to conclude that one shouldn't presume the relative importance or unimportance of a *mitzvah*. We can never know the consequences of our actions.

Most commonly, *Mitzvah* is translated, commandment. We're 'commanded' to act a certain way, to do certain things and not do others. But of course, for there to be a commandments, there has to be a *Commander*. I suspect that many people today have some doubts about this – after all, if one really believes that God commands us to act a certain way who wouldn't obey? Rabbi Aaron Lichtenstein, of Yeshiva University, wrote: "To the committed Jew, the experience of revelation, at Sinai or at present, is not simply a momentarily rapturous encounter... It imposes binding obligations. The Torah, although it includes sizable narrative segments, is, in its quintessence, normative."

But not all contemporary thinkers would agree with Rabbi Lichtenstein. Non-orthodox Jews struggle with the idea of commandment in a modern context. We've been taught to read the Bible as a document composed through human beings. And if that is the case how can I know what God commands me to do?

Rabbi Neil Gilman of the Jewish Theological Seminary would argue that every *mitzvah* is a choice. He writes: "I believe that the ultimate locus of authority for what we believe and how we practice as Jews is in ourselves. That is the irreversible gift of modernity." In other words, in Judaism, as in other areas of life **we choose to obligate ourselves** – though frankly that leaves the future of Judaism tenuously dependent on each individual.

So which interpretation of *mitzvah* works for you? Is a *mitzvah* a good deed, a precept, a rule, an obligation, a commandment, or a choice? Or is it something else? We don't stop to think about these questions often enough though I suspect we should. If Judaism matters, if it makes a difference then it's important not only to be Jewish but to do Jewish – and Jewish living is not defined by feelings or pride or some ethnic identity but by how we live, what we do, and how we sanctify each moment of our lives.

I would like to offer yet another interpretation of the word *mitzvah* – far from its literal meaning but closer to how I think about *mitzvot* in my life. I'd suggest that *mitzvot* are opportunities to live a life of meaning, to encounter God to ennoble our lives and our world through small and large actions. They are a language through which we as Jews express our deepest most abiding values and beliefs. In Torah Table Talk this week I shared a brief statement by Rabbi Arnold Jacob Wolf that captures my sense of what makes a *mitzvah*, a *mitzvah*. He writes:

"I try to walk the road of Judaism. Embedded in that road there are many jewels. One is marked "Shabbat" and one is marked "Civil Rights" and one "Kashrut" and one "Honor your Parents" and one "Study of Torah" and one "You shall be holy." There are at least 613 of them and they are of different shapes and sizes and weights. Some are light and easy for me to pick up. Some are too deeply embedded for me, so far at least, though I get a little stronger by trying to extricate the jewels from the street. Some, perhaps, I shall never be able to pick up. I believe that God expects me to keep on walking on Judaism Street and to carry whatever I can of its commandments. I do not believe that God expects me to lift what I cannot, nor may I condemn my fellow Jew who may not be able to pick up even as much as I can."

We can argue about where *mitzvot* come from, by whose authority we observe them, and how they should be practiced but none of these questions change the fact that every *mitzvah* is a sacred opportunity. Imagine you're walking along the street and you see a hundred dollar bill on the sidewalk. Who wouldn't stop to pick it up? Now imagine you see something priceless, something that has the potential to change your life and to change the world. The question of *mitzvot* is not so much right or wrong, but wise or unwise. That's not to say that it's easy; in an age when it is hard to talk to people about 'obligation' and 'authority' the way to teach people the way of *mitzvot* is to speak about opportunity, encounter and meaning.

As we approach the High Holy Days, I'd like to suggest that we spend time each day looking at the opportunities we've been given. They are all around us. Whether you realize it or not, you already perform *mitzvot*. A day does not pass without an opportunity to do good deeds and live a holy life. Don't we owe it to ourselves and to each other to use each opportunity wisely, and not to let these gifts pass us by?

Torah Table Talk related to this Parshat (as of the time of publication) can be viewed via this link – http://www.oceansidejewishcenter.org/rebmark/TORAH_TABLE_TALK/5769/TTTkitetzei69.pdf