

Why Do Jewish?

A New Understanding Mitzvah

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By Rabbi Mark B Greenspan

One of the most distressing metaphors of American Jewish life can be found in Dara Horn's novel, "In the Image." Ms Horn describes a semi-mythical mountain located at the bottom of the sea just outside of New York Harbor. It is made up of discarded *tefillin* which, along with other Jewish ritual objects, were thrown overboard by new immigrants upon their arrival in New World. Ms Horn writes that the new immigrants discarded these objects, "because *tefillin* were something for the Old World, and here in the New World they didn't need them any more."

Similarly, in his book, *Patrimony*, Philip Roth speaks of an incident in which his father, not sure what to do with his *tefillin*, decides to abandon them in a locker in the YMHA. It never occurs to him to pass them on to his children or grandchildren.

The distressing thing about these images is that Roth and Horn did not invent them; they've been around for a long time and are based on real life. When Ms Horn began lecturing about her book some years ago, a number of elderly people claimed to have witnessed similar incidents upon their arrival in America.

In a larger sense, however, the image of a mountain of *tefillin* at the bottom of the sea is a sorrowful metaphor for the challenges of being Jewish in America today. Most American Jews are comfortable with their Jewish identity but not with Jewish practices. Why bother holding on to these Jewish traditions? Is Judaism relevant to a new generation that no longer remembers the "Old World?" Why should someone bother putting on *tefillin* if they no longer feel 'obligated' or 'commanded' to do so? And what does it mean not only *to be* Jewish in a secular world today but *to do* Jewish three or four generations later after our grand-parents and great-grand-parents arrived in this *Goldineh Medineh*?

As we observe Yom Kippur today, Judaism appears to be secure and as vital as ever. There are over 1500 people in our building today. The seats of our synagogue are full and people have set aside their daily responsibilities to observe 'the great white fast' of Yom Kippur. For most Jews, this is the dividing line for Jewish identity. We can't imagine not observing Yom Kippur. When talking with young couples who are about to be married, I often ask them about their Jewish identity. Some tell me, "My family is 'reform,'" meaning, "I didn't grow up observing Jewish traditions," while others say, "I grew up in a typical Conservative household; we observed the holidays," meaning, we observed Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and Passover and we lit candles on Chanukah.

Of course, neither definition of Jewish identity is correct. Being a Reform Jew doesn't mean you 'don't observe' Jewish traditions, and being a Conservative Jew means more than showing up at services two or three times a year and having a family get-together on Passover. Reform and Conservative Judaism (not to mention Orthodox and Reconstructionist Judaism) all attempt to tell people why they shouldn't throw their heritage overboard; why Judaism can be as meaningful today as it was in the 'Old World.' Of course, our answers differ from one another as do our practices but being committed to a particular

movement is more than membership dues and High Holy Days tickets. **It's not affiliation but engagement in Jewish life that defines what type of Jew one wishes to be. No matter which synagogue we go to, we must answer the question "why do Jewish?"**

We call ourselves "Conservative Jews." What could be more confusing? In America, 'conservative' means 'right wing,' 'traditional' and 'not changing' and yet Conservative Judaism means that one is 'liberal!' It means one is not willing to compromise about living in the contemporary world while maintaining tradition and that one struggles with finding ways to fit our religious identity into everyday life. As Conservative Jews we're not prepared to sacrifice the mind at the altar of tradition. And it also means that we believe that Jewish law changes to reflect our changing understanding of the world. In our congregation, women participate fully in the prayer life of the synagogue and families sit together. Orthodox Jew would hardly consider that to be, 'conservative.'

Conservative Judaism was founded as a response to classical Reform Judaism which rejected much of Jewish ritual practice and belief in the nineteen and early twentieth century. In response to Reform Judaism, Conservative Jews were in the business of 'conserving' Judaism. For Solomon Schechter, Conservative Judaism was supposed to be the traditional Judaism of his day. The question of names is even more confusing today as Reform Judaism adopts more traditional practices including the use of Hebrew, wearing kipot, and even Kashrut. So we wonder, what makes us different? What makes us unique as Conservative Jews?

What defines us as Jews is not affiliation but how engaged we are by our way of life. The people who attend services at Chabad aren't suddenly more pious or religious because of where they attend services. And I know reform Jews who are passionately committed to Jewish living. Rather, it is what we do, how we live our faith, and how involved we are in Jewish life that makes us engaged Jews.

An engaged Jew is not afraid to ask questions. "Why do Jewish?" "What difference does it make?" "How should I pass this tradition on to my children and grand-children?" Jewish identity is not an ethnic designation. After all, even Elvis Presley wore a Jewish star! So what makes me Jewish? It's not my parents or whether I have a Jewish mother but whether I believe Judaism has meaning for my life now and for the world, and whether I think it's worth the bother of passing a Jewish way of life on from generation to generation.

I believe the answer to these questions is, in some ways, simpler for an orthodox Jew. For him, the answer to the questions, "Why do these things? Why put on tefillin? Why keep Kosher? Why attend minyan?" is straight forward. You do it because it is a mitzvah! If one believes in a commanding God who has instructed us to do something or live a certain way, why wouldn't one obey Gods' eternal command? Of course, one can come up with other reasons for the commandments but they are secondary in comparison with the larger sense of commanded-ness.

The issue has become more complicated us. We pay lip service to the idea of *mitzvah*, of commanded-ness, but we certainly don't live like we're commanded. For most of us to practice Judaism, we must find personal meaning in what we do. Our intellect is as important as our heart when it comes to making life commitments. *Mitzvah* comes from within us rather than from a transcendent source beyond one's self.

That is the symbolism of people throwing their tefillin overboard. Our immigrant relatives wanted to leave the past behind and build new lives for themselves. They didn't just discard rituals – they were rejecting the idea of a commanding God. But they weren't prepared to make a clean break with the

past either. They felt a certain amount of nostalgia for the past. Rituals and Yiddish culture were important to them to the extent that they were familiar even if they were no longer relevant to their lives. They were part of the smells and tastes of being Jewish. This was particularly true in the greater New York area where there was a kosher deli in every neighborhood and the city breathed Yiddish culture. Two generations later, and the nostalgia for the past (and pastrami) no longer speaks to the average Jew. Our parents and grand-parents couldn't imagine not being a member of a synagogue, even if they didn't attend often. For a new generation, the place to meet other Jews is at a health club, or the local bar or, better yet, on Face-book.

If nostalgia doesn't bring us to Jewish living and we don't respond out of a sense of commanded-ness, then we must ask ourselves "Why do Jewish?" What would make people want to attend Minyan, light Shabbat candles, or devote time to torah study even when it's not convenient? Bubbe, my wife's grandmother, used to complain – especially when she saw a commercial for non-kosher TV dinners, *Shver zu zein a yid*, its tough being a Jew. It never occurred to her not to do these things. Today's generation doesn't complain; it simply doesn't invest too much time or effort in being Jewish. They're proud to be Jewish but they no longer make the connection between being Jewish and doing Jewish. Jewish is where they come from even if it isn't where they are going.

We need to redefine mitzvah in a way that has meaning for us. Recently, I spoke about what *mitzvah* means today. Thinking of *mitzvah* as a commandment no longer works. Telling today's Jews that the reason they must observe the *mitzvot* is because God said so isn't enough. And threatening someone, as we rabbi sometimes do, doesn't work. We need a new understanding of *mitzvah* – one that engages the individual and challenges him/her to see *mitzvah* as something personal, something that brings meaning to their lives. We must come to see *mitzvah* is an avenue toward deeper spirituality, greater character, and a way of finding God in the world. It's a way of defining ourselves. It's a way of changing the world.

One way of thinking about *mitzvah* is as a sacred "opportunity." To forgo a *mitzvah* is to miss an opportunity to find beauty and holiness in life, to pass up a chance to create meaning and find wonder and joy in every day experiences. Every *Mitzvah*, writes Rabbi Arnold Jacob Wolf, is a precious jewel. Some are light and others are heavy. But who wouldn't pick up a jewel if they saw one in the road? Yet we always have a choice: we can pick these jewels up or pass them by. Wolf writes, "There are at least 613 of them and they are of different shapes and sizes and weights. Some are light and easy 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...I believe that God expects me to keep on walking on a *Jewish path* and to carry whatever I can of its commandments. I don't 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 as much as I can."

This definition of *mitzvah* works for me. I love the idea of thinking of Judaism as an array of endless opportunities. How do we respond to the precious jewels we encounter along the way? We have a choice: we can complain about the bumpiness of the road, how it makes it more difficult to walk. Or we can pave over the road, in effect covering them up so that travel will be more convenient. But there's another possibility: to stop, look at the jewels, touch them, experience them and to see if they have something to offer." The Jewish way is wondrous – the jewels come in all sizes and shapes. Some occur or twice in a lifetime like the *Birkat Hachamah* ceremony which happened earlier this year, the ceremony marking the 28 year cycle of the sun, and others can only be fully appreciated when we are prepared to make them into daily habits. Judaism challenges us to take 'a leap' not of faith but of action. They open us up to dimensions of life we might not other experience.

Another way of describing a *mitzvah* is a connection. Every *mitzvah* allows me to make a connection with God, nature, with community, with my fellow human being, with my family and even with myself. Most important, *mitzvot* allow us to connect to the stranger in our midst – so that he or she is no longer a stranger. These connections unite heaven and earth; they create a sense of community so that the world is a little less lonely. Loneliness can be deadly; Judaism encourages us through sacred living to find a world that is interconnected and more meaningful. Synagogues are institutions whose job it is to connect us to one another and to the sacred dimension of life through study, observance and caring!

So what we need today are not more affiliated Jews but people who are actively engaged; Jews who see every moment as a sacred opportunity, Jews who are making meaningful connections through Jewish living. The true meaning of Judaism is found not in a single experience but in the opportunity we gain by making Judaism a part of our lives on a daily basis...in large and small ways.

So here's my challenge to all of you. It's a challenge I've issued before. I'd like everyone to find one *mitzvah* to make your own this year. But don't do it; be mindful of it, learn as much about it as you can about it, find out how our tradition defines it, and how it makes a difference in your life and in the world.

Each time you are about to do it, think about how fortunate you are; how each *mitzvah* is your connection to community and God, to your past and to your future. I can't tell you what your *mitzvah* should be. Maybe this will be your year for putting on tefillin. Or the year you decide to light Shabbat candles, or give up shell fish, or read the weekly torah portion each week. Maybe this will be the year you decide to put a dollar in the pushke every day or buy an extra item of nonperishable food for the needy every time you go shopping. There are endless possibilities; all of them are sacred opportunities. And I guarantee that if you try, you'll find that God will begin to speak to you through these practices; not necessarily in words but in fullness of soul. Don't know how to pick a *mitzvah*? Want to know more about how to do Jewish? Come see me! My door is always open.

And think about your great-grandfather or great-grandmother, standing there at the side of a ship about to throw their tefillin or Shabbas candle sticks overboard. What would you say to them? How would you convince them that Judaism is worth the bother; that this rich and profound tradition will have meaning and purpose in years to come.

It's time to retrieve Dara Horn's mountain of *tefillin* from the bottom of the sea. We have proven ourselves as Americans. Today the challenge is to prove that we are still Jews not just in our hearts but in our bodies – in how we live and what we give, in what we do and how we remain true to our way of life. Judaism depends on it. Our souls depend on it. And we have so much to gain by 'doing Jewish' not only occasionally but every day!