

The Leap of Action—Rosh Hashanah 5768

I'd like to share with us, this year, some of my journey.

When I was in eighth grade, my classmate at Schechter, Chad, lost his grandfather. His mother was a single parent, whose family lived in Israel, and was sitting shiva by herself. There was a concern about getting a minyan for morning services, so a few classmates and I, all friends of Chad's, got up a little early that week, and went to Chad's house, where our reward for helping make minyan was a yummy bagel and lox breakfast before we had to run off to school.

A few years later, I spent a weekend in New York visiting the Joint and Double Degree programs of Columbia University and the Jewish Theological Seminary. While I was dazzled by Manhattan, and impressed and energized by the academics, it was the Shabbat I spent among the students that sealed the deal. I didn't grow up in a traditionally observant household, and had never kept *shabbes* in the way that seemed normative in the Mathilde Schechter Residence Hall, where I was staying that weekend. With 50 or so prospective students scattered

throughout the dorm for the weekend, showers and electric sockets were scarce and highly desired commodities. Each kitchen in the dorm brought forth a different, equally enticing aroma. The travels of laundry and groceries and the students *schlepping* them made the small elevator impossible to catch. This frenetic atmosphere soon made way for a calmer, quieter one as we left the dorm and walked over to Columbia for Kabbalat Shabbat services run by Koach, the Conservative group on campus.

Just a year or so after that, now a student in the Double Degree Program, I was walking through a volunteer fair held by the campus community service organization. A table with a banner that read “God’s Love We Deliver” caught my eye. I learned that God’s Love We Deliver was an organization that delivered hot, healthy meals to homebound people living with HIV/AIDS. Volunteers would collect the already prepared meals from a local drop site, and then deliver them to people living in the area. Intrigued by what seemed like a fairly easy way to help someone in need, I signed up.

These vignettes represent formative memories of mine, but other than that, they don't have much in common. They come from different chapters in my youth, involving different groups of people, and different environments. What they share are three concepts that both lie at their core, and are also, I believe, of ultimate importance for us as Jews. Those concepts are: Obligation, Connection, and Community.

None of these concepts is simple or self-evident—let me say what I mean by them. Obligation is a sense of responsibility, of indebtedness, of requirement. In some cases, the source of obligation is external. It was my parents who instructed me to go to Chad's house for shiva. Sometimes, the source of obligation is more internal, or personally motivated. After that first day, I wanted to be there for Chad's mother. Obligation can also be embedded in a certain circumstance; a situation itself can compel responsibility. Knowing that someone is in need often spurs us to take action.

Connection is quite different from Obligation, although it can be one of Obligation's sources. By Connection, I mean specifically connection to Jewish ritual or tradition. Certain things we do clearly connect us to our Jewish heritage. All of us are sitting here today in *shul*, celebrating Rosh Hashanah. The aspects of our tradition that draw us in may vary, but whatever our reasons, we are here because of the connection we feel to our tradition. And by being here, that connection is deepened.

Other things we do are less overtly Jewish. Volunteering for God's Love We Deliver was something I took on simply because I had been taught that helping those in need was important. I anticipated that I would feel like I was making a difference. I did not at all relate my desire to help out with the repeated instruction of the Torah to follow in God's ways by upholding the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and befriending the stranger." (Deut. 10:18) Despite being a non-sectarian organization, it is clear, from the name alone, that God's Love We Deliver is an organization that deeply understands the connection

between that religious mandate and its mission. God's Love We Deliver initially intrigued me because its cause was one I cared about, not because of any sense of religious connection or purpose. However, I eventually came to feel a strong bond between my religious community's concern for social justice and my volunteer work. Delivering meals two Mondays a month did connect me to my neighborhood and to the tremendous local need, but it also connected me to my Jewish heritage, and to my own sense of self as a Jew.

Community may be the hardest to define. We are all parts of multiple communities. We belong to neighborhoods, PTA's, and book groups. Each of these mini- (or not so mini-) communities is held together by a common thread—where we make our home, the school where we send our children, a personal interest or hobby. We all also belong to the Jewish community, but the experience of Community goes well beyond simple belonging. That Shabbat I celebrated in New York was one where the experience of community was overwhelming and transformative. Surrounded by rituals, both religious and social, that

were unfamiliar to me, I might have felt out of place. However, the students I met were incredibly welcoming and kind, explaining to me what they were doing and why without condescension, inviting me into their experience. Suddenly, I was a part of the group, rather than an observer, a member of the Community.

These concepts, Obligation, Connection to Jewish Tradition and Ritual, and a shared experience of Community, comprise the framework through which I have chosen to understand these few memories of mine. They are also the cornerstones of leading a meaningful Jewish life, and invaluable guideposts for what it is for us to do so as Conservative Jews.

The most expedient way to describe the Conservative Movement has for a long time been “neither Orthodox nor Reform—somewhere in the middle.” While this description has enabled us to encompass a broad contingent of the Jewish population, it isn’t much of a description. To paraphrase a dear friend and colleague of mine, it’s like describing people as being neither giraffes nor chickens. It tells us what we aren’t,

but not what we are. So, what are we? We are a movement that deals simultaneously with the demands of our ancient tradition and the exigencies of the modern world. As Conservative Jews, we honor our tradition by acknowledging that it cannot exist in a vacuum, that it has always been shaped by the circumstances of actual Jewish communities, existing in many different milieus, and by keeping it relevant through its engagement with our modern lives. Similarly, we honor and bring meaning to the world we live in through engagement with the enduring wisdom and beauty found in our Jewish tradition.

We often understand this practice of mediating between these two forces as the task of those responsible for answering halakhic questions, or for determining a community's standards of practice—the rabbinate and other leadership. However, the process of navigating between modernity and tradition is very much alive in who we are as a community, and as individuals. Here at Temple Emunah, we are constantly engaged in fostering meaningful, relevant, Jewish experiences that are also true to tradition. We are in fact recipients of a grant from

the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism that asks us to promote this kind of programming. One of our primary aims for this coming year is to do just that with our experience of *tefillah*, of communal prayer. Our *shlihei tzibbur* are deepening their appreciation of *nusah*, the traditional melodies used for chanting our liturgy. Over the course of the year Rabbi Lerner and I will be offering a number of opportunities, both formal and informal, for delving into the words, themes, and meanings of our prayers, so that we may more fully sense the spiritual expressions of our tradition. By exploring more modern approaches of meditation and alternative prayer services, we are striving to infuse our *tefillot* with more of our own spirit. This approach to Jewish practice is present in other parts of our communal life as well. We warmly welcome into our midst those who in another time and place might have been marginalized. We study the sacred texts of our heritage both with reverence and with a critical eye.

This is our approach to Judaism from the outside—it is one that I find compelling and authentic, and which I believe reflects the sanctity of

God and Torah. But if we are to find lasting fulfillment in this path, we must figure out our approach to Judaism from the inside—from within ourselves. The way for us to do that, I believe, is by exploring the same three concepts—Obligation, Connection, and Community.

Let's begin with Obligation. This is probably the most difficult for us, as "non-orthodox" American Jews. We do not adopt an orthodox way of life; obligation is not a term we are comfortable associating with our religious practices. As Americans, it flies in the face of one of our most treasured ideals—autonomy. We are heirs to the Enlightenment, the triumph of reason and autonomy, which heralded the advance of our society. Immanuel Kant, whom I suspect you never imagined hearing about in a sermon on Rosh Hashanah, spoke of this shift in ideals in an essay entitled "What is Enlightenment?" He wrote:

Enlightenment is man's release from his...inability to make use of his understanding without direction from others...Statutes and formulas, those mechanical tools of the

rational...misemployment of his natural gifts, are the fetters of an everlasting tutelage...For...enlightenment, however, nothing is required but freedom, and indeed the most harmless among all the things to which this term can properly be applied. It is the freedom to make public use of one's reason at every point.

In other words, we have the gift of reason. When we live in line with the dictates of any external source—political, intellectual, financial, or religious—we surrender our freedom, a paralyzing loss. While the freedom *to* make use of our rational faculties is certainly essential to being a modern human being, in my view, it need not also entail a freedom *from* any external influence. But for Kant, religion and autonomy are mutually exclusive.

Kant's answer to the tension between reason and religion is not one that I accept. However, the tension itself cannot be ignored. Our capacity for reason, for autonomous decision-making, does present a

problem for a religion that demands our acceptance of an external, albeit divine, source of authority. This problem is not a new one—it wasn't even new for Kant!

A number of *midrashim* on the giving of the Torah try their hand at solving it. One *midrash* contends with the verse, וּיִתְצַבּוּ בַתְּחִתֵּי הַהָר (Ex. 19:16), “And they stood בַתְּחִתֵּי [b'tahtit], at the bottom, or under, the mountain.” Picking up on the ambiguity in the word בַתְּחִתֵּי [b'tahtit], Rav Avdimi said: This teaches that the Holy Blessed One overturned the mountain on them like a barrel, and said to them, ‘If you accept the Torah, well and good, but if you do not, this will be your burial. Rav Aḥa bar Ya'kov responded: This presents a great challenge to the validity of the Torah! [Rav Aḥa understood that coerced acceptance could not be true acceptance.] Rava responds, conceding Rav Aḥa's assertion: Even so, they re-accepted it of their own free will in the days of Aḥashverosh, for it is written in the Book of Esther, קִיְמוּ וּקְבְלוּ [kimu v'kiblu], they confirmed and took upon themselves—they confirmed what they had taken on long before. In the eyes of this *midrash*, the

freedom to exercise our own reason is a necessary component of a valid religious practice. Kant's autonomy thus can also be the freedom to choose unswerving commitment to the authority of tradition.

This is how this one *midrash* answers the problem, but it is not everyone's answer. Accepting all of the dictates of the religion, even autonomously, does not work for everyone, nor should it. Although I find the *midrash* clever and profound, its answer doesn't really work for me, either. I do know, however, that the answer to this difficulty is not Kant, is not that religious obligation is not an operative principle for us.

Professor Arnold Eisen, the newly inducted Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, has been thinking a lot about this principle of Obligation, or in more traditional language, mitzvah. He has focused much of his recent research on how modern American Jews relate to their Judaism. His conclusion—that Mitzvah is the key to his questions. He shared his insights with the Conservative rabbinate at the Rabbinical Assembly convention in May, and has been speaking about it with the

general community all over the country since then. Chancellor Eisen believes that exploring how we relate to Obligation will help us understand our own approach to Judaism. More important, it will enrich our communities and personal practice. He has inspired me to bring this to our community this Rosh Hashanah.

So now, let's really talk about Obligation, in all understandings of the word. By talk, I do not mean me telling you what you are obligated to do, or listing for you a set of mitzvot you must perform. Rather, let's actually talk—with each other—about how we understand Mitzvah.

What obligates you? What do you feel responsible for? What about Judaism engages you? What do you feel you owe to God? To the community? To the tradition? To yourself? What do you do because you are commanded? What do you do out of love?

I'll start. For me, Obligation is a word with many connotations. I first started thinking about obligation in this way when I was in college. I had become a minyan regular, and after *davening* one day a rabbinical

student I admired asked me, “Do you come to minyan every day?” I said, “I try to, or I *daven* at home.” I did not expect her response to me, “Why?” “Because I’m commanded to,” I proudly said.

That was my answer for a number of reasons. As someone newly exposed to non-egalitarian Conservative Judaism, I felt I had to defend my right to participate equally in the minyan. As a freshman in college who saw the rabbinical students I knew as impossibly knowledgeable and pious, I thought that that was the proper “rabbinic” answer. As someone striving to live a ritually observant life, I thought that that was what I was supposed to believe. Actually, my answer to my acquaintance didn’t at all capture how I felt, and continue to feel, about my relationship to daily prayer. I feel obligated to *daven* because it puts a frame around my day, with room for both my meditative side and the me who has *shpilkes*. I *daven* because our *tefillot* give me the words to connect to God when I have none of my own. I *daven* even when I don’t want to. I *daven* because it is something Jews have done for thousands of years.

The Obligation I feel toward Shabbat is different from what I feel toward prayer. Shabbat, for me, is an Obligation of love and necessity. While I adhere to the traditional restrictions that go along with observing Shabbat, I do not experience them as restrictions. Even though I do “work” on Shabbat, it is a time for me to focus on my soul, on my relationships with others. Without the demands of e-mail, the phone, my laundry or grocery shopping, I feel freed. If it weren’t for Shabbat, I would never be able to stop thinking about all of the things I have to do. On Shabbat, I don’t have to do—I just have to be.

Now it’s your turn. Please, talk with your families, with your friends, and start this conversation. I’ll ask the questions again: What obligates you? What do you feel responsible for? What about Judaism engages you? What do you feel you owe to God? To the community? To the tradition? To yourself? What do you do because you are commanded? What do you do out of love? Over the next year, I’ll continue talking about this quite a bit, sharing with you how I experience

Mitzvah. And I hope that you will bring your perspectives to me, as well as to each other.

I am looking forward to these fruitful conversations about Mitzvah, but Obligation alone does not complete the picture. Connection and Community are of vital importance. Judaism is not lived in isolation, nor is it a solely intellectual pursuit. Much of what makes Jewish life so rich is that it is replete with ritual, and experienced in community. Without either of these components, Judaism loses its ability to bring meaning to our existence. I cannot inspire you to connect to Jewish ritual and to revel in the experience of Community by telling you to, or even by sharing these stories from my own life. Connection and Community happen through doing, through participation.

Often, religious philosophy speaks of a leap of faith, a decision to step into the unknown, without logic or proof, and believe in something. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, of blessed memory, a tremendous religious philosopher of the 20th century, spoke instead of a leap of action. Even when we don't entirely grasp the meaning behind certain

rituals, even if we don't know for sure that they will enrich us spiritually, Heschel explains that we are asked to embrace them as parts of our lives. To use his terminology, we must do more than we might understand in order to understand more than we do. Learning about the origin, history, and intended purpose of our ritual heritage can only take us so far. In order to experience the power of our tradition fully, we must actually experience it.

This is the time of year when we are engaged in *heshbon ha-nefesh*, taking account of our souls, and *Teshuvah*, repentance. Usually, we discuss these as ways for us to examine our missteps from the past year and make amends for them. This year, I'd like to offer us a different sort of *heshbon ha-nefesh*, another kind of *Teshuvah*, to carry us into our New Year. This year, let us also examine how we currently connect to Jewish rituals and practices, and how we might connect more meaningfully. Take the leap of action and try out a Jewish ritual that is new to you, or revitalize a familiar one—not because you know that it will bring you a spiritual high, but in order to learn more about how you connect to the

tradition, and to see where it takes you. Try lighting Shabbat candles, or being more conscious of your practice of *Kashrut*. Introduce questions and discussion to your *Pesah seder*. Take a class or come to a family program here at Temple Emunah. Volunteer your time or other resources to an organization that helps those in need. Take the leap of action, and see where you land. Taking the leap of action will better acquaint us with our existing Connection, and help to deepen it even further. When we do this together, we open ourselves up to the powerful experience of being a part of a shared endeavor, of belonging to a Community.

May our New Year be one filled with a new and diverse understanding of Mitzvah, a deepening Connection to our ritual and tradition, and the warm embrace of Community.

Shanah Tovah.