

## The Need for Obligation

For me, 5772 was a year of many firsts.

- It was the first time I kashered a supermarket deli slicer.
- It was the first time I was the lead singer of an incredibly talented band.
- And it was the first time, that I became a part-time, editor of Youtube movies and music videos.

This past year, 5772 was also a year of incorporating new rituals into my life.

I ritually made car payments, student-loan payments, health insurance payments, utility payments...it was as if my checkbook had become my new Siddur.

And this past winter, I took on additional ritual: Scraping off the frost and shoveling the snow off of my wife's car on the way back from morning minyan.

- The first time I did it, I felt like a real New Englander.
- The second time I did it, I felt like a real New Englander who had perfected his technique.
- and the third time I did it, I felt like a real New Englander, who had a good technique, but realized that he should have rented an apartment that came with a covered garage.

And for the rest of the winter, every time it snowed, and thankfully, it wasn't very often, I would stop by the car, take out the ice scraper, turn on the car's heater, and start shoveling...all so Shayna could have a warm and stress free start to her day.

Needless to say, Shayna loved it. She was incredibly appreciative. But over time, as the winter grew longer and the chill in the air became icier, the good feeling, that high I would get from removing the snow started melting away.

One day, as I entered our parking lot, I thought "it would be nice of my to clear off her car" but then, a second thought entered my mind. I'm cold, I'm hungry – I just want to get home. At that moment, I realized that if I wanted to keep performing this act, it could no longer just be a choice, but rather, I had to make it an obligation. I had to decide that I simply had no choice.

Having decided to take on the obligation, I walked over to the car, took out the ice scraper and started clearing the snow.

A quick survey – by show of hands:

Is it preferable to do something because you want to or because you feel you are obligated? In other words – is it better to call your parents or visit someone in the hospital because you enjoy it – or because you feel like you have to?

Who says because you want to?  
Who says out of obligation?

I had this same conversation with my mom several years ago.

It was at time when I was becoming more religiously observant and she asked why I wrapped tefillin every morning. I answered that I wrap tefillin because I see it as a religious requirement. It wasn't because I thought it was cool or because I always found it spiritually fulfilling, I did it because my understanding of Judaism required it.

I then, somewhat naively, informed her that the same impetus that motivated me to wrap tefillin in the morning is what drove me to call her everyday.

As soon as I finished the sentence, I knew I said something that I shouldn't. My mom was hurt and she was upset.

She said: What do you mean? You don't call me because you want to? You call because you feel you have to?

And I explained, that for me, to only call when I wanted to – or when it was convenient – opened the possibility, that I would not call for a day or maybe even two. And the idea of not calling, even for a day, wasn't acceptable. It wasn't the relationship that I wanted - It was not the kind of son I wanted to be.

The tension between doing things entirely by choice or out of a sense of obligation was one of the cornerstones in my deciding to become a Conservative Rabbi. I believed that Kashrut and Prayer weren't dependant on my dietary cravings or my mood and that Shabbat happened every week, regardless of what sports teams were playing or what movie was being premiered. This worldview, required that I leave the Reform movement's HUC rabbinical school and enroll at the conservative movement's Jewish Theological Seminary. Simply put, a Judaism devoid of a personal and communal obligation did not resonate with me.

The idea of choice versus obligation takes center stage in a Talmudic argument involving the following question: Is a person who cannot see obligated in observing the commandments. After a lengthy debate, Hanina b. Dosa, the 1<sup>st</sup> century Tanna who lived in the land of Israel, teaches

גדול המצווה ועושה ממי שאינו מצווה ועושה

Greater is one who does something out of obligation than one who does something by choice.

After learning this text with my rabbi in college, I looked up from my Talmud and was frustrated – I was angry and I fought with my Rabbi – how can Rabbi Hanina say what he said. Doesn't he know that it's better to do something because you want to – because you think it's right?

But over time I realized that the motivation to do something because it's nice or because it's good doesn't yield long term results.

Giving away free t-shirts to entice volunteers is a great motivator– but how do you drum up support when you run out of shirts?

Donating money to worthy causes is wonderful when the economy is doing well, but how do you inspire others to open their wallets when the economy is in trouble.

Finding time to volunteer is easy when you have a graduation requirement, but what do you do once you have earned your diploma and no one is counting?

An internal sense of obligation is not affected by free shirts, it's not intimidated by the economy and it is not susceptible to the influence of other people's expectations.

A personal sense of obligation is unyielding.

It is immutable.

It is not subject to variables.

And the idea that certain things in our lives are so absolute, can be really scary.

But it can also be liberating.

And so I ask today –

What in your life is paramount.

What in your life is so important, so singularly essential, that nothing trumps it?

That nothing could compete with it for attention, for resources, for time.

Now I know you might be thinking –

Rabbi Fel – you can't be so black and white. Life is in constant flux. There are always different factors that have to be evaluated when making decisions. Things come up – new opportunities arise and what was important yesterday, in light of new information, might not seem so significant today.

And I would respond, that you are correct. Life is incredibly quick paced and filled with more options than ever before. But, I have a feeling that if we search within our hearts – if we really ask ourselves what are the things I actually care about – it becomes very easy to filter out

- the extra,
- the superfluous,
- the nice but not really that important
  
- from the essential,
- the vital,

- the ikar.

Being one of the rabbis in this congregation, I get to share in your familial experiences. I revel in your joys and I ache in your hardships. And I am often inspired by what you do and how you live your lives.

I am inspired with how some parents regularly bring their children to morning and evening minyan.

I am amazed how some families are able to make living near each other such a priority. And I am constantly in awe of how so many of you, volunteer your time to cook, to clean, to organize and to make our shul an amazing congregation.

I want to highlight one story however, which illustrates how one family in our community embraced the idea of obligation, and how that decision, not only yields fruit today, but will undoubtedly yield fruit in generations to come.

I am sure we have walked past a penny or a quarter and debated whether to pick it up. More often than not, we might think – it is just a penny, it's not worth my time. Or we might think it would be unseemly for people to see us picking up loose change. So we simply continue walking. A certain member of our community had that same attitude when she was young. However, her father however, an immigrant who fled his homeland and came to this country with practically nothing, picked up and counted every single cent that he chanced upon.

One day, after her father past away, this congregant was walking around town and was about to pass by a coin. Suddenly, she thought of her father, and how he never took a single coin for granted. At that moment, she decided that because he would have picked it up, she should pick it up.

And that one day, those collected coins would be used for a higher purpose. They were no longer just coins, but a testament to her father. Those coins would become known as "Daddy Money."

She effectively obligated herself to pick up any lost change she found. It was no longer a choice. When she and her husband had kids, they inculcated the same obligation in their children. The kids learned that there was no option when passing money on the street – you simply had to pick it up – it had to go to Tzedakah.

One day, this family, asked, if they could come to my office and if we, together, could figure out what to do with the change. I said sure, figuring it would be at max, a piggy bank or two.

As our appointment time arrived, I could hear the jangle of coins echoing through the halls of our shul. Their two children, each lugging personal tzedakah boxes led the way, with their parents following in tow with ziplock bags, jars and Tupperware – all overflowing with quarters. When they set everything on my table, I was shocked - it looked as if they went to Manhattan and collected all the quarters I used for laundry. By the time we were done counting – the children had amassed over 446 dollars in “Daddy Money.”

The kids were excited – look at what we did. Think about how many people we can help! Look at all the “Daddy Money!”

After talking about the importance of tzedakah, we then visited the websites of several non-profits. We ultimately settled on Heifer International. For those who don't know – Heifer international is an organization that gives livestock and other animals to the developing world in the hopes that they can turn those animals into a continual source of revenue for needy communities.

These two kids bought  
A Sheep  
A Goat  
A Trio of Rabbits  
A group of trees  
A Flock of geese  
A flock of Ducks  
A Flock of Chicks  
And a swarm of honeybees.

By making the collection of lost coins obligatory, and not dependant on if they were in a hurry or who was watching, this family managed to amass a small fortune and turn it into a sustainable economic opportunity for people in need – and a connection to their departed grandfather.

My family also had certain unwavering customs.

As a child growing up in Miami, Sunday Night was special. More often than not, the day began with a trip to Home Depot or another hardware store. After fixing what needed to be fixed, mowing what needed to be mowed, and occasionally after giving up on a project that was more than my dad and I could handle, we would change out of our dirty clothes and get ready for a delicious barbeque. While the protein varied, sometimes Skirt Steak, sometimes a Rib Eye, sometimes Chicken– it always was accompanied with a salad, loads of ketchup, and a great tall glass of ice cold Coca Cola. Sunday night meant family dinner. Period.

When I moved away to Israel for my first year of rabbinical school, I genuinely missed the rhythm of a weekly family meal. So when the year ended and I moved back to New York City,

without hesitation, my sister Vivian and I reinstated Family Dinners. For five years, Vivian and I had dinner together nearly every Sunday night.

And rest assured that it was not always convenient – in fact, sometimes it was inconvenient. Sometimes I had homework, sometimes Vivian had real work, and sometimes, we were both exhausted. But we still got together. Each and every week. Sunday night dinner was untouchable. And the only way we made it happen, the only way that it wasn't affected by the city that never sleeps, was to build a tall fence around that special time and make it obligatory.

I think for many of us.  
We would say without hesitating for an instant.

That the relationships with our parents, with our siblings, with our children and with our partners are the most important things in our lives.

And if we perceived, even for a second, that something was coming in the way of those relationships, we would stop at nothing to defend them, to protect them and to strengthen them.

And yet, even knowing that, knowing how strongly we feel, sometimes, things, you know - get in the way.

Soccer practice gets in the way.  
SAT prep gets in the way.  
Violin rehearsal gets in the way.  
New opportunities always find a way, to get in the way.

But perhaps 5773 will be the year when things, stop getting in the way.

So how do we do it? How do we enable ourselves to find the time to focus on the things that really matter? How do we ensure that things “don't get in the way.”

For Shayna and me, the answer has been very simple: Shabbat.

I have found nothing better for my personal well being, for my work life-balance, for my relationships with the people that I love, than Shabbat.

An obligatory day of rest.

My religion tells me that I deserve to spend time with the people that I love.  
That I deserve to have time to reflect on God and ideas that are much greater than me.  
That I deserve to tell the rest of the world to be silent, so I can hear those who are important to me.

To put it bluntly – Shabbat is simply amazing.

While in college, I attended Shabbat Services at Hillel nearly every Friday night for four years. I can only remember one Shabbat that I didn't go to shul. I had purchased tickets to see David Gray, an English folk singer, on a Friday Night at Madison Square Garden in NYC. It was a great show – Gray performed his greatest hits and there was a good vibe in the Arena. But as I went to bed that Friday night, I felt like it was just that, Friday night – it wasn't Shabbat.

The euphoria of the show, didn't compare to the camaraderie at the Shabbat dinner table or the simple quietude of sharing stories around a living room. At that moment, I realized that for me, Shabbat was paramount. And nothing, literally nothing, could vie for Shabbat's attention or time.

It shouldn't be a surprise that Shayna and I celebrate Shabbat every week. We look forward to the day, we carefully plan the meals, we figure out who we are going to see and most importantly, what will we do to make the coming Shabbat extra special for each other: Will it be a bouquet of flowers, will it be a chocolate chip cookie, will it be a cute card we found at the store.

From the moment Shabbat starts, time feels different. On Shabbat, among many differences, we don't watch TV, we don't cook and we don't go shopping. Which leads some of my friends to ask – well what do you do?

For us – Shabbat isn't a matter of running errands or being productive. It's not about catching up. To be honest, we spend most Shabbatot chatting on the couch, reading together, going for walks, visiting our neighbors, and surprisingly, playing board games. We play Ticket to Ride, Settlers of Kattan and Uno.

Yeah. Uno.

On Shabbat, you laugh a different kind of laugh.

On Shabbat, the food tastes better.

On Shabbat, you get to take a nap!

And – for 25 hours – all the problems of the week that past, and the week ahead – seem to be on hold.

And for sure, one can do all of those things while having the TV on or while boiling pasta or eating at a restaurant. But I have found that it is only by stripping away those extra activities – cutting out the cell phones, turning off the Ipads, sitting in the dining room and coming to shul, that you can experience some of the purest, simplest and highest level of quality time together.

It is easier to see the goodness in the world, when you actually slow down.

It is easier to hear what your loved ones have to say, when the noise from the TV has been silenced.

It is easier to reconnect – when you aren't connected.

The Hebrew Poet and Zionist thinker, Ahad Ha'am once wrote, *More than the Jews have kept the Sabbath, the Sabbath has kept the Jews*. For over 2000 years, the Shabbat dinner table has been the venue for sharing stories and traditions. It's been where our people have found a sense of continuity and a sense of a joy.

We begin Shabbat by singing joyously the words of Lecha Dodi. We say that we must Shamor v Zahor Shabbat – We must protect and remember Shabbat. But this implies that we are only doing things to Shabbat. I think the relationship is actually bidirectional. Shabbat protects me and it enables me to remember.

It protects the relationships with the people that I love.  
And it reminds me of where I come from, who I am and what I want the world to look like.

Abraham Joshua Heschel compares Shabbat to a Palace in Time: A glorious edifice, able to withstand the trials and tribulations of an ever-changing world. In 5773 how will you and your family build your own Sabbath Palaces. How will you find a way to establish, even if for only a few moments every week, that protective and freeing Shabbat experience that enables you to focus on the vital? That experience, which is never interrupted, when things can't get in the way.

Will it be by lighting candles and making Kiddush every Friday Night at home?  
Will it be by coming to our ever-growing Friday Night Kabbalat Shabbat experience?  
Will it be by spending your Shabbat morning at shul and then enjoying kiddush with friends?  
Or will it be by joining the more intimate and casual Shabbat minḥah crowd?

Whichever it is – make it regular. Make it fixed.

My blessing, my berakhah for us in the New Year, in 5773, is that we can each work together to build our own Sabbath Palaces and to dwell within its protective walls for many years to come.

Shanah Tovah