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Navigating the Journey

*The Essential Guide
to the Jewish Life Cycle*

An updated and revised edition
of *Gates of Mitzvah*

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fulfill commands that have been inscribed in books that may well reflect the wisdom of an inspired people, but contain challenging passages that sometimes contradict modern sensibilities and occasionally lack complete internal coherence. Acting in the face of such legitimate questions makes observing these mitzvot an undeniably meaningful act of personal faith. Actualizing mitzvot through practice allows us to act on our beliefs and affirm that there is deep and ineluctable purpose to our lives that transcends our own ephemeral existence. Beyond simple proof or disproof, in acting we elevate specific values and dedicate our days to making them present in our world.

Mitzvot, then, as developed into their particular halachic outcomes in each generation and community, meaningfully fuse the communal and the personal, the past and the present, the divine and the human. They testify to the continuation of a powerful chain of beliefs and commitments unbroken, though not unaltered, throughout the millennia. As Reform Jews, each time we act in this manner, we forge the next link in that chain and, in so doing, strengthen it and extend it. In connecting us with those links that came before and those links that will one day follow, actualizing mitzvot allows our ephemeral lives to transcend human limitations and to partake in the eternal.

RABBI DR. RACHEL S. MIKVA

Mitzvah

It Begins with Relationship

“The Stories of Which I Am a Part”

It begins with relationship. The Chasidic masters knew this when they reimagined the etymology of *mitzvah*, connecting it to an Aramaic term with the same root. Rather than the Hebrew sense of “commandment,” they focused on meanings of attachment, companionship, joining together.¹

Reform Jewish conversation about mitzvah used to circulate around questions of authority: Since we do not claim that God is the author of Torah, who exactly is the “commander” of the commandment? We have seen that the answer is multiple, fluid, occasionally hidden. I think our question is different now, perhaps: How do my relationships deepen my investment in mitzvah, and how does mitzvah deepen my relationships?

Many Reform Jews who choose to embrace additional mitzvot see them as opportunities to enhance the quality of their individual lives. They unplug for Shabbat. Torah study challenges them to think in new ways and engage in a lifelong course in moral development. A *b'rit* ceremony for their newborn daughter gives them a platform from which to shout for joy. Reading with inner-city kids instills a sense of virtue. Even as the praxis begins to make a claim on them, they see the emergence of a personal sacred discipline: the Rabbinic

1. The Aramaic term appears multiple times in the Babylonian Talmud, presenting this range of meaning (e.g., *Bava M'tzia* 28a, *B'rachot* 6b, *Sukkah* 52a, *Bava Batra* 80a). The Chasidic association can be traced back to the Baal Shem Tov, as cited in *Degel Machaneh Ephraim*. Abraham Joshua Heschel also alludes to it in *God in Search of Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976), page 287.

insight “One mitzvah leads to another” (*Pirkei Avot* 4:2) defines a path of self-improvement.

Yes, the key phrase of blessing *asher kid’shanu b’mitzvotav*, “who sanctifies us with commandments,” acknowledges that mitzvot open gateways to holiness all around us, providing chances to fall in love with our lives all over again and to draw closer to the person we’d like to see when we look in the mirror. But there is a grand irony in our careful instruction about the root *k-d-sh*. We make sure people understand it is about setting apart for sacred purpose, yet there is nothing that works more consistently to join beings together than sanctifying with mitzvot. It begins with relationship.

Lawrence Kushner, in a captivating little book where he deliberately mistranslates Hebrew words in order to get at something deeper, tells us that *mitzvah* means “response.”² I think his insight lies at the core of my earlier writing on covenant and commandment:

It does not matter whether the foundation of our Jewish relationship is a theistic concept of God, an abiding connection with Jewish history and culture, or nurturing a Jewish home; we internalize the claims made on us as mitzvah. As with our other covenantal relationships—as spouses, parents, and children—we know that we will often fall short and still the bond abides. We also know, however, that the relationship grows richer each time we can respond with the fullness of our being: *hineini*, here I am.³

The call is especially powerful around life’s passages. God’s presence saturates the membrane between life and death. Generations of family pack the marrow of our bones. The cells of our body reverberate with the tissue of Jewish history, and there is faith in the ancient wisdom for telling a human story. Judaism excels at investing moments with deep significance. After all, it can take a random day in the weekly calendar and transform it into a palace in time. In the construction and celebration of human becoming, our life-cycle

2. Lawrence Kushner, *The Book of Words* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 1993), pages 91–94.

3. Rachel S. Mikva, in *Lights in the Forest*, ed. Paul Citrin (New York: CCAR Press, 2014), page 191.

rituals illuminate the passages so we can see the transcendent significance of where we are, where we have been, where we are going—and who is accompanying us on our journey.

Alasdair MacIntyre insists, “I can only answer the question ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’”⁴ I am part of grand stories that shape my response to mitzvah. Exodus impresses upon my very soul the heart of a stranger and insists that whatever my evolving sense of the Divine, God is invested in human liberation. Sinai, the greatest mythic moment of Jewish religious imagination, establishes my place among this ever-aspiring people, tilling the inexhaustibly rich soil of Torah, straining still to hear the God who never shuts up. But our individual stories, the ones that mark life’s passages, best reveal the dynamics of relationship as the nuclear, animating force of mitzvah.

Bat Mitzvah: The Claim of Family

Hugh Kerr cautions, “All wisdom is plagiarism. Only stupidity is original.”⁵ So as I pressed *b’nei mitzvah* to continue their Jewish education and to increase their sense of response-ability to Judaism, I borrowed trusty truisms as conversation starters. “Becoming bar or bat mitzvah is like getting a driver’s license, not a diploma.” I’m not sure where I heard that one, but it always caught their attention, eager as they were to reach driving age and get behind the wheel. Or I would invoke Arnold Jacob Wolf’s image of walking down the street of Judaism, paved with precious jewels embedded in the stones. Each gem represents a mitzvah: Shabbat, civil rights, kashrut, honoring parents. Our task is to lift up and carry those that we can.⁶

“But why am I even walking down this street?” one too-bright-for-her-own-good student asked. “You tell me,” I urged. “Because my

4. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), page 216.

5. Hugh Kerr, “Preacher, Professor, Editor,” *Theology Today* 45, no. 1 (1988): page 1.

6. See Wolf’s contribution to the *Commentary* collection of Jewish thinkers answering questions of the day in *The Condition of Jewish Belief* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), page 268.

parents dropped me off there.” It was a mildly subversive allusion to the fact that her parents were not all that learned or observant in their own lives. At the same time, she correctly identified the claim that the mitzvot had on her: her parents wanted them to mean something in her life.

“I feel Jewish; isn’t that enough?” With adolescents, it is always a mighty struggle for me to ask good questions rather than preach. “When? When do you feel Jewish?” She identified the service at which she celebrated becoming a bat mitzvah, the funeral of her grandfather, holy day celebrations with her family. “Don’t you see?” I exclaimed. “All those moments are constructed of actions. We are a people of doers.”

An unstoppable mini-sermon came pouring out. I spoke of Abraham Joshua Heschel’s brilliant charge to take a leap of action, to do more than we understand in order to understand more than we do. “In carrying out a sacred deed, we unseal the wells of faith.” Heschel shows how mitzvah weaves us into a fabric of relationship. To do for the sake of Torah unlocks treasures of spiritual meaning. In the “ecstasy of deeds” we come into the presence of God.⁷

In the end we cut a deal. She was firm about leaving religious school but agreed to seek out one additional mitzvah that made her feel like she was making a difference in the world, one that whispered of something she might name as God, one that bound her to the Jewish people, one that she did just because it brought joy. She kept her end of the bargain, and when we checked in together, she reflected how, having begun the journey in response to the claim of family, she deepened her relationship with God, the Jewish people, Torah, the congregation, herself, and the patchwork quilt of humanity. “That was the point, wasn’t it?” she asked.

Conversion: The Claim of the Most High

A bright twentysomething woman taught me something I have often shared. Speaking as a medical student, she said that all the selfish

7. A paraphrase of Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, pages 282–283.

behaviors of human beings make perfect biological sense. What gave her faith in God was the desire of human beings to be good.

She loved the midrash that tries to explicate the verse “You are beautiful, my darling” (Song of Songs 1:15) through the allegorical lens of God and Israel as lovers. How can the Divine be in thrall to this fragile, flawed creature? What beauty draws God near in intimate relation? On a path of conversion, she found the response of the midrash inspiring: You make yourself beautiful through the doing of mitzvot (*Shir HaShirim Rabbah* 1:63). Each new practice she engaged in made her feel closer to God.

But she did not feel connected to the Jewish people—just the one loving young man she planned to marry . . . and his parents, sometimes. “I am ready to become a Jew, Rabbi, but how do I become Jewish?” I asked her to describe the mitzvot she had been exploring; they all entailed sanctification of the home and mindfulness in daily life. “What about the mitzvot of community—worship, Torah study, singing in the Purim-spiel, or schlepping chairs for a synagogue program?” I suggested. “Then you’ll see we were all at Sinai together.”

“How about now?” I asked after the wedding. Those things helped, she acknowledged, but the real connection came from the service celebrating her conversion and from the wedding itself. At the service, she gave a brilliant *d’var Torah* on Maimonides’s medical ethics (thanks to advice I adopted from Peter Rubenstein, to have Jews-by-choice become expert in a Jewish subject defined as knowing more about it than the rabbi), a congregant came to her with a query. Then as part of the *nisuin* ritual, their Jewish friends “translated” the seven wedding blessings in ways that spoke directly of the couple’s relationship, values, and aspirations. “I wrote myself into the story,” she said, “or the Jewish people got written into mine.”

Reciting *Kaddish*: The Claim of the Jewish People

“525,600 minutes, how do you measure a year in a life?” This line from the musical *Rent* somehow nested in my mind while I was speaking with a man who recently buried his father. The father had been what Nachmanides would have graciously called “a scoun-

drel with the permission of Torah,"⁸ a relatively observant Jew who nonetheless missed the point and managed to be a mediocre human being and a terrible father. The son was struggling with the mitzvah of reciting *Kaddish* for the (almost) year. "Why would I devote a year of my life to honor his memory?" I asked what pushed him to consider it. "Because that's what Jews do." And so he began the journey through loss and healing in the way that Mordechai Kaplan imagined, because of his relationship with the historical civilization of Judaism.

A few weeks in, I received an e-mail. "I'm not a theist, Rabbi. What do you suggest I make of the *Kaddish* prayer?" I responded with several possibilities, including the lovely interpretive rendering by Marge Piercy. It begins:

Look around us, search above us, below, behind.
We stand in a great web of being joined together.
Let us praise, let us love the life we are lent
passing through us in the body of Israel.

I thought the emphasis on being woven together as the people of Israel would speak to him. Four months later, he revealed that it was a different line that made him catch his breath each time he read it:

The past and the dead speak through us.
We breathe out our children's children, blessing.⁹

"Our youngest son is so much like my father—but transformed into a mensch. It never occurred to me that my father had some hand in that, or that our son is the person my father might have been. I always imagined I had done it all despite him."

What had begun as a duty of the limbs, the mitzvah of reciting *Kaddish* for a deceased parent, ended as a duty of the heart.¹⁰ The great kabbalist Isaac Luria insisted that mitzvot play a role in cosmic

8. Nachmanides's commentary on Leviticus 19:2.

9. Marge Piercy, "Kaddish," in *The Art of Blessing the Day* (New York: Knopf, 1999), page 138.

10. Bachya ibn Pakuda (eleventh century, Spain) wrote a work on spiritual ethics frequently translated as *Duties of the Heart*.

repair, each one composing a new harmony that reveals additional sparks of God's infinite light. The idea always seemed compelling, but I generally imagined it through the lens of social justice. Here it was what Kaplan once called "religious poetry in action," the transformative, redemptive power of connecting to forces larger than ourselves.¹¹ Initially motivated by the claim of Jewish tradition, this man reclaimed relationship with his father.

"525,600 minutes, how do you measure a year in a life? In truths that she learned or in times that he cried, in bridges he burned or the way that she died? . . . Measure your life in love." The closing line of the song used to seem a little simplistic to me. Perhaps I was wrong.

It begins, and ends, with relationship.

11. Mordecai Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization* (repr., Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1994), page 434.