Responding to Mitzvah Posts

The vigorous and rich exchange of posts about mitzvah attests to the continuing vitality of Conservative debate on the matter. That debate is as old as the Movement, and in some sense still defines Conservative Judaism. The contributors agree, I think, that Jews are commanded in some way by the mitzvot. They accept that we do not all need to agree on the nature of that obligation or the meaning of the commandments. They all wish that more Conservative Jews performed more mitzvot with greater regularity. They recognize that Conservative Jews disagree profoundly on the source of obligation for our commandedness. It’s clear that this disagreement will not end anytime soon. I personally do not want it to end, though I wish our communities were more observant than we are. In addition to enriching our lives, added engagement with the range of mitzvot would allow Conservative Jews to worry less about differences in why we do what we do. Let me add a few more words in response to the respondents that I hope will push the conversation further.

I come down on both sides of the debate between rabbis Joel Roth and Brad Artson. Like Rabbi Roth, I believe that I am duty bound to observe the Torah’s commandments as interpreted and reinterpreted by the teachers of our tradition. I think we agree, too, that halakhah is the set of norms and aspirations, growing out of the eternal core of Torah, which should guide Jewish individuals and communities. We disagree on the character of halakhah as law. I do not find compelling the parallel to American law—which, unlike halakhah, can fine me or send me to prison if I violate its provisions. As I wrote two weeks ago, I do not think that “obligation” itself captures all there is to mitzvah. I need the additional connotations of discipline, responsibility, instruction, and loving relationship to make sense of what binds me, and Jews like me, to the mitzvot. Rather than demanding unquestioning obedience, the Torah calls out to us to live life with a capital L, a life of profound meaning and joy. It points us to a way that, if we walk it, provides for such a life.

The choice belongs to each of us, as Nina Kretzmer put it—but, having made that choice, we recognize that Torah obligated us all along. As David Saiger wrote, we never get to “outsource” the decision-making process to God or halakhic authorities.

That is where I diverge from Rabbi Artson’s formulation, despite agreeing wholeheartedly that mitzvot link us to God, to Torah, and to Jewish wisdom.
bottom line is that I do feel commanded to walk the way of mitzvah. I believe I am obligated to study Torah, to acknowledge my Creator with gratitude, to mark off sacred times and spaces that direct a life of mitzvah, to pass on this way to my students and children, to provide for Jews and Gentiles in need, and many other things. Like Rabbi Artson, however, I do not believe that I am obligated to observe every last detail in any of the changing formulations (halakhah) of what mitzvah entails, including the one ascribed to our teacher Moses. Like Rabbi Simon, I find the massive accumulation of specifics confusing, in part archaic, and somewhat off-putting. I appreciate the halakhic attempt to encompass all of life inside the teachings of Torah. But I also appreciate the need—underlined in Rabbi Noah Bickart’s citations from the Talmud—to make the system accessible by providing highlights and entry points. We need flexibility, experience, and good judgment to keep halakhah relevant.

Several mitzvot on that halakhic list seem especially crucial to Conservative Jewish life right now:

*Study* . . . because we cannot walk confidently into the future unless we know in depth and breadth the Torah that Jews have lived and taught until now.

*Tefillah* . . . because we need to recover the rich and nuanced conversation about God and divinity that Jews have been conducting for over two millennia—a conversation lost to many Jews at present in oversimple dichotomies between secularism and fundamentalism, “faith” versus “science,” “religion” versus “reason.”

*Sabbaths, festivals, and other holy times* . . . because we seek to live fully engaged with the society and culture beyond Judaism, as well as fully engaged with the texts and practices of Torah. Jews, a small minority, cannot maintain that balance without times and spaces dedicated to our norms, our view of the world, our rituals and texts, the needs of our communities, and our encounter with what is best inside ourselves.

*Israel* . . . because there can be no Judaism without Jews, and the State of Israel is essential to Jewish survival. What is more, Jews are partners to a Covenant aimed at greater justice and compassion in the world, and the existence of a Jewish State gives Jews the unprecedented chance—for the first time in two millennia—to apply the Torah’s teachings in new ways to every aspect of the public sphere, from foreign and environmental policy to health care and the treatment of minorities. Speaking such new words of Torah is the very heart of Conservative Judaism.

*Protection of the planet* . . . because we are the stewards of God’s creation, and that creation—including human creatures—is threatened with destruction as never before, the threat often couched in religious language and justified by appeal to the alleged will of God. This profanation of God’s name cannot go unchallenged. The blueprint for the challenge is found in the commandments of our tradition.
This list of “signature mitzvot” for Conservative Jews in our day is not exhaustive. I think more Conservative Jews will rally to the cause of mitzvah if our communities resonate with the honest, vivid conversation evident in these blog posts. Jane Shapiro’s formulation of “hiyyuv without yoke,” obligations undertaken out of personal reflection and communal conversations, seems to me exactly right.

When all is said and done, I stand with the young rabbinic colleague who told her congregation one day that God does not care “whether or not we spend money on Shabbat or we eat a McDonald’s cheeseburger,” but that God does care “whether or not we live our lives with a sense of purpose, whether or not we have gratitude and seek forgiveness, whether or not we are . . . compassionate and concerned about justice.” We can’t accomplish that as individuals. We need communities animated by shared norms, aspiration, and commitment, and guided by shared practice. Mitzvah and halakhah are needed to help Jews bring more meaning to their lives, and more justice and compassion to the world.