Walking the Way

In last week’s post I laid out a Conservative approach to mitzvah that accords with a Hasidic midrash on the word that Abraham Heschel liked to cite: a mitzvah is an act done be’tsvat ha (together), with God and fellow Jews. It joins the best of what we know to our best understanding of what God wants. Mitzvah partakes of autonomy and obligation, freedom and responsibility, the interpretations of previous generations and the innovations contributed by our own generation. This partnership, Conservative Judaism holds, is essential to extending the way of Torah into the future.

I would summarize Conservative convictions on the matter as follows:

We believe that mitzvah requires every bit of knowledge, skill, experience, and reflection that we can bring to it, whatever the source: ancient or contemporary, Jewish or Gentile. All of us are required, and all of our insights.

We recognize that we are obligated by the mitzvot—we are not and would not want to be entirely autonomous agents—and that “ritual” actions such as Shabbat and kashrut are no less a part of that obligation than “ethical” actions such as honoring parents and taking care of the poor.

We know that the norms and details of Jewish observance—collectively known as halakhah—have changed over the centuries, and must change further to retain their force in transformed conditions. Observance is required—and so is flexibility in observance.

We treasure the fact that Jews bring diverse meanings to the performance of mitzvot, and we respect the diverse patterns of their observance. We want those patterns to stress ethics as well as ritual, freedom as well as responsibility, obligations to “the creation” as well as duties to the Creator. We hold fast to our distinctive Covenant as Jews—and protect the Jewish lives and interests that are necessary means to fulfillment of that covenant—and we seek allies among other Children of Noah, whom we respect in the difference of their own traditions.

On this as on other essential matters, Conservative Judaism ordains a balance that seems to me exactly right.
Several implications follow from this approach. I present them here with the hope of furthering Conservative conversation and of expanding Conservative practice—both of which are essential, in my view, to our Movement’s future.

*Meet Jews where they are.* Don’t present mitzvah as all or nothing, take it or leave it, black or white. Begin with a few of the many accessible entry-points to observance that are features of current practice and give them added meaning. “I started by not spending money [on Shabbat],” a young rabbi explained recently to her congregation. “My next experiment was not using electricity . . . I remember being surprised that it made such a difference.” I will not soon forget the young woman who told me, unsolicited, that lighting candles on Friday night had changed her life.

*Begin, as JTS’s Mitzvah Initiative does, with honest discussion of what mitzvot Jews do and do not practice and why.* Some Jews will be surprised to find that they observe as many mitzvot as they do, not realizing that some acts they perform regularly are requirements of Torah. Some will confess that they do not obey God when they perform mitzvot but rather heed the voice of conscience, or the voice of ancestors, or the needs of their local community or a summons to Jewish responsibility. Others will confess that they do obey God and believe that the Torah transmits God’s will.

*Encourage the multiple meanings that Jews bring to Jewish practice.* Value lifelong exploration, circuitous journeys, and seeming detours that turn out to be essential stages on the way to mitzvah. “Understanding the historical traditions and the theory behind our most treasured practices has helped me to discover what I consider most important to me,” one participant in the Mitzvah Initiative wrote. “I hope to sustain some of the pathways that have opened for me.” She valued the experience of study and practice because she and her husband have grown as individuals, as a couple, and as members of their community.

A friend once told me that she began lighting Friday night candles soon after her father passed away because her mother had asked her to start using the candlesticks passed down from her great-grandmother. My friend hoped her own daughter would do so in turn. “It’s not about God,” she said. But it is about Judaism, obligation, a distinctive Jewish act that binds the generations one to another. My friend has been lighting candles ever since.

*Recognize that there are many such thoughtful and committed Jews of all ages in Conservative synagogues, schools, camps, youth groups, and organizations.* We need not idealize or romanticize them to appreciate their quality. I think sometimes that Conservative Jews do not accord sufficient respect to themselves and one another. We need not compare ourselves to Jews more punctilious than we about observance of ritual commandments but less active in serving the community, less generous in philanthropy, and less devoted to *klal Yisrael.* We should rather encourage Conservative Jews to expand their practice, building on their quest for wisdom, their concern for justice, and their abundant loyalty to the community. There is much room for growth in our congregations, both individual and collective, and much potential for achieving it.
Some individuals and communities, as a result of the Mitzvah Initiative, have opted to increase observance by selecting a “signature mitzvah” that will expand their practice in coming months. One group decided to start a *hevrah kaddisha* (a Jewish burial society). Others have resolved to visit the sick, attend daily minyan, or study.

Perhaps there are signature mitzvot that cry out for urgent attention here and now from the entire Jewish people. Three such mitzvot seem to me especially vital in the contemporary Jewish situation. They call on Jews in North America to guard the State of Israel from its enemies; to take every step to ward off assimilation; and exercise global citizenship for the planet and its inhabitants. None of these can wait. All demand great effort, and demand it now.

Likewise, a higher standard of practice by a critical mass of Conservative Jews seems to me essential to the future of our Movement. This is particularly the case with regard to three “leaps of action:” study, *tefillah*, and observance of Shabbat and festivals. I shall explain why—and discuss my view of the relationship between mitzvah and halakhah—in next week’s post.