Mitzvah

The commitment that 21st century Jews make to the life of mitzvah is decidedly countercultural.

We moderns are raised to prize autonomy, resist authority, and jealously guard options. Commandment and obligation seem antithetical to personal freedom—and many contemporary Americans approach them warily. Jews are not immune to this tendency. Sociologist Steven M. Cohen and I heard numerous unsolicited protestations from “sovereign selves” in the course of doing research for our book, *The Jew Within*. “No one can tell me what to do as a Jew.” “I elect to observe Judaism as I elect to observe it.” Sovereign selves believe they have a right to exercise such choice when it comes to Jewish observance and commitment. In their eyes, it would be wrong not to do so: they would be “dishonest” or “inauthentic” if they engaged in any practice that is not personally meaningful at the moment they perform it. Each mitzvah—far from being obligatory, part of a larger pattern to which they are pledged—must, as it were, make the case for its own observance, every time.

Most Conservative Jews understand this. They recognize that partnership in the Sinai Covenant entails a thoroughgoing discipline of practice; an all-embracing way rather than a set of discrete “good deeds.” I think they have learned from experience that mitzvah—because it is comprehensive—provides a wholeness to life that would otherwise be unavailable. How we eat is connected to the rhythm of the week and the year; how we learn Torah is inseparable from the good we try to do in the world; all of these flow to and from encounter with God, however one thinks about and tries to serve God or the Ultimate Truth of existence. A great many Conservative Jews resolutely take the “leap of action” to mitzvah and by doing so acquire the gift of wholeness to life. At least as many aspire to do so, or to do so more often.

We all know that more than duty alone inspires Jews to make sacrifices on behalf of Israel or to devote hours beyond number to service of synagogues, schools, Federations, or other causes. Belief in revelation at Sinai is also not what drives most Jews, most of the time, to undertake those responsibilities. We do such things—and take on many other mitzvot—because we are grateful for the life that
Torah makes possible, thankful that we have resources that we can share, pleased we have the chance to give back to our community, loyal to the ways of parents or grandparents. The combinations of motive are many and not always well-understood. Some Jews act in obedience to God. Some heed conscience. Others believe that God speaks to them through conscience—or in the voice of the community. All find meaning and joy in a life governed by Torah. That is why *commandment* is not an adequate translation of *mitzvah*, any more than *good deed* captures the matter. Mitzvah means so much more than either of these. It is, like Torah itself, a pattern, an ennobling source of wholeness, a way.

What is distinctively Conservative in this understanding of mitzvah? How shall we increase performance of mitzvot among Conservative Jews? These questions are the subjects of next week’s post.