

The Mitzvah Initiative: When MITZ-vah becomes Mitz-VAH



What is the difference between a *MITZ-vah* and a *Mitz-VAH*?

MITZ-vah, pronounced with the accent on the first syllable is borrowed from the Yiddish, and we typically use it to indicate a “good deed.”

Mitz-VAH, on the other hand, is derived from the Hebrew word that means “commandment.”

Sometimes a *MITZ-vah* is also a *Mitz-VAH*. But not always. What differentiates them is our sense of obligation.

To do a *MITZ-vah*, a good deed, is usually seen as something we do voluntarily, a matter of choice and temperament.

A *Mitz-VAH*, however, is something we do because we feel obligated to do it. It is not a matter of choice, but a consequence of our sense of duty and responsibility to God and other human beings.

Judaism was traditionally based on a system of *Mitz-VOT*, commandments, that were seen as the obligations that God, through the Torah, has placed on each individual Jew.

An individual could find meaning and identity through such responsibilities. Community was built on the shared expression of these obligations.

But we live in a very different world today. We are autonomous individuals, freely choosing our style of life, and the commitments that give it meaning. We choose the communities we belong to, and the degree to which we feel we are ready to be involved in them.

The contrast between traditional Jewish “obligation” and contemporary individual “choice” has led to a need to redefine the way we come to embrace Judaism. Often, obligation and choice are seen as being opposites, and we feel we need to opt out of Jewish expression if we cannot embrace it all. As a result, our lives as Jews are diminished, and our communities are rarified.

Clearly, we need a different model of being Jewish. A different model of *Mitz-VAH*.

The *Mitzvah* Initiative is a new program being developed under the auspices of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, and spearheaded by its Chancellor, Dr. Arnold Eisen, whose late father Allen was a member of AJ. It is meant as a way to bridge *MITZ-vah* and *Mitz-VAH*, choice and obligation, individual and community, present and future.

The *Mitzvah* Initiative, which we will launch this fall here at AJ is part adult education and part individual transformation. It is built on the premise that, while in classical Judaism the individual is obligated by all of the commandments and has no choice, Jews today will assume any Jewish obligation only as a matter of individual choice.

The program is structured to guide us in an inquiry, as individuals, of classical Jewish sources, and learn as adults about what Judaism teaches about living in community. The program then encourages us to make our own decisions about which of the *Mitz-VOT* “speak to us,” “grab us,” “are meaningful to us,” so that we will want to begin to admit them into our lives as “freely chosen obligations,” as paradoxical as that term seems. This is a revolutionary approach, but it is grounded in the classical understanding of *Torah*; that even at Sinai, the people had to accept the discipline of *Torah* voluntarily, and each in an individual way. In June, the Seminary held a phenomenal two-day workshop which introduced the program. AJ sent one of the largest teams to the conference. Our delegation included Hazzan Glantz, our educational director Debbie Miner, and our youth and programming director, Manya Monson, in addition to myself. We all came back enthused and eager to initiate this program at AJ.

On Rosh Hashanah, I will speak about the *Mitzvah* Initiative and introduce the concept further. Shortly after that, you will receive, by mail, an invitation to participate. We will offer three possible times for this fourteen-week program to be held. Depending on minimum enrollment for each time slot, we will determine if we will run the program once, twice, or three times weekly.

I am hopeful for a maximum attendance. I want to see this program running three times a week, with seventy-five to a hundred participants. It will stimulate Jewish commitment, and energize our community in a meaningful and purposeful way.

So for now, keep your ears and eyes, your mind and heart, open to the idea of participating in the *Mitzvah* Initiative. Listen carefully to my sermons on *Rosh Hashanah*, and keep open the possibility of participating, even if it seems like a stretch for you right now.

I believe that within every Jew, whether by birth or by choice, there is what some used to call, in Yiddish, “*Das Pintele Yid*,” that flicker of the Jewish soul, a pilot light of Jewishness, just waiting to be ignited into a burning flame of Jewish passion. The *Mitzvah* Initiative is meant to help our congregants, as individuals, discover what will ignite them Jewishly, to help them live more fulfilling human lives.

I hope you will join in this voyage of Jewish self-discovery which will ground you as a Jewish individual, and help you find your place in the continuum of the Jewish spirit. We will be better as individuals, and our congregation will be stronger as a community, for it.

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