

Shabbat Shalom
from Rabbi Michael Gold

Candle Lighting Time
Friday Erev Shabbat 7:17 pm

Services

Thursday Mar. 26, 8:30 am Minyan followed by Bagels and Bible

Saturday Mar. 28 9:30 am Shabbat morning service

Passover Begins Wednesday Night April 1. Sign the form for me to sell your hametz.

Service Schedule

Wed. April 1 5:30 pm followed by 1st night Seder for those with reservations

Thurs. April 2 9:30 am 1st Day Passover

Fri. April 3 9:30 am 2nd Day Passover

Sat. April 4 9:30 am Shabbat Hol HaMoed, Reading of Song of Songs

Wed. April 8 9:30 am 7th Day Passover

Thurs. April 9 9:30 am 8th Day Passover, Yizkor

Passover begins next week. On the eighth day of Passover, we share the vision of Isaiah where even the animals will live in peace. We read, "They shall not hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea" (Isaiah 11:9). As war continues between Iran and Israel, the United States, and the Gulf States as well as between Israel and Hezbollah, we pray that peace finally come to this troubled region.

Here is my weekly message.

PARSHAT TZAV – SHABBAT HAGADOL
COMMANDMENT

"Command Aaron and his sons thus: This is the ritual of the burnt offering: The burnt offering itself shall remain where it is burned upon the altar all night until morning, while the fire on the altar is kept going on it." (Leviticus 6:2)

This week's portion is called *Tzav*, a word that means "Command." God commands Aaron and his sons to take the ashes from the daily burnt offering, dress in special clothes, and carry them to an appointed place outside the camp. From this word we get one of the most important ideas in Jewish tradition – *mitzvah* or "commandment." The phrase *bar mitzvah* means "son of the commandment," *bat*

mitzvah means “daughter of the commandment.” [Note – bar mitzvah is a noun, not a verb. A boy of thirteen becomes a bar mitzvah; I do not bar mitzvah boys at thirteen.]

So, what is a mitzvah? Many would translate it “good deed.” Certainly, many of the commandments are good deeds: giving money to the poor, honoring parents, visiting the sick, burying the dead, comforting mourners. But many other commandments are not necessarily considered good deeds. Next week we must eat *matzvah* (unleavened bread) and *maror* (bitter herbs) around the Passover table. We even bless these acts with the words, “Praised are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, Who has sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us to eat *matzvah/ maror*.” Eating these foods and telling the story of the Passover is not necessarily a good deed, but it is certainly a commandment.

This brings us to the heart of the meaning of the word mitzvah or commandment. To be a commandment, we must believe there is a Commander. At the heart of the theology of Judaism is the belief in a personal God Who has laid out certain expectations, not simply of Jews but even of non-Jews. In fact, Jewish tradition teaches that God gave non-Jews seven commandments, all of them fundamental ethical laws. God gave Jews 613 commandments. If one converts to Judaism, one takes on 606 commandments. [Note – the name Ruth, the most famous convert in the Bible, using Gematria or Jewish numerology, adds up to 606.]

Of course, many moderns are troubled by the idea of a personal God Who gives out commandments. Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan (1881-1983), the founder of the liberal Reconstructionist Movement in Judaism, denied the existence of a personal God. To Kaplan, God was simply the sum of forces in the universe which make for redemption. Rather than use the word “commandment,” Kaplan called Jewish practices “folkways.” Kaplan certainly ate *matzvah* and *maror* on Passover. But his reason was that these are the folkways of the Jewish people, not the expectations of a commanding God.

At the other extreme from Kaplan’s Reconstructionism is the extremely successful Chabad Movement. Chabad believes that every time a Jew performs one of God’s commandments, it raises up hidden sparks of the divine. Raise enough of these sparks and we can bring about the coming of the Messiah. Chabad emissaries will travel anywhere in the world to get a Jewish man to wrap *tefillin* (phylacteries) or to get a Jewish woman to light Sabbath candles. They will conduct Passover seders in far-flung corners of the world. In fact, the largest Passover seder in the world takes place in Kathmandu, Nepal, often attracting hundreds of Israelis who go trekking in the Himalayas after their military service.

Many of us, myself included, believe there is a middle ground regarding commandments between the liberalism of Kaplan and the traditionalism of Chabad. I put *tefillin* on my arm and head every weekday morning, even during my recent hospital stay. (I do not know what my hospital roommate thought I was doing; maybe he thought

that I was taking my own blood pressure.) Certainly, I see it as a folkway, part of the way of life of the Jewish people. But I also see it as more than a mere folkway, that on some level I am doing the will of a commanding God.

The word mitzvah means more than good deed, it means commandment. It assumes the presence of a Commander. If I believe in God, then it makes sense to me that God would want certain behaviors of me. Judaism is a religion of action, actions that fulfill the will of the living God.