

## **“One More Mitzvah (Shavuot)”**

Kol Nidre Sermon

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As many of you know, this spring we had a Pakistani exchange student, Faiza, who lived with us. She was with us during the month of Ramadan. I had always known that Muslims fasted from sunrise to sunset for the entire month. What I did not know until this spring, is that the fast does not start at sunrise. It actually starts more than an hour before sunrise. You have to eat before the first prayer of the day. That first prayer occurs when the sky begins to get light. So, if sunrise is at 5:00 in the morning, as it was this June, then Faiza would have to finish eating by 3:45am. Even though Chris and I were not fasting, we found it very difficult to get up at 3:15, cook breakfast for Faiza, and then go back to sleep around 4am. And Faiza did it all while going to school! As an outsider I both admired her devotion and questioned the system. Really, you have to finish eating before it even starts to get light? That seems really strict. For 30 entire days? Sometimes it takes being on the outside to see how traditions may look to others.

So I imagine, to many non-Jews out there, Yom Kippur seems, similarly, a little, shall we say, strange. You don't eat or drink for 25 hours. You wear white but you don't wear leather. You stay in synagogue all day thinking about what you've done wrong. Then you blow into a ram's horn at the end of it all.

And Yom Kippur is not even our strangest holiday. Have you seen Sukkot? We build a little hut, but with a roof that leaks. We fly in an etrog from Israel and shake it in all directions with a palm frond, willow, and myrtle (really, have you ever encountered an etrog in real life?) From the outside, Sukkot probably seems pretty weird.

It's not only on holidays. We wear funny looking prayer shawls during services. Some of us wear t'fillin, a black box on our head and one on our arm, with passages from the Torah handwritten in each box. We do not eat pork, or shellfish or mix meat and milk. And, don't forget the laws of shatnez, the prohibition of wearing wool and linen. With 613 commandments, we are bound to have more than a few silly ones thrown into the mix.

That is certainly how the early Reformers felt. They rebelled against laws that they felt were a little too strange. Tallit? Out. Tefillin? Of course not. Dietary laws? Nope. In the Pittsburgh Platform of 1885 they wrote, “We hold that all such Mosaic and rabbinical laws as regulate diet, priestly purity, and dress originated in ages and under the influence of ideas entirely foreign to our present mental and spiritual state. They fail to impress the modern Jew with a spirit of priestly holiness; their observance in our days is apt rather to obstruct than to further modern spiritual elevation.” What was in? Organs. Robes. Choirs. Seating in pews. Sermons in English. Eventually a shorter prayerbook. Recognition of gender equality. A desire to engage with the world.

Early reformers weren't the first people to “take away” as it were some of the commandments. In his hilarious if not quite historically accurate film, “The History of the World Part I,” Mel Brooks famously depicts Moses himself losing some of the commandments. In the film, Moses descends Mount Sinai with three tablets of stone and 15 commandments, but he drops one tablet as he presents them to the people Israel so He proclaims, “The Lord, the Lord Jehovah, has given you unto you these 15...oye....10, 10 commandments for all to obey.”

Long after Moses presented the original 10 commandments, the destruction of the Temple made it impossible to do some of the *mizvot*, because there was no more animal sacrifice.

Taking those commandments away leaves us with 270 mitzvot that we all have to follow—48 positive and 222 negative. It was from these 270 that our early ancestors cut, to leave us with what we have now. Unlike Chabad.org, I can't give you an exact number. In Reform Judaism, we do not embrace the idea that we are obligated in the same way that those of other movements might view themselves as obligated. But, even if we do not have a traditional model of obligation, we do have an idea of commandedness and covenant. It is just a little more difficult to figure out what the terms of our covenant are. This evening, we will explore how we opt in and how we are obligated in covenant as we look at the holiday of Shavuot, and what it can teach us this Yom Kippur.

For those of you who missed Rosh Hashanah, I should let you know that I'm exploring a different holiday in each sermon and examining what it can teach us about this time of year. During Rosh Hashanah, I discussed Tu B'shvat and Tisha B'Av. This evening, I will examine Shavuot, the spring holiday that occurs fifty days after Passover and commemorates Moses receiving the Torah at Mount Sinai.

The central focus of the Shavuot experience is the *brit*, the covenant that God and the Jewish people entered into on this day. Tradition tells us that everyone was at Sinai. Yes, all of us — all the Jews who were alive then, and every Jewish soul who would ever live (Shemot Rabbah 28:6). This is intimately linked to the Torah portion that we will tomorrow morning.

אַתֶּם נֹצְרִים הַיּוֹם כְּלֶכֶם לִפְנֵי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:

You stand this day, **all** of you, before the LORD your God (Deuteronomy 29:10). The text then goes on to list everyone that was there. We stood together to enter into a *brit*, a covenant with God. There are terms. God will be our God, just as was promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The Israelites will be God's people. And, the covenant is not just with the people physically there, but also with those who are not there (Deuteronomy 29:14).

On this Yom Kippur we read this text that hints at the revelation at Sinai where we entered into the original covenant with God. So what is this covenant, this *brit*, that we entered into at Sinai that we reaffirm on Yom Kippur? With most Hebrew words I introduce, I share the root of the word, which gives us some insight into its meaning. But *brit* is a little bit different. No one is really positive about where it comes from. Many modern scholars have settled on it coming from an ancient Akkadian word meaning something that binds together, a meaning that had to do with the bond that happens between us and God. A covenant is not a mere promise. A covenant is an unbreakable relationship. Once we are in this relationship with God we can't leave and neither can God. It is mutual--each party promises something to the other. God promises us that we are chosen as God's people and that God will remain our God. For our part, we promise to follow the laws that God has given us. If we go astray, as we do again and again, that does not mean the covenant ends. However, it does mean that we will be punished. While good deeds are rewarded, those rewards take up much less literary space than the punishments that will befall us if we do not follow the laws. This unbreakable bargain can be more than a little intimidating.

Fear is one of the aspects of this covenant we have with God. It is scary. It certainly felt that way for our ancient ancestors standing at the foot of Mount Sinai. There was thunder and lightning. A mountain in flame. The sound of the divine shofar. The people were so scared that they begged Moses to go up the mountain and talk to God himself. They did not want to get that

close to the Divine presence. Similarly, Yom Kippur is an awe inspiring and intimidating day. Our *machzor*, our prayerbook, tells us that even the angels are filled with fear and trembling at this time of year. We pass under God's staff and our every deed is recorded and counted. It is an intimidating and fear-inducing feeling.

Not only can the covenant be scary, but it requires a real commitment from us. Even with "only" 270 commandments, Judaism is serious business. You have to do a lot to be a good Jew, more than you have to do in order to be a good person. The commitment that is required on our part demands discipline and obedience. Sure, we can argue with God, we can disagree, but at the end of the day, we have to follow the laws. Abraham argues with God about the number of good people needed to save Sodom and Gemorrah, but once God makes a decision, that decision is final. 10 good people are needed, if there are fewer, the cities will be destroyed. Yom Kippur is a holiday of commitment and discipline. We fast, not eating anything for the day. Of course, there are exceptions, we should not harm our health, but for many of us fasting is a central part of our observance. We attend services, we recite prayers, we yoke ourselves to the mitzvot. We take actions we would never take during our ordinary lives, ones that we might think impossible, but we do them. We might fall short, but next Yom Kippur we'll be back to try again.

This is a this time of year we commit. We do what is asked of us and more. We go all in for the covenant.

But, what about tomorrow? What about November and March and July? We experience this one day in a heightened way. One day of rituals, of ancient prayers, of commitment and dedication, and then we return back to our lives. But perhaps, just perhaps, we are being asked for a little bit more. Perhaps we are being challenged to opt in not just on Yom Kippur, but all year long. Maybe Yom Kippur isn't just about this day with 5 services and bodily deprivation and intense introspection. Maybe it is really about all the other days of our year.

If we can do this on Yom Kippur, we might say, then Shabbat doesn't seem so hard. Building a sukkah might not be an insurmountable obstacle. Maybe I could stop eating pork. Maybe we could remember to do havdallah every week. And, as we sit here experiencing the most extreme manifestation of our religion, it begins to seem a little bit more doable to opt into some of the other commandments. After all, there is a whole world of Jewish life out there that is much more fun than Yom Kippur.

And just when we start thinking that way, we read our Torah portion for the morning. "Surely, this Instruction which I enjoin upon you this day is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach. It is not in the heavens, that you should say, "Who among us can go up to the heavens and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it. Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who among us can cross to the other side of the sea and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?" No, the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it. (Deuteronomy 30:11-14)." You got this. It's not nearly as hard as you think it is. There is a whole world of Judaism out there to explore. Go get it!

That is our challenge today. Yom Kippur isn't just about Yom Kippur in the same way that Sinai wasn't just about Sinai. And Yom Kippur isn't just about our relationship with God, or our relationship with other people, it's about our relationship with Judaism. It invites us to commit to doing a little bit more, all year long.

We might not want to. It's hard, it's scary, we could fail. But we are being invited. We all know open-ended invitations can be difficult, so let's be specific. Add one mitzvah, one commandment, to the list of mitzvot you observe. Add one mitzvah for the entire year. From this Yom Kippur to next. There are 270 to choose from. What will yours be? Will you observe a new

holiday? Commit to regular Jewish study? Make Shabbat at home each week? Do havdallah? Teach Torah? Recite the shema morning and evening? Keep dietary laws? Give tzedakah? Say a blessing after eating? What will be the mitzvah that you add this year? What will your one additional mitzvah be?

Now despite the assurances in our Torah, we all know that maintaining a resolution is not the easiest task to accomplish. We all might need help. We might need materials--a havdallah candle is helpful if we are going to do havdallah. We might need expertise--just how does one say the blessing after eating? We might need some support-- we may not want to go to Torah study if we don't know anyone who will be there. We have a community that has stepped up for one another in so many ways. We can certainly help one another as we seek to be more Jewish. Now I have no idea what this will actually look like. I don't know how many of us will step up to take this on. But, I can say that I'm here to help you and I extend a very sincere invitation to join the "One More Mitzvah" Club. Let me know. Let others know what your one more mitzvah will be.

Today, the holiest day of the year, we are called upon to enter again into the covenant with God. As a symbol of that covenant, each of us is invited to commit to Jewish acts, to mitzvot that make our lives holy. Now is our time to commit. What will your "One More Mitzvah" be?