

*This is the text of Rabbi Gordon Tucker's Rosh Hashanah sermon delivered in September (2007-5768). It explains the purpose and vision behind the **Mitzvah Initiative** that JTS Chancellor Eisen spoke of at Temple Israel Center of White Plains in January 2008, and that is about to begin in our community.*

ROSH HASHANAH 5768 - 2007

I offer very special L'Shanah Tovah wishes to everyone assembled here today. They are special, of course, because this Rosh Hashanah is not only the beginning of the year 5768, but also the beginning of Temple Israel Center's centennial year. It is a great privilege for me to be in the leadership position with which you have entrusted me during this very significant moment in the life of this community. And as we look around us, it is not difficult to see just how much there is to celebrate. Seven years to the day after we opened this Sanctuary (and I still remember seeing the mouths of congregants agape as they entered it for the first time on that holiday), this sacred space is anything but a relic. It continues to be filled to overflowing week after week. Our physical plant has expanded to just about its maximum size, and we must creatively reconfigure and refurbish space to accommodate ever-growing programs for all ages. Since I am just one of many, it's OK, I think, for me to note that we have a first-rate professional staff, with whom it is a pleasure to work day in and day out, not only because they are wonderful people, but also because they all understand deeply what this sacred work is all about and feel privileged to be doing it as well. All who visit us, whether from other congregations in our general area, from distant parts of the country or the world, or from the State of Israel, are impressed with what they see and experience in this kehillah, and in the White Plains Jewish community of which we are a vital part. In short, we are envied. And, while envy itself is not necessarily the most noble of emotions, being envied is not so bad – it's a "Maileh", as the Yiddish expression would have it – and as our Sages said long ago, קנאת סופרים תרבה חכמה – envy among people of the book has the effect of increasing wisdom for everyone.

With all that we have to celebrate, we will, appropriately, have many delightful celebratory events in the course of the year now beginning. You can get a complete look at these in one aesthetically pleasing glance by taking the beautiful Centennial brochure that has been set out for you today (and for which we thank Debbie Edelman, Hank Haynes, Corrine Kohlmeyer-Hyman, and the entire Centennial team).

But it will not just be about celebration. We also have plans in store, plans that will give real substance to this milestone. Some are already underway. I have in mind here the Reimagine Project with which our Religious School has been actively engaged. We have done this in anticipation of the Centennial year, because we want this milestone to coincide with our best efforts to create one of the finest models of religious education that a synagogue can provide. For we are reimagining our mission as what it was always meant to be – not only to teach Hebrew language and Jewish history and ceremonies, but also to create and nurture a mature religious consciousness and spiritual life in the young men and women who grow up here. For only that will suffuse the language, the history,

and the ceremonies with real and enduring meaning. So the Centennial year will be marked by exciting work with our teachers, students, and parents, and will, we believe, usher in an era of even greater Jewish knowledge and commitment than that of which we can already boast.

Other plans will be taking shape this year. Since we are a kehillah, a community bound together, we will be looking at ways in which we can enhance the physical settings in which we celebrate life events and communal occasions together. And, looking beyond ourselves, we will redouble our efforts, together with our larger community, to be a source of support in a multitude of ways to the State of Israel and to our brothers and sisters there, especially those of the Masorti Movement. And finally, we will take first really meaningful steps, steps that are vital but long overdue, to model a religiously based reverence for our planet by making the synagogue's activities more earth-friendly. We'll be working on this with the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life. Celebrating 100 years, after all, must include a concern for the next 100, everywhere. This will include the launching of a community supported agriculture program that we hope will get many congregants to buy a significant portion of their produce from a Hudson Valley farm, and thereby reconnect to our sources of food and lower our carbon footprint at the same time.

This will be an exciting year, a real beginning of an era for us. Much of what we will seek to do together will require things of the congregation. Part of that will surely involve the provision of funds to bring various projects to full fruition. We confidently believe that when these plans are fully laid out during the year, the community will eagerly rise to the opportunity to further these goals. And, thinking here of next Friday night – Kol Nidre night – it will also require that we not forget in the midst of the Centennial excitement that the ongoing needs of the congregation must also be met, as they are by your generosity every year.

But for today, this first day of the year, I want to focus on a much broader commitment that will be required of this community, indeed of any community seeking to renew itself. So I ask: what is the common denominator that binds all of these diverse dreams together? What is it to be committed to a community that wishes to observe and celebrate together? What is it to plan for the provision of a substantive religious education for the next generation? What is it to be committed to a community of Jews in Israel whose culture is superficially often quite different from ours? What is it to feel a sense of global responsibility for the planet? In short, suppose we were to ask the question that the Torah tells us that our children will inevitably ask us: *מה העבודה הזאת לכם?* – what's the point behind all of these activities that you engage in? Why is this community and its commitments important to you, to the Jewish world, indeed, to the world?

If the answers to all of these related questions had to be summed up in a single word, it would be the much-misunderstood word *Mitzvah*.

But in order to explicate this sufficiently, I first want to take you back to the time of our beginnings 100 years ago. What sort of landscape were the founders of this congregation in 1907-1908 living in, as Jews in America?

That American Jewish landscape certainly had its precarious aspects to it. Here's one example of that: Just months prior to our congregation's very first year – no doubt as meetings were being held to plan for the creation of this synagogue community – an essay was published, with the title “Immigration and its Effects Upon the United States”, by one Prescott Hall, a New Englander who was a founder of something called the Immigration Restriction League. (Sound eerily like some current events?) Here's part of what Hall had to say about the Jews in our country then:

“The physical degeneration of the Jew in New York and Philadelphia has been accompanied to some extent by a moral and political degeneration.....As the Hebrew death rate is low, and the birth rate high, the race is likely to multiply. The family as an institution has a strong hold upon them, and their desire for racial and religious purity tends to keep them from intermarriage with other races, so that assimilation is often a mingling rather than a fusion.”

In other words, those Jews will never be able successfully to assimilate into American culture, and this is a problem, particularly since only such assimilation would cure the physical, moral, and political degeneration the author saw in those New York and Philadelphia Jews.

That xenophobia was one element of what made Jewish life here still precarious. But at almost the same time, there was a much more positive outlook, if you will, from a very different quarter, though it raised the specter of a danger of a different sort. In 1908 (our first full year as a synagogue community), a new play by the British Jewish writer Israel Zangwill, opened in Washington, D.C., in the presence of President Teddy Roosevelt. It was called “The Melting Pot”. It eventually made it successfully to Broadway. It had a Jewish protagonist, and here's what that character had to say in this play as he rapturously considered America's open arms:

"America is God's Crucible, the great Melting Pot where all the races of Europe are melting and reforming! Here you stand, good folk, think I, when I see them at Ellis Island, here you stand in your 50 groups, with your 50 languages and histories, and your 50 blood hatreds and rivalries. But you won't long be like that, for these are the fires of God you come to! Germans and Frenchmen, Irishmen and English, Jews and Russians, into the crucible with you all! God is making the American.”

A celebration of the melting pot to be sure. Now exactly what Zangwill was advocating for American Jews can be debated back and forth. Was it a full assimilation into the newly forged “American”? Or perhaps it was simply a vision of every group contributing its skills to a greater whole. (After all, it was in our congregation's earliest months, in 1907, that the very first American won a Nobel Prize in a science, and that went to a Jew – Albert Michelson – who won it in physics). Whatever it was, and as uplifting as

Zangwill's vision was, it pointed his readers to a precariousness of a different kind. For what Prescott Hall, in his xenophobia, believed could never happen, Zangwill believed could and would happen – and that is an integration into the American melting pot, a process that succeeded perhaps a bit too well.

That the integration happened is surely one of our great blessings. It is why we have the standing and the success to be able to celebrate this Centennial as we do, where we do, in prosperity, in security, and in confidence.

But there has been a price paid for the integration, and understanding what that price was, and is, requires me to retell a powerfully poignant Rosh Hashanah story. The story was told by the Hasidic master Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev, and he told it in the name of his teacher, the great Maggid Dov Ber of Mezritch, the leader of the second generation of Hasidism. Here's the tale as the disciple told it:

“Regarding the sounds of the Shofar, I heard a beautiful parable from my master and teacher. There was once a king who sent his son abroad to a distant land, for a purpose known only to him. In the course of time, this son integrated himself into the lives of the villagers among whom he lived, and he forgot the king's ways of doing things, and he no longer had a royal bearing. Then one day the son heard that the king was going to visit his adopted land; and when the king arrived, the son made his way into the royal entourage and cried out loudly, but strangely. For it was only with sounds, and not with words that he cried out, since he had forgotten the king's language entirely. Then, when the king heard the sounds that his son made, and he understood that he had even forgotten their common language, he was filled with compassion for his son. And this, said the Maggid, is the significance of the sound of the Shofar.”

We, who have been sent into this blessed land for God's purposes, what is the language that we have forgotten? It is, I submit to you, the language of *Mitzvah*. Yes, we use the word a lot, but we've lost the meaning that it had in its native language, in our native language. Type “mitzvah” in your word-processing program, and you'll see that your spell-checker recognizes it. Because it's become an American word. That is, a word connected with freedom, and thus with the right to choose what we shall do and what we shall not. Ask the average Jew – and I mean a well-identified and educated Jew – what *Mitzvah* means, and he or she will likely tell you “a good deed”. [I did it this morning at several of our youth services – I asked the products of our Religious School and our Day Schools exactly this question, and I got exactly this answer] “Go and visit so-and-so who's sick. It'll be a *mitzvah*”. Meaning: a nice thing to do. A good deed is, of course, a nice thing to do. But it is so in an American meaning, in that it is something that is voluntarily chosen. And by the way, lest you think otherwise, this insistence on autonomy and the right to choose is not just a trait of the freer-thinking American left. The conservative end of our political spectrum is just as devoted to this autonomy; just consider the ways in which that political community often understands charity to be that which ought to be done by voluntary associations, and not ever imposed as an obligation by society's governors. When we ask a Bar or Bat Mitzvah, “what Mitzvah project did you choose to take on?”, we are, whether we know it or not, undermining our native

language of obligation (*mitzvah*'s native meaning) by the American language of autonomous choice.

And what we have imbibed sociologically from our American society, is reinforced by an enduring philosophical idea that goes back at least to Immanuel Kant more than 200 years ago. For Kant claimed that the only reason that people would submit to what he called "external direction", and allow others to be their guardians and guides, was laziness and cowardice. Those who accept obligations from outside themselves are, in this view, simply avoiding the trouble of thinking for themselves. So commandedness = laziness, and to accept obligations is not to be free.

No wonder Zangwill's children of the melting pot, the children of the land of the free, would have to forget the native language of *mitzvah* as commandment, as obligation, and translate it into their new language as "good deed", freely done.

This unfortunate side effect of the blessed American experience of these last 100 years has now been compounded by a more recent development in our culture, and here I must tell you a more personal story. For years, Amy and I have enjoyed, on our annual trips to North Carolina, what are by a wide margin the most delicious peanuts we have ever eaten. We knew they came from a tiny hamlet in southeastern Virginia named Newsoms. This past May, when we were down there, we undertook on a whim to visit this out of the way place and meet the peanut farmers who produce these gems. It was a father-son team, and the younger of this pair, a man just a few years younger than us, was a delightful person to meet, and it was fascinating to get a glimpse of his work and family life. I had never had any special concerns about the kashrut of the peanuts, since they were clearly marked as being made with "peanuts, peanut oil, and salt." That's it. But when we saw the operation (it only produces 400 pounds a week), I saw all of his ingredients stacked up in the roasting room, and I pointed out to this new friend of mine that the peanut oil he used actually had a kashrut certification on it – that of the O-U. And when it was clear that he had no idea what that was, I explained to him that this meant that people like myself could eat his peanuts with confidence. (We had already established in a conversation earlier in our visit what I do for a living, and believe it or not, when I told him I was a rabbi, he asked me whether I was Baptist or Methodist). But when I mentioned that the certification enabled observant Jews to eat his peanuts, he remembered that Jews don't eat certain things. And then he hit me with the following question: "do you really believe that you will go to hell if you eat pork?" (I'll tell you what I answered him some other time). But at that instant, I said to myself, "Wow! For a significant portion of Americans nowadays (probably at all times, but they are a lot more visible and vocal nowadays), religion is what you do to avoid going to hell."

In a twist on Kant's axiom, he was just asking: "why else would one do it if there weren't a threat of hell?" And I felt a wave of sadness for this new friend of mine, for whom that was the meaning of religious life.

This is the same attitude about God's commands that produced horrendous statements about lack of obedience having led to 9/11, or Rabbi Ovadia Yosef's recent comments

that IDF soldiers die in war because they don't observe *mitzvot*. What wonderful advertisements for *mitzvah* these attitudes are! So we are repulsed by these vocal manifestations of a fundamentalist version of religious obligation, and rightly so. For whether they originate from Christians or from Jews, they all reinforce the caricature that Christianity long ago created of the vengeful, commanding God of what they called the "Old Testament." Who wants any part of that? And so, repulsed as we are by both the American and Israeli religious right, we reject the idea of commandment and obligation.

What I've described for you is a real double whammy. On the one hand, the American ideals of freedom and autonomy that Zangwill celebrated makes us *mitzvah*-averse, and at the same time the theological excesses of those who buy into the harshest, most unforgiving understandings of obligations manage to convince us that our *mitzvah*-aversion is, after all, correct.

The end result? We are truly like the child in the parable, who no longer understands the language of the parent – a parent who, as in the parable, is not a vengeful, controlling parent, but rather one who wants to nurture loving commitment in us, commitment between parent and child, as well as among all of the child's brothers and sisters. And since we don't understand the language, we assume that we can't speak it, and that it won't speak to us. I know that many of you may well go home saying something like "This is interesting, but it's not really for me. It's fun to go to a Sukkah, and I might even build one, because it's a nice thing to do in the fall foliage, but it's not my obligation as a Jew. And the palm branch doesn't really speak to me. And kashrut makes some sense at important occasions, but not as a daily discipline that takes over my autonomy." I understand it, really I do. I'm also a proud American. But I ask you at least to put up some resistance to it, and to see it for what it is – the forgetting of our parent's language, the language of our people, to the point where we can no longer understand it. That's why we're short on obligation. That's why, when a crunch comes for a particular family, and it is often, though not always, around the issue of whom a child will marry, the lack of facility with – indeed, the active avoidance of – the vocabulary of obligation for all those prior years comes home to roost. When almost everything is either voluntary – as in: it's a "good deed" to go to Hebrew High School – or else is arbitrarily imposed by an authority you can't avoid – as in: "you have to go to Religious School to avoid the purgatory of not getting a Bat Mitzvah date" or "the kiddush has to be kosher because it's at the shul" – why should it suddenly make sense that there's some obligation to marry within the faith?

You all know of the demographic figures that show the numbers of Conservative Jews dropping. Such fluctuations in absolute numbers don't bother me all that much, in and of themselves. But what is more interesting, and revealing, is what the demographic studies show about those who leave us. On the one hand, we lose some significant numbers to Reform, and that is in part because those who have grown uncomfortable with the native meaning of *mitzvah* – or for whom it is strange and alien – believe they will hear less of it there (which is, by the way, somewhat unfair and disrespectful to Reform). But we also lose a certain percentage of the best products of our religious schools and day schools to independent communities, and even to modern Orthodox communities. Of the latter, let

me be clear: if people are convinced of an Orthodox ideology and way of approaching Jewish theology and observance, I have no issue with the phenomenon. People should worship and observe in a community they believe in. But that is usually not the reason we lose some of these fine young products of our Movement. They do not leave to adopt an Orthodox world view. Rather, they are looking for communities who still speak the native language of *mitzvah*. They are not looking to buy into an Orthodox understanding of the *mitzvot*, but they don't any more know how to make commandedness grow in our soil. They are trying to recapture the parent's language.

But you know, the child in the parable wasn't completely oblivious to what had happened to him. The child was drawn to the parent's presence, and was moved to cry out in a wordless language. Why? Because he knew instinctively, as we do at critical moments, that something deeply important was missing in his life. Rosh Hashanah is a critical moment each year, and it is a moment when the parent's presence is palpable. A Centennial Rosh Hashanah should be even more so. And I believe that we are not oblivious to what has happened to us either. If any of us has been profoundly moved by the sounds of the Shofar we have already heard this morning, it is most likely because we know within us that we need to re-learn our language.

Mitzvah is not intellectual laziness, nor is it a surrender of autonomy and reasons to a capricious God. Heschel, who was also born 100 years ago, as we were being founded, taught us that you cannot understand what *halakhah*, the set of rules governing Jewish life, is about, until you first understand what *mitzvah* means. It *is* our language, that which gives our lives as Jews meaning, and that enables us to celebrate 100 years in a land of freedom, integrating in a way that poor Prescott Hall in his xenophobia and bigotry could never imagine, but not disappearing – yet – into a tasteless stew, as Zangwill had projected.

Heschel taught us that *mitzvah* is about a mode of living that reflects our sense of the transcendent, that which cannot be fully expressed. Here are his exact words: “To outsiders the *mitzvot* may appear like hieroglyphic signs, obscure, absurd, chains of lifeless legalism.....To those who want to tie their lives to the lasting, the *mitzvot* are an art, pleasing, expressive, full of condensed significance.....in the Jewish mind the action sings and regularity of fulfillment is the rhythm by which we utter our tunes.”

It is not about fear of hell. It is a recognition that there is more to the meaning of life than just personal utility. But note well that I do not present to you today one definition of *mitzvah*. There can, in fact, be many ways of living a life of Jewish obligation. And that is no doubt what it means to speak the language of *mitzvah* with a Conservative accent. This is not the kind of sermon that lays out for you what you need to do to be in good standing. This is an easier sermon than that, but one that requires thought and study. I am today issuing to you an invitation, and it comes not only on behalf of myself. It is an invitation to a life-giving conversation for our reborn community and for our Conservative Movement, the need for which had been recognized at the highest levels. The new JTS Chancellor's Rabbinic cabinet – on which I have the honor of serving – has been busy preparing the materials needed for this critical dialogue among Conservative

Jews. We are one of 8 congregations nationally who will be participating in a pilot year of this Mitzvah Initiative. It will not be a pronouncement from above as to what is a “good Conservative Jew”, but rather an honest dialogue among people who understand how important it is to relearn the parent’s language, even if we retain our right and responsibility to bestow on it our own accents and our own idioms. Anyway, sermons that tell you what to do rarely change anyone’s life. The only shot we all have is to get engaged in honest self-reflection and mature conversation.

I remember saying to myself, in anticipatory exhaustion, as we were formulating these plans in the Chancellor’s Cabinet, “that’s just what I need in a centennial year; another program.” And then it hit me. That’s just what I need; it’s just what we all need in the centennial year. We need it so that the celebrations will be able to answer the question מה לכם להעבודה הזאת לכם?. Why do we do these things? Is there a reason other than sheer institutional survival that makes our work truly important?

I will need to know who among you – and I hope it will be very many – are interested in being involved in this important conversation on *mitzvah*, that has the potential for making history in American Judaism. During the year there will be sermons and bulletin articles on the subject, but above all, I fervently hope, *hevrutot*, study groups, that will grow up in our midst, in which texts and ideas on this subject will be honestly studied and considered. Because a mature and honest sense of what obligates us, what commands us, is the only thing that will give enduring meaning to the vital life of this community, and recapture the vitality of our movement.

So let’s together recapture what it means to be free – as we will always be – but to be *freely bound* to something that transcends us as well. The irony is that something that may appear, to those unfamiliar with the language, as meaningless, can be exactly the vehicle that gives enduring meaning to life. It is just like the Shofar, whose *tekiot* on the surface are meaningless sounds, but which actually express our yearning for the language that ties us to one another and to God. We will be blowing the Shofar during the silent Amidah in a few minutes. It is perhaps the best backdrop, that silence, against which to hear those sounds. Listen to the sounds carefully during that silent prayer. And see if you can hear in it your own voice, reaching out for the saving language that we have temporarily lost.