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One of my classmates recently gave a sermon at our school; he raised the question, "What the mitzvoth (commandments) mean in liberal Judaism?" His remarks on the subject spurred my own thoughts and I wanted to take this opportuinity to share both with you. When I was a little kid in Sunday school the teachers and rabbis always told us that a Mitzvah was a good deed. Come Rosh Hashannah and Yom Kippur we were always asked to write down all the good deeds we had done for people throughout the year, they went into the big 'Mitzvah Bag', and our rabbi would read them at children's services on the High Holy Days.

When I became a Bar Mitzvah the rabbi and the cantor explained to me, in the presence of my parents and whole congregation, that the level I was about to attain by being called to the Torah meant that I was now responsible for the commandments. He informed me that a Mitzvah was much more than a good deed but rather things that I was responsible for in Jewish living. He explained that my Bar Mitzvah marked the begining of my responsibility for all of the commandments, responsibile for doing what I chose to do, and responsible for knowing why I did not do others.

As a rabbinical student I have had the privlige and the opportunity to study most if not all of the commandments placed upon the Jewish people. There are in total 613 commandments that are derived from the Torah. This number includes the the 'Top Ten', commandments concerning ritual practice like, kashrut and wearing a Tallit, as well as a number of commandments that were specific to the sacrificial worhship in the Temple, which we cannot maintain today. I have studied not only what they are, but I believe I have gained a pretty good understanding of why they were commanded and toward what end.

Traditional Jews will explain that Jews are obligated to the commandments (mitzvoth ) because they are central to our unique relationship with God. The merit, in their view, is not what we are being asked to do or not do, but that we are being asked at all, and they reason, if it is God who is commanding how could we refuse. I understand this reasoning, it makes the whole system quite simple, but I cannot agree with it. By the same token, perhaps I now have the impediment of having read and studied too much to continue to define a mitzvah as a good deed.

So I come back to the definition given to me on my Bar Mitzvah day, that the mitzvoth form a list of things that I am free to choose to do or not do I meerly need to understand why I make that choice. This sounds pretty good to me, it makes rational sense, and I am comfortable with it. The problem is that I am too comfortable with it, under these criteria I am only obligated to do what I think makes sense, what I agree with, but in this formation, if I am only going to do what makes sense to me, then why do I need the commandments at all, couldn't I just come up with my own list? Of course I could, and I do all the time, the rules that govern my life are not always grounded in Torah, they are often grounded in my own moral underpinnings, which through study I often find are based on Jewish teaching, but not always, and not perfectly. So what can the Mitzvoth mean to me, to liberal Jews as a whole? In my very humble opinion, the mitzvoth can be all three things for each of us simultaneiously. Sometime they are good deeds that we are inspired to perform for others, our community our enviorment. And sometimes they are things that we study but choose not to do, or do based on our understanding. And still sometimes they must also be those things that we know we are obligated to do, and thus we do them, even when we can't fully understand why, but we realize it is our duty as a Jew.

What the mitzvoth must never be, are comfortable.