

ST ALBANS MASORTI SYNAGOGUE

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Two Kinds of Obligation

I am, as many of you know, a cyclist.
You learn many things on two wheels.
Most of all you learn how fragile a life is.
Every time I snap on my bicycle helmet my mind flashes back to an intensive care cubicle I visited as a Hospital Chaplain.
The patient was Jewish. As was his wife and two small kids. He had fallen off his bicycle, cracked his skull and was in a coma.
He died.
I think of that fragility when I click my helmet over my kippah.
It's a good thing to remember on Yom Hazikaron – this day of memory.

Some time ago I read an article on why people drive Hummers – Hummers are the massive half tank/half-cars that you sometimes see, rarely it has to be said, in St Albans.

'I like my Hummer,' this woman was saying, 'because it makes me feel safe. I'm up high and protected.'

But she is fragile, that Hummer driver.

Just as fragile as I am, you are, we all are.

We are all cyclists here,

We are all cyclists, with our fragile souls protected by fragile bones and maintained by fragile systems.

Back to the bicycle.

Matt Seaton writes on cycling for the Guardian.

He's been cycling all his life, but several months ago he took the cycling proficiency road test and wrote about what he learnt.

Mostly, it was what he expected, and knew.

But there was one thing.

"I learnt," Seaton wrote, "how important it is to look over one's shoulder when cycling."

To look at the cars behind.

What was so interested Seaton about this instruction was not the notion that cyclists need to know if there are cars behind them.

For indeed us cyclists can hear the cars.

What was interested Seaton was that the reason given for looking behind, as one cycles along, is **to make sure that the drivers see you.**

The idea being, of course, that when a car driver sees your face, they encounter your fragility, and then he or she can't run you over.

They can't forget you.

And all of a sudden they are obligated to give you just a little more space, between you and the gutter.

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If a driver sees my face, sweaty and short of breath,
He, or she, starts to shift a little uneasily, even in their Hummer.
They are forced to recognise a fetter on their freedom, a call on their actions, an
obligation, a Mitzvah.

I want to talk, today, about **Mitzvah**.

It's a notion that we are in danger of forgetting, in these times.

Earlier this year I was invited to go class to class at Clore Shalom, a local Jewish
school where a number of our members attend.

It was Purim time, I volunteered to speak about the *mitzvot* of Purim.

I started by asking, in class after class, for a definition of *mitzvot*.

Hands went up in the air and class after class

I was told *mitzvah* meant a nice thing to do for someone.

I was told *mitzvah* meant being kind.

It doesn't, of course.

Mitzvah means obligation.

Two types of obligation – obligations between ourselves and our fellows – *mitzvot
ben adam lchavero*

And obligations between ourselves and our world, between ourselves and our God –
mitzvot ben adam lmakom.

Obligations.

The word threatens to make us stutter over its harshness, in our oh so modern age.

Who wants to be obligated?

I want to be free.

Or, to give it a more posh-term, 'I want to be autonomous.'

I want to drive around in my Hummer, so high and so gently cushioned by
expensive suspension, that I can forget what is crushed underneath my comfy tires.

By the way, I'm not specifically interested in people who drive big 4x4s today. We all
like our metaphorical Hummers – our escape capsules from the world.

Our metaphorical Hummers might be i-pod headphones used to block out the noise
of the street, or the selective deafness we all conveniently develop in order not to
hear those voices that distract us from our own private self-interest.

Selective amnesia

We all want to drive around in Hummers – immune to everyone and everything.

And yet we are all cyclists – desperately hoping those who have the power to run us
into the gutter will see our face, recognise our fragility and feel a sense of obligation
towards us.

See my face,

Feel an obligation.

Be dragged out of your Hummer.

The great Jewish philosopher, Emanuel Levinas made a career out of writing about
the impact of seeing another face, of engaging with the mortality of the soul in your
line of sight.

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'The first word of the face' says Levinas, 'is the 'Thou shall not Kill.' It is an order. There is a commandment in the appearance of the face, as if a master spoke to me.¹

But there is more than a mere obligation not to kill.

There is more than the *mitzvah- lo tirtzach* 'Thou Shall Not Kill'

When one becomes aware of the other, it calls many things into question.

Says Levinas

'One has to respond to one's right to be because of one's fear for the Other. My being in the world, or my place in the sun, my being at home, have these not also been the [taking' of spaces belonging to the other man whom I have already oppressed or starved or driven out into a third world; are they not acts of repulsing, excluding, exiling, stripping kidnapping?'

If that language is a little high-falutin' how about this.

'My entire philosophy,' wrote Levinas, can be summed up in the phrase, *après vous monsieur*

I put your needs before my own.

Everything we do in our life results in us picking up obligations.

Indeed in choosing to speak, today, about *mitzvah*, I am responding to a call, made by the new Chancellor of my Seminary in New York, Professor Arnie Eisen.

Chancellor Eisen has called on every ordained Rabbi of the Jewish Theological Seminary, to speak about this most important subject, on this most important day.

An obligation.

Everywhere we go, everyone we meet, imposes obligations upon us.

How about these obligations, from Robert Fulghum's charming book, All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten?

1. Share everything.
2. Play fair.
3. Don't hit people.
- 4 .Put things back where you found them.
5. Clean up your own mess.
6. Don't take things that aren't yours.
7. Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody.
8. Wash your hands before you eat.
9. Flush.

Mitzvot ben adam lchavero – obligations between a person and their fellow come in so many shapes and forms.

There are so many things to protect, so many people to take care of.

¹ 'Ethics as First Philosophy,' in The Levinas Reader, ed. Sean Hand pp75-88.

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We live in a web of connections, all the different aspects on our existence jostling one another, making claims on our selective amnesia.

Every time we try to disappear in our metaphorical Hummers, all our history and biography and experience reminds us that there are cyclists on the road, fragilities and responsibilities that weigh upon us even as we go to sleep and certainly when we go on our way.

And the quality of a life can be measured by how we respond to these obligations. To live well in this world means accepting these obligations with *all our heart, all our soul and all our might*.

And you shall repeat these words to your children and speak of them, when you lie down in your homes and when you go on your way.

For among the jostling identities we all share, in this very special community, on this very special day, is our identity as a Jew.

And this is what brings us to our obligations before God – the *mitzvot ben adam Imakom*

To live well, in this skin, with this soul granted to us, we need to respond to this call too.

We need to remember our identity; call it to mind and allow it to tug us out of our metaphorical Hummers.

We need to remember the day God promised Abraham that his offspring shall be as numerous as the stars of the heavens.

We need to remember the moment we were freed from Egypt.

We need to remember the day we stood on the foothills of Mount Sinai and heard the words 'I am the Lord Your God.'

These are desperately important things to remember for two reasons, Firstly because this chain of memory is stretched thin in this day and age, and for many of us, sat here today, it is in danger of snapping, of disappearing into nothing more than a vague appreciation of chicken soup and klezmer.

This keeps me awake at night, but, of course, it's no reason, in itself for sticking with this 5000 year old tradition.

No the real reason it is important to give Mitzvot time and space in our lives is that they connect us to the deeper part of our selves. They connect us to our past and they allow us to find a way to stand in the face of the Universe.

Our Mitzvot give us a way to respond to the extraordinary gift of our own creation. How does a Jew say thank you? When we wake in the morning we are obliged to say *modeh ani lephanecha* – and we claim that this works.

How does a Jew respond to the extraordinary contemporary abundance of food that means, radically, that starvation is simply an unknown in our community? We eat Kosher and when we have eaten and been sated we bless. As it says in the Torah – *vachalta v'savata uverachta* – and we claim that this works.

How does a Jew respond to simply being alive and being able to live free of the trials of slavery?

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We eat Matzah and, and this is the greatest and most powerful insight in our glorious faith, we keep Shabbat – and we claim that this works.

As the Good Book says

Remember that you were a servant in the land of Egypt, and that the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and with a stretched out arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day.

It is the Shabbat that is at the heart of everything, for us as Jews.

A response to the miracle of our freedom.

A response to the miracle of our creation.

Remember the Sabbath day; six days you shall do all your work, and the seventh day is a day of Sabbath and re-ensoulment.

Uva yom hashvii shavat vaynifash - the seventh day is a day of Sabbath and re-ensoulment

Six days you shall run, like a hamster on a wheel, putting food on our plates and earning the necessary crust with which to pay for the car, the new clothes, the mobile telephony and the broadband exchange router.

But on the seventh day you shall be re-ensouled.

You shall stop, breathe, and take in the company of your fellow human beings face-to-face.

On the seventh day you shall stop, and thank God.

And we claim that this works.

Don't do it because you want to, or because you enjoy it, or because your parents or kids expect you to.

Do it because it is a Mitzvah, an obligation.

Do it because, as a Jew you are prepared to claim God demands this Mitzvah of you.

Do it because you are obliged, you owe it to your past and to your future, to your ancestors and your descendants and to God.

Do it because you are prepared to claim that this works.

And in so doing you will lift the Shabbat far far away from being a day off.

You will turn a normal day into a day of re-ensoulment.

You will turn it into a moment to stand before your creator with pride.

Many years ago, when I was just starting to think about my own Jewish journey I was davening with some friends on a Friday night, it was summer time.

We were all singing away,

Singing these wonderful tunes, rocking away.

And I realised that there was a twig that I was brushing against, it was catching my sleeve as I sang and rocked back and forward.

How annoying.

I went to break it

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And then I remembered that there is a Halacha – a law – against breaking twigs on Shabbat.

And I paused.

And I remembered that on Shabbat I don't get to boss the Universe around the same way I would the other six days of the week.

And I took a step away, and left the twig where it was.

It was a tiny moment.

But it has stayed with me as a moment when I let my ego - my desire for instant gratification – go a little.

And, as I did so, this moment of stepping back from breaking the twig, I felt myself folding into the tradition of my parents and my ancestors, back through my great grandparents in London's East End, back through their ancestors in the Shtetls and cities of Eastern Europe and back still further, back to Sinai.

A little thing like not breaking a twig can have that power.

More power even than a Hummer.

That is the power of the Shabbat.

That is the power of a day of re-soulment.

So homework.

Yes there is homework.

Two pieces of homework.

The first is about cycling. It is about *mitzvot ben adam lchavero* – obligations between people.

The first piece of homework is to look at someone and be moved by what happens when you see their fragility.

Allow yourself to be moved, to feel obliged.

And respond.

It could be a photo of a bedraggled stranger in the papers, allow yourself to be obliged to send some money. *For you shall not wrong the stranger for you were strangers in a strange land.*

It could be a work colleague, a lover, a friend.

Anyone who needs a hand, a hug, a gesture of support.

As Robert Fulghum would put it; do something to meet the obligations we learnt in kindergarden

1. Share everything.
2. Put things back where you found them.
3. Flush

I'm not so serious about the 'flush part'

But place another person's needs before your own.

Know that they are fragile and you have the power and therefore the obligation to support them.

'My entire philosophy,' wrote our philosophe de jour Emmanuel Levinas, can be summed up in the phrase, *après vous monsieur*

I put your needs before my own.

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This is the first piece of homework.

The second piece of homework is about *mitzvot ben adam l'makom* – obligations between a person and cosmos.

Looking back over my sermons these past four years I have had the merit to serve this special community I see I have talked about Shabbat from this pulpit many times. But I have no greater message to offer than this.

Keep Shabbat and save your life.

Save it from being swallowed by the humdrum and the profane.

We all need saving.

Light a candle, light two.

Leave the wallet behind.

Don't answer e-mail.

Anything to rescue this most special of days.

Anything to respond to the mitzvah, the obligation, to *shomer et yom hashabbat* – observe the Sabbath day.

First - *Apres vous monsieur* - I put your needs before my own.

Second - *Shomer et yom hashabbat* – observe the Sabbath day

Because this is how we respond to the obligations of our life.

Because this is what it means to acknowledge that we are bound, obliged, by our Mitzvot.

Because this is how we come to deserve and even how we earn the sweet, healthy and happy year for which we pray.

Shannah Tovah