

Supplementary Materials for “Mitzvah”

Discussion Questions

1. “[Conservative Jews] have come to understand that Torah entails a thoroughgoing discipline of practice: an all-embracing way rather than a set of discrete ‘good deeds.’” [p. 16]
 - a. What is the dichotomy that Chancellor Eisen wants to avoid in the beginning of this essay? How does that dichotomy detract from the notion of mitzvot providing “wholeness to life”?
 - b. What, in your opinion, is lost by practicing mitzvot while understanding them on the one hand only as “good deeds,” or on the other, only as “commandments”?

2. “More than duty alone inspires Jews to make sacrifices on behalf of Israel or the Jewish education of their children. More than abstract obligation drives them to devote hours beyond number to service of synagogues, schools, Federations, or other causes. Belief in the Revelation at Sinai is also not what motivates most Jews, most of the time, to undertake these and other responsibilities.” [p. 16-17]
 - a. What does Chancellor Eisen suggest might motivate Conservative Jews to embrace mitzvot? Do these motivations resonate with you? Are there others you would add?
 - b. Choose a mitzvah that is especially important to you. Why are you motivated to do it?

3. “This Conservative approach to mitzvah accords with a Hasidic midrash on the word that Abraham Heschel liked to cite: a mitzvah is an act done *be’tsavta* (together), with God and fellow Jews. It joins the best of what we know to our best understanding of what God wants.” [p. 17]
 - a. What “convictions” regarding mitzvot (discussed in the subsequent paragraphs) does Chancellor Eisen believe are distinctive to the approach of Conservative Judaism?
 - b. How do these convictions reflect the midrash cited here?
 - c. Do you share these convictions? What is “Conservative” about the way that you think about mitzvah?

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4. “On this as on other essential matters, Conservative Judaism ordains a balance that seems to me exactly right.”
 - a. Why might the balance between commitment to the obligatory nature of mitzvot and flexibility in their observance be described as “in stereo”?
 - b. Can you think of any examples of the Conservative Movement expressing this balance in practice?