

***MITZVAH***  
**The Quintessence Of Relationship**

The *N'shamah*<sup>1</sup> is always present  
at the core and essence of each person  
The *N'shamah* is the Breath-Taking Somatic Self  
Life moves through you, except when it doesn't  
Life is great, but sometimes it hurts like hell  
There is a second you, always present the (*Tzelem*)  
The *Tzelem* is the Cognitive self-mindfulness  
whose task is to witness sponsor, name and bless  
whatever comes through  
the Breath-Taking Somatic Self *N'shamah*  
[The *Tzelem* ⇔ *N'shamah*]  
[Breath-Taking ⇔ Model of Divinity]  
is in balance and life works,  
when both are in an [I ⇔ You] reciprocal relationship.  
Relationship is the basic religious and psychological unit.  
There is an intelligence greater than you present in the world.

Know in Whose Presence you exist.

*B'rachot 28B*

You are an incurable deviant.

*Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5*

***MITZVAH* has become an English word!**<sup>2</sup> It is a major theme of Jewish life. The doing and fulfilling of specified commandments is endemic to our tradition.<sup>3</sup> There are few Jews who do not know this, and even where they invite family and friends to their children's **Bar**

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<sup>1</sup> All transliterated words come from the Hebrew and are italicized and bold..

<sup>2</sup> As has Mitzvot, the plural of Mitzvah-2003 Merriam - Webster 11th Collegiate Dictionary Version 3.0

<sup>3</sup> 365 negative commandments like the number of days in the solar year, and 248 positive commandments corresponding to a person's limbs: Talmud, tractate Makkoth, 23 .

and *Bat Mitzvah*<sup>4</sup>, they are using words that have become English expressions, and have entered the English language. Few Jews and fewer Gentiles recognize that the word *mitzvah* and its plural *mitzvot* has close to overwhelming importance in Jewish life and learning. A Gentile's major task is to believe and take Jesus Christ as one's personal savior. A Jew's task is to learn and perform the full range of these *mitzvot* which cover everything from birth to death. Studying and fulfilling them, is crucial in Jewish religious living, even when defining what a *mitzvah* is and how to do it, is not clear. *Mitzvot* are said to be what God requires of us, exemplified in the covenant we Jews have with God. Our task is to obey our Deity and fulfill our covenanted commitments, to the fullest extent possible. We have been commanded to do so by God, our Commander in Chief, who is said to be the source of the *mitzvot*.

Beyond that, being commanded implies the presence of a relationship between and God's people, and fulfilling the *mitzvot* ordained by God, can only happen in relationship. Our sense and the sense of Jews down the ages, is that there is something beyond our human "being" and that in some inchoate way we are in relationship with that "being" who somehow from time to time relates to us and demands of us doing *mitzvot*. Fulfilling a *mitzvah* is our response to that sense and affirms that in the relationship with the Deity, we have an obligation and responsibility to behave in a particular way. Obligation is implicit in any relationship. Often but not always present in relationships is a *metzaveh*, a commander and a *metzaveh*, one who is subject to those commands. In Jewish life the *metzaveh*, is God and the *metzaveh* is the Jewish People who tradition tells us were present at Sinai, when God revealed the obligatory 10 commandments to us<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> At 13 years of age, a young Jew is inducted into Jewish peoplehood and observes the occasion by involvement in the worship service and the subsequent celebration.

<sup>5</sup> All English translations are from; The Five Books of Moses by Everett Fox, The Schocken Bible Volume 1. Schocken Books, 1983ff. .

After an introductory “**I am**, there follow twelve You are not(s)<sup>6</sup>...one Remember, and one Honor... A list of *mitzvot* leading to endless others, Jews have been by the covenant entered into with God, obliged to fulfill down the ages.

In Yiddish, *mitzvah* has an alternate meaning in the relationship between two people. “Do me a *mitzvah* has the overtone of “do a favor for me”! A favor based on and signifying the caring two people have for one another and the doing of that *mitzvah* strengthens the bonds of their relationship. Though the partner in the relationship is asked to do the *mitzvah* nonetheless in that context, *mitzvah* loses much of its being commanded by the Deity, much of its one-sided commandedness.

In *any* relationship, we are virtually always responding to **our** perception of what is going on with our relational partner, both when something is asked of us and even when nothing is required of us. Our response, which we perceive as our very own, independent of the other, whether the other meant well or not, will have an effect on and often alter the relationship. *Any one who has been married or a parent or involved with any other human being or even a pet knows that this is so.*

Our role in any Relationship created and shaped by us, is all too often a response to our perception of what is happening with the other. In the life of *mitzvah*, that other is referred to as God. This does not imply *that there indeed is something out there that we call God or even assert* that there’s nothing supernatural out there with whom we are in relationship. We simply do not know! All we really know is what **we** perceive, think, hypothesize and/or experience on our side of any relationship.

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<sup>6</sup> Exodus; 20; verses 3;4;5;5;7;10.13;13;13;13;14;14;

And what we perceive, think and in what manner we respond, is also influenced by the relationships taking place inside our heads, our inner relationships. We are in a profound sense, multiples, with many different ideas and inner responses, many in conflict with each other and we struggle to work out their relationship, and produce a response, which may or may not be “useful” and “appropriate.”

Relationship is virtually always implied in the dichotomies of

[“Good⇔Bad”],[Self⇔Other”],[”Me⇔You”],[”Us⇔Them”],  
[“Power⇔Love”],[”Inside⇔Outside”],[”I⇔IT”],[”Healthy⇔Sick”],  
[”Masculine⇔Feminine”],[“Problem⇔Solution”],[”Mind⇔Body”],  
[”Rabbi⇔Layperson”],[”Divine⇔Human”],[“Thinking⇔Feeling”],  
[”Conscious⇔Unconscious”],[“Jew⇔Gentile”],[“Tahor⇔Tameh”],  
[“Kosher⇔Treyf”],[”Holy⇔Mundane”],[”Sacred⇔Profane”],  
[“Clean⇔Unclean”],[”This⇔Not this”],<sup>7</sup>  
and seemingly endless other splits.

We are not “selves”, as we have hitherto understood that. We are each of us a relationship between different “selves”.

In religion this has often led to the search for certainty, for the True way of being and pursuit of the path, “halachic”<sup>8</sup> or otherwise that leads to that elusive almost impossible sense of Oneness.<sup>9</sup>

Inside our being, our experience is that there are thoughts, beliefs and feelings that we should struggle to extirpate.

We may extrapolate from our experience within our “selves”, that there are relationships in which one partner is perceived as powerful

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<sup>7</sup> The brackets [ ] indicate the interrelated unity of these two elements. The double arrow <=> signifies reciprocal relationship.

<sup>8</sup> The halachah-the way a Jew is to behave.

<sup>9</sup> The Rabbi As Symbolic Exemplar-By The Power Vested in Me Haworth Press 2002

enough to demand complete obedience and in light of that “fact” may be awarded “full” authority by the relational partner. Alternately, partners in a relationship may treat the other partner with reciprocal respect. Some parts of the obliged relationship may be perceived as legal, (think Halachah) and some are simply culture bound. That very much depends on the nature of the relationship.

It is we humans who have determined, shaped and promulgated what God’s will is, what God asks and requires of us, and the methodology of how we can fashion a relationship with God, that we believe hope and pray will be found satisfactory by our supernatural relational partner.

Obligations in relationships change over time. The changes are often dependent on our judging how the relationship is moving along, and whether in **our** perception our partner is responding in ways that we think useful, caring and appreciated by us. If we mean to continue in a human relationship, we are obliged to craft changes in our side of the relationship.

Our texts were written, recorded and shaped by humans. Any writer invariably projects their own thoughts and opinions onto their creation, even when borrowing word for word or piecemeal, from others. So God and our understanding of divinity and what God does or does not require from each of us as Jews, or desires from humans generally, is modeled after and molded by us. It cannot be otherwise.

God and humankind, modeled after each other, both struggle with "wounded" places and symptomatic "neglected selves."<sup>10</sup> The God we deal with is a "'wounded" God", very much like us, afflicted with "wounded" places and resulting “neglected selves” capable of evil as well as good. (Viz; Noah’s Ark, and those first born of Egypt who

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<sup>10</sup> Our foundational texts are replete with evidence of God's "wounded" places and consequent "*neglected selves*"

died that fateful night.) though some of them may have had absolutely nothing to do with, nor participated in any way in making slaves of our forbears. Some of God's "wounded" places have gone untended and unblessed. Some have morphed and have an independent existence as divine "neglected selves". Our relationship, with God is between two partners each of whom is "wounded", each of whom is possessed of and sometimes possessed by "negative selves".

Rabbinic tradition recognizes, with due deference, some of the "neglected selves" of our "wounded" God. Humanity and Divinity are [Both/And] not [Either/ Or] entities; God struggles to relate to and experience in dealing with humanity, [his/her]<sup>11</sup> good side. Our foundational texts are replete with evidence of God's "wounded" places and consequent "neglected selves". We need to recognize that so that we may know and sponsor more fully the partner with whom we assert that we are in relationship. Looking at God we are simultaneously looking at and seeing humankind. The relationship is linked and reciprocal.

God's prayer is;

“May it be My will that my compassion overcome my anger and may my mercy prevail over my attributes of justice and judgment. May I deal with my children in accordance with My attribute of compassion. May I act towards them beyond the letter of the law.”<sup>12</sup>

God thus affirms that [he/she] sometimes referred to as The Eternal or Divinity, or The One and Only or any of a multiple of appellations, is also a relationship between [his/her] two "selves"-what God is and what God would like to be!

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<sup>11</sup> [His/Her] and [He/She] and similar usages do not imply that God is androgynous. and has a confused sexual identity. They are used to dispel the prevalent notion that what we call God is neither male nor female as humans are.

<sup>12</sup> Babylonian Talmud, B'rachot 7A

God's untended "neglected self" at times takes center stage, vindictive and raging, with retribution for old affronts dominant, as justice and mercy make a quick exit.

Facets of the "divinity" in us include our "neglected selves", which are uncannily similar to God's "neglected selves". A Godly "neglected self" is the place in the divine being God responds from in rage when the "heavenly" word and wish is ignored. Likewise, our human "neglected self" wants things our way, is petulant and destructive, commands the unethical, is intolerant of imperfection and abusive to others.

The '*living*' God of Israel whom we perceive and give thanks and appreciation to for creating and governing the world is not served by our making that "living" God, who for sure does not live in any way we would recognize as "living" i.e. God does not breath oxygen in nor carbon dioxide out, politically correct by diminishing God's complexity and tensions. It also infantilizes our already tenuous relationship with God. How we relate to our "neglected selves" and to God's 'neglected selves' is crucial to how we are in the world.

Humanity and the "Divinity" we experience ourselves interacting with are [Both/And] not [Either/ Or]<sup>13</sup> entities; Our foundational texts are replete with evidence of God's "wounded" places and consequent "neglected selves" We need to recognize that, so we may know and sponsor more fully the partner with whom we are in a loving covenant relationship. Looking at God we are curiously simultaneously looking at and seeing humankind. The relationship is linked and reciprocal.

I suggest that *mitzvot* and the doing of them represents the best that is in us, given that they are our creation and not that of whatever is out there. And they, when we get it "right" change the relationship

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<sup>13</sup> The Rabbi As Symbolic Exemplar: By The Power Vested In Me; pp 161-167

between us and how we perceive God,

Asserting whether blandly or forcefully that Halachah, that immense corpus of Jewish Religious Law is Heteronymous, and that we are subject to laws and rules imposed by others—in this case including God, people or institutions, is a perception and a statement about that perception made by us. No one else! It is a statement of dubious authenticity. No matter how well meant, it is a distortion. It may be useful to some who wish to protect the concept of *mitzvah* as that which our divine partner requires of us in the relationship. Whether that is a reality, whatever that means, is at best arguable. It risks distorting and perhaps destroying what is at least a two-way relationship. It may be based on our one-sided severely limited perception of what is to be in an at least two-way, give and take relationship.

To be more accurate about what our experience is, we must recognize that *mitzvah* implies relationship. Almost anything that makes a difference is about relationship and—how that relationship takes place is crucial. Whether that be the relationship between a superior (whatever that may mean) and an inferior (whatever that may mean), relationship touches virtually everything in the world. The seed and its environment. The sun and the solar system. Woman-to-woman, Man-to-man, kids to their pets, even the wondrous relationships within our very own body. Relationship pervades even our “inner” dialog which though outsiders cannot see or hear it, we may choose to reveal to others, or to hide it by silence. We struggle to clean it up, so we do not act rashly, show our anger and act precipitously and with some embarrassment with others. As sentient beings we perceive, interpret, and struggle to “understand” and make sense of what is happening around us. Pretty much everything exists in relationship with another whatever or whoever.

The widely held fundamentalist premise is that there is only one truth and that truth is literally revealed in a special text, and that faithful, i.e

literal following of this text is not only required, but can lead to salvation. Such fundamentalism is dangerous to our sense of relatedness to others, to our “selves”, to those who differ from us, which actually means everyone, and to our own relation to the tradition we love and tend.

That the God whose existence we posit, is both singular and paradoxically plural is referred to many times in Jewish tradition viz;

God said to Moses: You want to know my name? I am known by what I do. I am called many things. When I judge humanity, I am *Elohim*. When I war on evildoers, I am *Tzevaot*. When I suspend judgment, I am *El Shaddai*. When I am merciful to My world I am *Yahweh*. --My name is *EHYEH ASHER EHYEH*-I will be- there howsoever I will be-there. I am known by what I do.<sup>14</sup>

Humankind has historically had a pervasive sense that there is something beyond us. And that “something” which we personalize as a sentient being, though not in the same way that we are sentient, is in a relationship with us. That “being” has emotions, demands, and requirements of us. *Mitzvah* first and foremost means that being in that relationship—we are obliged by that “other” to behave responsibly, by doing what that “other”, whatever name we give it, asks and at times demands of us.

### **Obligation in Relationship**

Humanity and Divinity are [Both/And] not [Either/ Or]<sup>15</sup> entities; Our foundational texts are replete with evidence of “God's” "wounded" places and consequent "neglected selves" We need to recognize that,

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<sup>14</sup> Exodus Rabbah; 3; 6

<sup>15</sup>The Rabbi As Symbolic Exemplar: By The Power Vested In Me. The Haworth Press 2002

so we may know and sponsor and yes, bless more fully the partner with whom we are in a loving covenant relationship. Looking at what we call “God” we are simultaneously looking at and seeing humankind. The relationship is linked and reciprocal.

Obligations i.e. *mitzvot* change over time.<sup>16</sup> What we are obliged to do and how we do it changes, depending on what is going on in the relationship, even the relationship we find our “selves” in with “God”.

In any relationship, even that with what we refer to as “God” we are responding to our perception of what is going on with what we experience as other. And that includes “God” whom we have shaped and fashioned, and one might dare to say created out of the vast sum of our perceptions, and whom we further assert wants to be in relationship with us and to let us know how to behave, in ways which will satisfy the divine wishes. We affirm that one of those ways is the life of *mitzvah* which we have defined as meaning the way we are commanded to live, believe and behave.

### **WE ARE PARTICIPANTS IN A TWO WAY RELATIONSHIP!**

Besides our own suppositions about who/what God is, we further presuppose that one of God’s roles in the relationship with us is to dictate how we should live; what we should eat and how we should treat one another and on and on. We assume that for us, our relational role is to fulfill to the very best of our ability, what we have posited as “God’s” demands of us. We do that by living and making decisions great and small, with the sense that we are fulfilling God’s will and requirements, Our part of the relationship is to affirm that the “God” we assume exists and the behavior God has outlined for us is a requirement of the relationship. This has often been what Jews have called a life of doing *mitzvot*, consisting of doing what is often but not

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<sup>16</sup> The Reform movement and the alterations it has wrought in Halachah and *Mitzvot* is evidence of that change.

always embodied as “*Halachah*”. We assume that what we call “God”, who in relation with us is both the source of *mitzvah* and its relational recipient. That calls forth from us our own bounty. A break in this loving yet demanding I-You<sup>17</sup> relationship impedes the life of *mitzvah*.

*Mitzvah* is grounded in relationship. It is what we do in relation to the world in which we find our “selves”. *Mitzvah* starts in the I-You, loving relationship not only with others, but also with one’s own “other selves”, those very "selves" we struggle to define as "not me".

*Mitzvah* and the doing thereof continues in the *mitzvah* doer’s awareness of their own relationship with what or whomever we are told or experience as God, whose bounty and being has made room in the world for us and our unique "being". Doing *mitzvot*, is in the relationship in which we participate with those others who choose a life of doing *mitzvot*. *Mitzvah* is a relational term. “God and humanity are each bound by *Mitzvah*. It cannot be other!

So what happens is not commanded by what we call God. God is a supposition we make about the nature of the world and our assumption that there is a “being” who bears that name, at least in English. Perhaps we are right or perhaps we are fumbling in the dark.

*Mitzvah* is exemplified by our determination to perform acts that we place at the top of our hierarchy, as the best we can do to sanctify our lives, understanding that we are causal in bringing messianic times without a physically embodied Messiah.

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<sup>17</sup> I-You is used following Walter Kaufmann’s suggestion, and my German born wife Ingrid’s concurrence. In I AND YOU; A PROLOGUE, to I AND THOU by Martin Buber A New Translation, Walter Kaufmann, Simon & Schuster New York .1970, Kaufman suggests that You is the more appropriate English word for conveying the intimate German “du.”

Though *mitzvah* is not heteronymous, a life of *mitzvot* is crucial; As Jews it is perhaps our greatest creation. We can take pride that we have created it, even though we make the assumption that the God we perceive- often inaccurately, has asked/commanded us to do so. It is our transcending part in living in and perhaps even changing the world. So let us do a *mitzvah* or hopefully *mitzvot*, knowing they are our and our ancestors' creation as the way they developed and taught their children to live in the world in a relationship with the projected other whom **they** referred to as *Elohim* or *Yahweh*, and whom we in English, call God. And in doing our relational part, may we talk and act in keeping with what is and not with what is not!

And doing that would be a **GREAT MITZVAH!!!!**