

**“Rabbi, Why Are You Doing These ‘Orthodox’ Things?”
Encouraging Reform Jews to Recover Ritual Mitzvot**

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Chapter 1

A. The History of Reform Judaism's Relationship with Ritual *Mitzvot*

B. The Rationale for Reform Jews to Reclaim Ritual *Mitzvot*

Jewish ritual practice consists of actions and practices called *mitzvot*. Traditional Jewish thought teaches that *mitzvot* are commandments, obligations which were given to the Jewish People at Sinai when Jews entered into the covenant with Hashem. Written and Oral Torah as interpreted by competent, “authoritative” *poskim*, define what a *mitzvah* is. The individual Jew does not *choose* to adopt specific *mitzvot*. The individual Jew’s responsibility is to perform *mitzvot* as the traditional halakhic process dictates.

Reform Judaism encourages Reform Jews to make informed choices regarding the *mitzvot* they choose to perform. A ritual *mitzvah* is not by definition “Orthodox,” even if Reform Jews have largely abandoned its observance for many generations. Any *mitzvah* may become part of Reform practice, just as any ritual *mitzvah* can. We should think of Jewish religious practices as “Jewish” and not “Orthodox.”

Although many less observant Jews call themselves “Reformed” believing that Reform Judaism is simply a more secular Judaism without a dedicated practice of observing *mitzvot*, this is simply not what Reform Judaism is all about. When we look at the history of Reform Judaism and its relationship to *mitzvot* and Jewish ritual, we understand that leaders of Reform Judaism have grappled with the place of ritual, *mitzvot*, and halachah since the beginnings of the movement for Jewish religious reform in Germany.

The notion of “obligation” has been problematic for Reform Jews because of the movement’s theological emphasis on personal religious autonomy. While some of the leaders of reforming Judaism saw value in maintaining ceremonial tradition, others believed it to be obsolete. Gunther Plaut explains that modern Reform Judaism gained its foundation in the

eighteenth-century period of the Enlightenment through leaders such as Moses Mendelssohn.¹

Mendelssohn believed that Jews could leave the ghetto and fit in with modern society without turning their back on tradition. He believed Jews could enter the German world while holding onto their heritage. Plaut explains:

Mendelssohn's theory of the nature of Judaism had a profound though strange effect on succeeding generations. Of the three parts of Judaism—doctrines, historical truths, and ceremonial laws—he considered the first two accessible to all men and not part of divine revelation. Only the ritual law was revealed especially to Israel, and since it was the distinct mark of the Jew's relationship with God, Mendelssohn saw no reason why this law should not be meticulously observed.²

To Mendelssohn, reforming Judaism did not mean abandoning the customs, traditions, and ceremonies that the Jewish People held onto for centuries. Those were unique to the Jewish people and therefore worth preserving. Mendelssohn envisioned Jews fitting into the modern world while still maintaining their tradition. He believed they could be Jewish and German at the same time. This illustrates that the initial mission of reforming Judaism was not based on erasing rituals, customs, and *mitzvot* from Jewish practice; it was based on reforming Jews' relationship to Western culture. Some individuals connect Reform Judaism with abandonment of traditions, but from the very foundation of Reforming Judaism, abandoning tradition was not the goal.

Over time, German reformers of Judaism questioned and criticized the value of ceremonial law. With their focus being on the rational mind and keeping up with modernity, radical reformers believed that ceremonial law no longer had a place in the modern world.³

Mendelssohn taught that ritual observance does not partake of universal reason that is accessible to all humans. Radicals took this to mean that ritual is not reason, and reason is the most important criteria for determining religious obligations; therefore, ritual must be useless.

¹ Plaut, W. Gunther. *The Rise of Reform Judaism*. A Sourcebook of Its European Origins. New York: World Union for Progressive Judaism, 1963. Page 3

² Plaut, *Rise of Reform Judaism*, p. 5

³ Ibid

There was a growing need for discussion over how reformers of Judaism would approach *mitzvot*, ritual, and *halacha* as well as other key parts of Judaism. Because of this need for discussion, German reformers of Judaism organized conferences and synods where leaders could grapple with what it meant to reform Judaism; the conferences were strictly rabbinical meetings whereas the synods included clergy and laity. At these meetings the Reformers sought to define Reform Judaism.

The meetings began in 1806 when Napoleon initiated a convention of Jewish notables. This was referred to as the Assembly of Notables and it was followed by an enlarged conference called the Grand Sanhedrin. These had little effect, but Plaut explains that these were forerunners for future rabbinical and synodal conferences. It was the first time in modern days that a Jewish group met to talk about how the demands of the times could affect traditional Jewish practice. They made declarations on how Jews would function with the laws of society and the laws of Judaism.⁴

A century later, they were ready to create another conference; this time it did not come from a secular, governmental order, but it came from within the Jewish community. Ludwig Phillipson organized it and it was called the Brunswick conference. Plaut states, “Withal, the Brunswick conference and those that followed were landmarks of Jewish history. Their slow beginnings, their controversies, their hopes, and their failures all play a part in the drama.”⁵⁶ These conferences were a success for the Jewish community as it gave them a foundation to later work toward creating a platform for Reform Judaism.

⁴ Plaut, *Rise of Reform Judaism* Page 71-73

⁵ Plaut, *Rise of Reform Judaism* Page 74

⁶ Plaut, *Rise of Reform Judaism* Page 71

Plaut explains that the failure of the 1848 revolutions and the large-scale immigration of Jews from Central Europe hurt liberal movements. It took another generation passing before Reformers created a new platform for discussion. In 1868, 24 rabbis led by Phillipson and Geiger met in Cassel to lead an inclusive synodal conference of rabbis, Jewish leaders, and scholars known as the Leipzig Synod.⁷ Next would be the Augsburg Synod. Plaut explains:

Once more in 1871 did the leaders of Reform make an attempt to tackle pressing practical and theological problems through synodal decision. The setting of the Augsburg Synod was similar to that of the Leipzig gathering. It was, however, a more intensive work conference, and dealt not only with important specific questions, but also produced the first general platform of Reform Judaism and outlined the tasks facing the modern Jew.⁸

Similar to the conferences, the Synod was a crucial step in reforming Judaism. By creating the first general platform and outlining tasks for the modern Jew, its members helped Reform Judaism become a legitimate form of Judaism with guidelines and a foundation. Among their conclusions was the following; “While fully appreciating and venerating the past, Judaism strives, in accord with earnest scientific research, to set aside what is obsolete and antiquated, so that it may unfold itself in the spirit of the new age.”⁹ This statement displays the belief of many German reformers that ritual was a relic of the past.

One of the biggest problems these Reformers dealt with was the binding nature of *halachah*. With regard to German Reform Judaism, Plaut states that it:

...distinguished between the ethical-religious content of Judaism and its ritual or ceremonial aspects. It could not accept the equal importance of all mitzvot, but it could not fully resolve the question of differentiation: which mitzvot were divine obligations and which were not? A hundred years later this dilemma has still not been solved, and

⁷ Plaut, *Rise of Reform Judaism* Page 90

⁸ Plaut, *Rise of Reform Judaism* Page 93

⁹ Plaut, *Rise of Reform Judaism* Page 94

reflects itself in the controversy over ritual guides and codes.¹⁰

Reformers grappled deeply with the idea of *mitzvah*. They did not simply dismiss the entire idea of *mitzvah*, but they thought about obligation and what made a *mitzvah* considered to be a divine obligation. Even the earliest versions of Reform Judaism had a relationship with *mitzvah*—a relationship that continued throughout time. Some radical Reformers such as Samuel Holdheim believed that all of Jewish ceremonial law would eventually pass away. Holdheim believed that ceremonial law only existed to keep Israel safe and holy in a pagan world.

As paganism gives way to monotheism, the ritual laws are less and less needed; and with the arrival of the Messianic era they are absolutely superfluous...If one searches after the reason for most of the ceremonial laws of the Bible, one will find that they were given only because of the existence of pagan peoples and had as their purpose separation from these people.¹¹

According to Holdheim, as monotheism became mainstream, Jews no longer needed to separate themselves with ritual. While some radical reformers like Holdheim were strongly against performing “obsolete” customs and rituals, others were not as quick to abandon tradition. The role of ritual and *mitzvot* in Reform Judaism continued to be debated as reform Judaism spread to America.

Plaut explains how German reformers of Judaism influenced Reform Judaism in America. Plaut states, “The spirit of German idealism and religious reform had a profound effect on the burgeoning Jewish society of America. German Jews were found in all major cities, and after the 1840’s German rabbis came in increasing numbers to minister to them.”¹² The German reformers’ beliefs toward ritual and *mitzvot* were heavily reflected in American synagogues. The Preamble to the Constitution of Chicago Sinai Congregation in 1858 reads, “The removal of usages and ceremonies partly outlived and party based upon erroneous conceptions, and the

¹⁰ Plaut, *Rise of Reform Judaism* Page 96

¹¹ Plaut, W. Gunther. *The Growth of Reform Judaism; American and European Sources until 1948*. New York: World Union for Progressive Judaism, 1965. Page 123

¹² Plaut, *Growth of Reform Judaism* Page 3

substitution of others more vital, more truthful, and more apt to produce blissful effects...”¹³

American Jewish reformers faced the same issue of what to do with *mitzvot*, ritual, and *halacha* in their synagogues. Many of these leaders followed in the path of German reformers who believed these traditions were obsolete.

American reformers stood on the shoulders of German reformers by having conferences of their own where they worked to create a platform for Reform Judaism. The first conference of American Reform rabbis took place in Philadelphia in 1869. Plaut states, “In many ways it seemed to continue the German conferences of the middle forties. A number of the old names were among the participants, and the language of the discussions was German...Perhaps the number of liberal rabbis seemed too small to warrant the establishment of a formal association.”¹⁴ At this conference they hoped to strengthen the power of Reform Judaism and to extend it to wider circles by forming a foundation of principles created by like-minded rabbis that would serve as solutions to practical and religious questions.¹⁵

In 1885, fifteen rabbis issued the Pittsburgh Platform which would explain guidelines that defined Reform Judaism.¹⁶ The Pittsburgh Platform focused on justice and righteousness and stated, “all such mosaic and rabbinical laws as regulate diet, priestly purity, and dress...fail to impress the modern Jew...observance in our days is apt rather to obstruct than to further modern spiritual elevation.”¹⁷ This was a *complete* rejection of the *mitzvah* system as a set of binding observances.

¹³ Plaut, *Growth of Reform Judaism* Page 11

¹⁴ Plaut, *Growth of Reform Judaism* Page 29

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Levy, Richard. *A Vision of Holiness: The Future of Reform Judaism*. URJ Press. New York. 2005. Page 1

¹⁷ “A Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism.” Central Conference of American Rabbis, www.ccarnet.org/rabbis-speak/platforms/statement-principles-reform-judaism/

The president of the Hebrew Union College, Kaufman Kohler, forbade the wearing of kippot and tallitot among students of the college. Kohler stated, "Not by "romanticism or Ritualism or Legalism but by the accentuation of the eternal principles of our eternal truths can our faith be revitalized."¹⁸ While Jewish ethics and morals seemed eternal, ritual in contrast appeared evanescent.

Richard Levy discusses the Pittsburgh Platform's rejection of Jewish modes of dress, diet, and purification and explains why Reform Jews of the late nineteenth century were put off by these ways of expressing Judaism. He explains that when Reform Judaism was developing in the United States modern culture made clear what was and what was not proper behavior to fit into society. Modernizing Jews adopted these cultural standards as criteria for determining their ritual observance.

American society frowned on covering one's head indoors, looked upon wearing a tallit or t'fillin as foreign and, increasingly, "Orthodox." For Reform Jews who had grown up in Orthodox homes, tales proliferated of what they saw as the corruption of kosher supervision ("My grandmother told me to give the rabbi a dollar and he would declare the chicken kosher") "Purity," meanwhile raised the specter of dirty, humiliating mikvehs, and enforced sexual separation of husbands and wives (nidah) that seemed much less protective of "family purity" than degrading to the menstruating woman.¹⁹

Many Reform Jews at this time sought to leave the strict culture behind and obtain more freedom as American Jews. Rejecting rituals and *mitzvot* propelled them forward into a new generation. For the first time in history, the formal criteria for determining Jewish observance was "culture," specifically the culture of Western modernity—not "Torah."

By the 1920's Reform Judaism was increasingly influenced by eastern European Jews who joined the movement. As opposed to the earlier Reform Jews who hailed primarily from Germany and Central Europe, the Eastern European Jews were more favorably disposed toward

¹⁸ Goldstein, Niles E. and Knobel, Peter S. *Duties of the Soul*. Bronstein, Daniel. "Reform Judaism and Mitzvot: A Historical Overview. Page 9. UAHC PRESS New York 1999

¹⁹ Levy *A Vision of Holiness* Page 116

ritual and cultural practices that could be defined as “traditional.” Reform Jews began to slowly return to more traditional rituals of Shabbat and high holidays. On the level of doctrine, they began to rethink whether or not there could be a more meaningful place for *mitzvah* in Reform Judaism. This was a major change compared with the earlier version of Reform Judaism where rituals and ceremonial practice of *mitzvot* were deemed obsolete by many reformers.²⁰

The 1937 Columbus Platform reflected the changes American Reform Judaism faced. The document mentions God, Torah, and Israel as its “Foundations of Judaism.” The Platform begins, “In view of the changes that have taken place in the modern world and the consequent need of stating anew the teachings of Reform Judaism, the Central Conference of American Rabbis makes the following declaration of principles. It presents them not as a fixed creed but as a guide for the progressive elements of Jewry.”²¹ It continues:

Judaism as a way of life requires in addition to its moral and spiritual demands, the preservation of the Sabbath, festivals and Holy Days, the retention and development of such customs, symbols and ceremonies as possess inspirational value, the cultivation of distinctive forms of religious art and music and the use of Hebrew, together with the vernacular, in our worship and instruction” illustrating that keeping rituals, traditions, customs, and practices was vital.²²

Although radical reformers of the past may have been appalled that leaders of Reform Judaism expressed that a Jewish life “requires’ more than moral and spiritual demands but preservation and retention of customs, symbols, ceremonies and traditions, this statement seems to align with what Moses Mendelssohn had encouraged in the beginning of Reforming Judaism in Germany. Mendelssohn pushed for a Judaism that fit with modern times but did not throw away tradition. This version of Reform Judaism meets this criterion and therefore is not antithetical to the

²⁰ Goldstein and Knobel *Duties of the Soul*. Bronstein, Daniel. “Reform Judaism and Mitzvot: A Historical Overview. Page 9

²¹ “The Guiding Principles of Reform Judaism.” Central Conference of American Rabbis, www.ccarnet.org/rabis-speak/platforms/guiding-principles-reform-judaism/

²² Ibid

tenants of Reform; it in fact goes all the way back to the original goal of one of the first Reformers of Judaism who wanted to create a Judaism that allowed Jews to be Jewish and modern. While Mendelssohn himself was not a “Reform Jew,” he was an original reformer of Judaism whose idea of reform served as a foundation for other reformers to work toward creating Reform Judaism.

Another prominent rabbi in Reforming Judaism, Solomon Freehof, argued that Judaism is a religion that was formed by law and has lived by law and therefore Reform must have some relationship to the law. Freehof tried to link Reform practice to traditional customs.²³ As Mendelssohn had taught that a reform Judaism could have a place for tradition, Freehof was illustrating this truth. Columbus established that ritual observance in and of itself was not a negative thing. Freehof worked to figure out a method by which the Reform Jew could decide which rituals to adopt.

The movement began to see Reform Jews maintaining and developing traditions, symbols, and ceremonies. The Columbus platform argued that certain religious standards and practices were necessary for one to live an integral Jewish life. In the introduction of his book Freehof states, “The foundation of Jewish religious life is Jewish practice upon which are built habits of mind and attitudes to the universe. It is a case of: “we will do and then we will hear.” First we obey God’s commandments and then we learn to understand God’s nature. We do not begin with theology, we arrive at theology.”²⁴

Freehof explains that by this time (1963) Reform Judaism has become fairly crystallized. He argues that it would be of great benefit to Reform Jews to reclaim traditions of the past. He states:

²³ Freehof, Solomon. *Reform Jewish Practice*. UAHC New York 1963 Page 3-15

²⁴ Freehof, *Reform Jewish Practice* Page 4

Many new practices develop constantly. Often they are a modification of some older Jewish practice which had hitherto been entirely neglected and which now it is felt can be reconstructed and serve to instruct and inspire. It is, therefore of interest to Reform Jews to learn more from the vast treasury of Jewish practice in the past so that from it material for new observances may be derived. Thus it is the intention of this book not only to give the present Reform practice but also the practices of the past with which these present observances are connected. In this way Reform Jews may see their observances against the background of tradition.²⁵

Levy also illustrates this point that certain religious standards and practices that had been abandoned by earlier generations of Reform Jews were making a comeback. Over time more Jews became attracted to kippot and tallitot; wearing ritual garb demonstrated that they were not embarrassed by Jewish culture the way their parents were. He explains, “In the dark days of racial violence and the horrors of Vietnam, many of these young Jews embraced Judaism as itself a countercultural expression.”²⁶ But at the same time, many Reform Jews still felt that rejecting Jewish rituals and ceremonial law was a way of asserting independence. Levy explains, “To uncover one’s head, to cast off a worn silk tallis, to eat treif, all felt like assertions of one’s independence, though it was really a surrender to the majority culture that defined “American” as “uniform.”²⁷

By the 1970’s Reform Jewish leaders saw the need for a new doctrinal statement: the San Francisco Platform of 1976 (The Centenary Prospective).²⁸ This platform focused on individual choice based on knowledge, arguing that Jews should learn about the traditions and then decide if they are meaningful and if they feel obligated to perform them. This platform asserted that Reform Jews are called upon to confront these traditions regardless of what they will ultimately

²⁵ Freehof *Reform Jewish Practice* Page 13-14

²⁶ Levy, *A Vision of Holiness* Page 118

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ “The Guiding Principles of Reform Judaism.” Central Conference of American Rabbis.
<https://www.ccarnet.org/rabbis-speak/platforms/reform-judaism-centenary-perspective/>

mean for them individually. The tradition should not be ignored altogether; the tradition should be grappled with.

Reform Jews experimented with ritual and found that some rituals and found that even though they did not feel commanded or obligated to perform them, they might still be spiritually satisfying. They did not hesitate to express these rituals in the language of *mitzvah*. For example, Levy notes that the siddur *Gates of Prayer* published by UAHC in 1975 overflowed with the word *mitzvah*. “Many Reform Jews, however, felt that a tallit increased the kavanah, the intentionality of the prayers, viewing it as a fulfillment more of the mitzvah of prayer than of tzitzit per se.”²⁹ Reform Jews could participate in traditions and customs and find their own meaning; they could feel “called” rather than “forced” to observe *mitzvot*.

Still Levy points out that often Reform Jews experimenting with rituals and *mitzvot* felt rejected at their synagogues.

Jews who learned to wear tallitot and kippot in a minyan or a weekend retreat entered their Reform synagogues and would sometimes find themselves stared at or given hostile glares. The most classical of synagogues would dispatch an usher to request that people remove their head coverings. The rejectionist stance of the Pittsburgh Platform of 1885 extended its long arm into the synagogue a hundred years later and made the growing ranks of Jews who wore these garments feel increasingly uncomfortable”³⁰

Levy does not give evidence for this but mentions that this attitude was exhibited one hundred years after the Pittsburgh Platform, during the time of *Gates of Prayer* and even after the Centenary Perspective of 1976. Even as many Reform Jews were reclaiming traditions that Reformers of the past had rejected, other Reform Jews found this antithetical to Reform.

The majority of the Reform movement was not in agreement over the way Reform Jews should relate to rituals, *mitzvot*, and traditions. It began to seem that Reform’s belief in autonomy did not exist if synagogues were still pushing for Reform Jews to be united against performing

²⁹ Levy *A Vision of Holiness* Page 119

³⁰ Levy *A Vision of Holiness* Page 120

rituals and *mitzvot*. While the Centenary Perspective of 1976 encouraged Jews to confront Jewish tradition and exercise autonomy, not all synagogues according to Levy were being open and welcome to this approach.

While not all of the Reform movement was in agreement about this growing need for rituals, tradition, and more dedicated *mitzvot* observance, the CCAR encouraged Jews to educate themselves on these topics. The CCAR published *Gates of Mitzvah* (1979),³¹ *Gates of the Seasons* (1983),³² and *Gates of Shabbat* (1972).³³ Reform Jews had resources from their own movement which taught how to incorporate *mitzvah* into their lives. Autonomy was still a vital part of Reform Judaism, but how could people make educated choices in how to be Jewish without any knowledge or guidelines? The authors of these guides encouraged autonomy while providing the Jewish knowledge.³⁴

The intention of *Gates of Mitzvah* is to demonstrate to Reform Jews that the treasure they are looking for is hiding in their own Jewish tradition and is in reach of everyone. Reform Jews do not have to become Orthodox to receive the benefits of tradition and *mitzvot*. This book argues that *mitzvah* is the key to authentic Jewish existence and to make life holy. This book is a guide for doing and it strongly reminds readers that intention matters. Editor, Simeon Maslin states, “A few *mitzvot* observed with kavanah will lead to an enlargement of commitment as time goes on. The secret of observing *mitzvot* is to begin.”³⁵ *Gates of Seasons* covers *mitzvot* specifically through the Jewish calendar, while *Gates of Mitzvah* covered *mitzvot* through the Jewish lifecycle. In the introduction Peter S. Knobel writes:

³¹ Maslin, Simeon. *Gates of Mitzvah* CCAR 1979 New York

³² Knobel, Peter S. *Gates of Seasons* CCAR 1983 New York

³³ *Gates of Shabbat* CCAR 1972 New York

³⁴ Levy *A Vision of Holiness* Page 122

³⁵ Maslin, *Gates of Mitzvah* Page 3-5

There has been an undeniable trend toward the reinstitution of traditional practices in Reform Judaism during the past decade. And so, one has every right to ask where the Reform Movement is going. Is it, as many claim, returning to Orthodoxy?...It is our *mitzvot*—our traditional and particular Jewish practices—that put us in touch with Abraham, Moses, Esther, and the Jews of fifth-century Babylonia, twelfth-century Spain, eighteenth-century Poland, and twentieth-century Auschwitz. It is the study and the practice of our *mitzvot* that has “kept us in life, sustained us, and brought us to this moment.”³⁶

The goal of *Gates of Seasons* was not to cover every *mitzvah* but to take some *mitzvot* of the Jewish life cycle and the Jewish calendar that might deepen the lives of modern Jews.

The *How to Handbook for Jewish Living* by Kerri Olitsky in 1993 teaches Reform Jews how to observe *mitzvot* such as “Wrapping Tefillin,” “Putting on a Tallit,” “39 Labors Traditionally Prohibited on Shabbat,” and “Rules for Kashrut.”³⁷ It lists blessings including *n’tilat yadayim*, but it simply says that *n’tilat yadayim* is the blessing for washing hands, which would be confusing to a Reform Jew who might think this blessing is for washing hands any time of day which is not the case.³⁸

Although the CCAR published books that encouraged Reform Jews to grapple with *mitzvot*, ritual, and Jewish tradition, this does not mean that Reform Jews in synagogues all over the country were in fact adding these *mitzvot*, rituals, and traditions to their lives. Levy points out:

...Despite the affirmation of inspirational “customs, symbols and ceremonies” in the 1937 Columbus Platform, and the 1976 affirmation of knowledgeable choice among different kinds of Jewish observance, the original Pittsburgh Platform had not been superseded, but remained in force. Most Reform Jews maintained that only the moral

³⁶ Knobel, *Gates of Seasons* Page ix

³⁷ Olitsky, Kerry M. and Isaacs, Ronald H. *The How to Handbook for Jewish Living* 1993 Table of Contents

³⁸ Olitsky and Isaacs, *The How to Handbook for Jewish Living* Page 8

laws were binding, and what could possibly be moral in covering one's head or wearing a fringed garment?"³⁹

There is a discrepancy between what the movement encourages with platforms and statements and what actually occurs in synagogues and practice. Of course, we still see this today. While the movement introduced books and statements encouraging tradition, most Reform Jews did not jump on board, although many did.

Another major shift occurred in 1999 again in Pittsburgh at the CCAR convention. As Levy writes:

...for in the city where fifteen reform rabbis gathered in 1885 to proclaim that only the Torah's moral laws were binding, that laws regarding diet and dress "obstruct...modern spiritual elevation," in that very city some four hundred Reform rabbis met to vote on a document that said, "We are committed to the ongoing study of the whole array of *mitzvot* and to the fulfillment of those that address us as individuals and as a community. Some of these *mitzvot* long have been observed by Reform Jews; others, both ancient and modern, demand renewed attention as the result of the unique context of our own times."⁴⁰

While the Pittsburgh Platform declared certain Jewish rituals and *mitzvot* off limits to Reform Jews, the Pittsburgh Principles a century later encouraged Reform Jews to reclaim Jewish tradition. Levy explains, "Pittsburgh was chosen as the site for the vote in the hope that the name "Pittsburgh" would now be permanently associated with a document that showed how much the movement had changed since 1885."⁴¹

Levy reports that the rabbis voted 324 to 68 that Reform Jews could be open to responding to all the *mitzvot*; this overwhelming majority highlights the major attitude change in the movement over time.⁴² At this time, Levy was the president of the CCAR; the Principles were passed at his initiative. Levy explains that Reform Jews should never feel forced to observe

³⁹ Levy *A Vision of Holiness* Page 120-121

⁴⁰ Levy *A Vision of Holiness* Page 2

⁴¹ Levy *A Vision of Holiness* Page 5

⁴² Levy *A Vision of Holiness* Page 2

a *mitzvah*, but they should give it some serious and educated thought as to how it may be meaningful to them. Levy states:

There is no system, moral or otherwise, that can cause any body of Reform Jews to “reject” a *mitzvah* for another Reform Jew. The Pittsburgh Principles asserts that each Reform Jew has the right, indeed, the obligation, to enter into a dialogue with the *mitzvot*, because as Jews we have been involved in that dialogue since Sinai. It is the right of every Reform Jew to emerge from that dialogue affirming a *mitzvah*, declaring one is not yet ready to accept it, or even rejecting it. But the dialogue must precede the decision, or it is not really a decision.⁴³

Not all Reform Jews approved of the Pittsburgh Principles; this document caused much debate between those who were satisfied with Reform’s rejection of ritual and *mitzvot* and those who believed Reform Judaism needed to push for a revival of Jewish tradition.

A third draft of the Principles was posted in Reform Judaism Magazine Winter 1998 along with a discussion of the debate as a cover story with a picture of Richard Levy with a kippah, tallit, as he touched the tzitzit to his lips and Levy explains, “For many other Reform Jews, though, it looked like a picture of a Judaism they or their parents had once rejected, which now seemed to be taking over Reform.”⁴⁴ The disagreement led to debates, sermons, discussion groups, and postings in national newspapers as Reform Jews grappled with the change.⁴⁵

When reflecting on whether or not the Principles might influence Reform Judaism, Levy writes:

In some ways, they merely articulate a change that has been underway for some time. On the one hand, the document reaffirms the individualistic nature of a Reform Jews responses to the *mitzvot*...On the other hand, whereas the Centenary Perspective used the word “autonomy” to describe this role, the current document prefers an approach closer to that of Franz Rosenzweig, who uses the language of call and response, of dialogue, between God and the individual Jew.⁴⁶

⁴³ Levy *A Vision of Holiness* Page 123

⁴⁴ Levy *A Vision of Holiness* Page 7

⁴⁵ Ibid

⁴⁶ Levy, Richard N, “The Challenge of the “Principles.” *CCAR Journal*, 47th Edition, Central Conference of American Rabbis 2000.

Levy hoped that the Principles would keep Reform Jews from feeling alienated or awkward at synagogue when wearing a kippah or a tallit; he suggested that synagogues have them for all people to choose from.⁴⁷ This way the *mitzvot* and rituals would not be forced, but Reform synagogues would be a place where Jews could be exposed to *mitzvot*, educated on *mitzvot*, and encouraged to make their own decision based on what they felt “called” to do.

Not all Reform rabbis believed that the new platform was necessary. A newspaper article in the Los Angeles Times quotes the remarks of Rabbi Eric Wisnia during the floor debate over the Pittsburgh Principles: “It wasn’t broken. Why are we fixing it?”⁴⁸ In another newspaper article in the Los Angeles Times, Mary Rourke writes that some Reform Jews responded negatively to increased tradition and ceremonial practice in their synagogues. She states, “As more Reform congregations return to tradition, some members say they feel more spiritually connected, while others resent the change:

During a Temple Emanuel alternative service, called a minyan, the Hebrew term for a gathering of 10 or more, a young man came forward to read from the Torah in practiced Hebrew. He was not wearing any religious garment, and an older man in the community tried to wrap a prayer shawl around him before he touched the Torah. The young man refused three times before the dispute was quietly settled when the older man sat down. An undercurrent of tension passed, and the young man read aloud.⁴⁹

While ritual *mitzvot* became part of synagogue experience, some congregants felt it was being pushed onto them. It is not “Reform” to *force* ritual *mitzvot*, and these occurrences do not demonstrate the tenants of our movement, they are consequences of people becoming hooked and making minhag a principle when not everyone feels comfortable with that. One negative

⁴⁷ Ibid

⁴⁸ Stammer, Larry B. *Los Angeles Times*. “Rabbis Vote to Revive Observance of Traditions.” May 27, 1999 <http://articles.latimes.com/1999/may/27/news/mn-41529>

⁴⁹ Rourke, Mary. *Los Angeles Times*. “Values: Our Culture, Our Beliefs, Our Responsibilities.” September 08, 1999 <http://articles.latimes.com/1999/sep/08/news/cl-7706/2>

consequence of increased *mitzvot* observance is when some Jews try to force it on other Jews or make them feel that they are “less Jewish” if they choose not to perform these *mitzvot*.

Rourke quotes a 76-year-old member of Temple Emanuel named Paul Samek who stated, "It bothers me that we are adopting Orthodox ways." Rourke states that Samek “has given up reading from the Torah at services, for example, because he refuses to wear religious garments and feels pressured to do so when he reads. Yet he has no problem with others wearing them.”⁵⁰ While some Reform Jews enjoy the push toward grappling with rituals and *mitzvot*, others feel it is being forced. For our movement to be true to its tenants, there needs to be education on rituals and *mitzvot*, while at the same time, we must accept and encourage people to do what works for them and understand that some people simply do not feel comfortable or called to perform many *mitzvot*.

Rabbi Daniel Zemel was not satisfied with the new principles. He stated:

We gathered in Pittsburgh to issue a restatement of our beliefs about the covenant our ancestors forged. Unlike the one we inherited, the one we created does not inspire...It does not tell me a story that touches my soul...It presents itself as a nice list of affirmations and commitments. As much as anything it seems to dodge a problem rather than solve one...We did not ask ourselves to make a compelling statement about who we are what we really believe. Instead, we provided a list of things we like and want people to take more seriously.⁵¹

Zemel believes that while at Pittsburgh the rabbis pushed a series of affirmation, now what American Reform Judaism needs is a compelling ideology.

On the other hand, as Rabbi Laura Geller stated, "If they hadn't passed it, it would have sent a message that reinforced the most negative stereotype of Reform Judaism--that it is a religion of minimalism."⁵² Similarly, Rabbi Paul J. Menitoff stated, “For too many years, too

⁵⁰ Ibid

⁵¹ CCAR Journal Winter 2000 Zemel, Daniel G. “A Response to the Pittsburgh Principles.” Page 48

⁵² Stammer, Larry B. *Los Angeles Times*. “Rabbis Vote to Revive Observance of Traditions.” <http://articles.latimes.com/1999/may/27/news/mn-41529>

many of our laypeople have responded to the questions about what it means to be a Reform Jew in the negative: “I’m Reform, so I don’t...” The Pittsburgh Principles, while affirming the freedom and integrity of each individual’s decision making process, provides our people with a simple statement of what it means to be a Reform Jew.”⁵³

Menitoff argues that no Reform Jew should ever need to join a different movement in pursuit of observing *mitzvot*; the Reform Movement is the place to experiment with ritual *mitzvot* and find what works for the individual. He states, “Those who opt, for example, to keep kosher need not feel that they are unwelcome guests at our Movement’s table. In other words, the Pittsburgh Principles affirms loudly and clearly that the Reform Movement has not ceded any part of our people’s heritage to other Jewish movements and it encourages Reform Jews to take the totality of our tradition seriously.”⁵⁴ Menitoff clarifies that the Reform Jew is invited to participate in the entire Jewish tradition; nothing is off limits. He states:

Our greatgrandparents and grandparents, being firmly rooted in Judaism, focused their energy on becoming as American as apple pie. As their heirs, our lifestyle is testimony to their success...Our challenge has, during the past quarter of a century been to become more at home in our Judaism. In an atmosphere of minimal anti-Semitism and maximal acceptance, we have engaged in a process of discovering our Jewish roots. As a result, Reform Jews have become more open to traditional practices. We are, in fact, a more traditionally oriented movement than we were twenty-five years ago.⁵⁵

From these debates between the rabbis themselves, it is clear that there was not one opinion regarding Reform Judaism’s relationship with tradition, ritual, and *mitzvot*. Still, rabbis disagreeing over how Jews should live out their Judaism is not a new concept. Our Reform rabbis debated, disagreed, and questioned each other just as rabbis long ago. This should not be seen as a reflection on Reform Judaism, but instead as evidence that our movement inspires a

⁵³ CCAR Journal Winter 2000 Menitoff, Paul J. “Pittsburgh Principles: A Continuing Process.” Page 13

⁵⁴ Ibid

⁵⁵ CCAR Journal Winter 2000 Menitoff 14

thought provoking Judaism that leaves us questioning and searching for the best way to live meaningful Jewish lives.

In the course of the movement's 200-year-old existence, many ritual *mitzvot* have disappeared from Reform Jewish practice, either because the movement's rabbinical institutions explicitly rejected them or because Reform Jews simply stopped observing them. Generations of Reform Jews were not exposed to these *mitzvot*, nor were they educated on the place of these *mitzvot* in Judaism. Although there has been a revival of the tallit used as a prayer shawl and the kippah, there are many other rituals, *mitzvot*, and customs that Reform Jews do not know about, or that they believe are reserved for Orthodox Jews.

I believe that the renewed emphasis in Reform Judaism on ritual *mitzvot* is a positive development, and I seek to build on it. This thesis considers the possibility that Reform Jews might recover more *mitzvot* that are still deemed "Orthodox." I will contribute toward constructing a rationale for their observance by Reform Jews. Through writing this thesis, I strive to help make Reform Judaism a place where Jews will be more encouraged to experiment with and perform *mitzvot*.

Richard Levy argues that the Pittsburgh Principles brought freedom to Reform Jews. He states, "The Pittsburgh Platform of 1885 limited our freedom—it ruled that many *mitzvot* were off-limits to Reform Jews. The new document, by affirming our commitment to study all of the *mitzvot*, frees each of us to respond to each *mitzvah* as it calls to us. In that sense, we may rightly call the 1999 Pittsburgh Principles a declaration of religious freedom for Reform Jews."⁵⁶ If the 1999 Pittsburgh Principles was a declaration of religious freedom for Reform Jews, then I believe that it is the responsibility of clergy and Jewish educators to provide congregants with the resources, education, and knowledge to experiment with *mitzvot*. If Reform Jews are not

⁵⁶ Levy, *A Vision of Holiness* Page 12

exposed to the vast array of rituals and *mitzvot* that they are “free” to grapple with, then there is no freedom to choose.

Many Reform Jews are unaware and uneducated on the *mitzvot* that they may feel called to perform, if they knew that these *mitzvot* existed. For example, growing up in my Reform synagogue, I never observed the *mitzvah* of wrapping tefillin. Because I never learned about it or witnessed it happening, I did not have that freedom in choosing if it was meaningful for me. There are synagogues where clergy and Jewish educators do not teach ritual *mitzvot* such as tallit katan, tefillin, and the *n'tilat yadayim* handwashing benediction.

Although the CCAR has published books that educate Reform Jews on these rituals, traditions, and *mitzvot*, ritual *mitzvot* are intentionally or unintentionally left out of the curriculum; Reform Jews grow up believing that these rituals are foreign, Orthodox, or strange because they are not rituals that these Jews grew up learning about. If clergy and Jewish educators desire to promote or expand on the most recent Pittsburgh Principles that declares religious freedom for Reform Jews, they must expose their congregants to rituals and traditions that have been abandoned in the past. In writing this thesis, I focus on tallit katan, tefillin, and the *n'tilat yadayim* benediction, all *mitzvot* that I did not learn about at the synagogue where I grew up—all rituals that I have not seen being encouraged or taught about in the Reform synagogues I have visited as an adult.

Lack of education and exposure are not the only reasons that Reform Jews do not all feel comfortable experimenting with ritual *mitzvot*. Even with education and exposure, Reform Jews might feel that observing ritual *mitzvot* conflicts with modernity. Niles E. Goldstein writes:

As products of modernity, Jews today have been raised with a worldview that polarizes reason and faith. We've been taught that only those beliefs or behaviors that can be justified through rational argument are true, that non-provable doctrines such as

messianism and non-rational actions such as laying Tefillin are somehow primitive or superfluous.⁵⁷

We must help congregants to see that rituals are meaningful even in a world where we strive to think rationally. One may be a rational person who chooses to engage in ritual for a plethora of reasons. Scientists and mathematicians may find meaning in wrapping tefillin. Wrapping tefillin may make them feel connected to their ancestors—it may bring them peace or inspire them to be more compassionate, kind, and faithful people when they learn about the prayer inside the tefillin boxes. One may be rational-minded and faith-hearted at the same time.

Some congregants may believe that only ethical *mitzvot* are binding. They may believe that a *mitzvah* is a good deed and as long as they act as ethical, loving people, then they are fulfilling their Judaism. They may believe that they do not need outdated rituals and traditions that do not help people suffering in the world. But observing ritual *mitzvot* may lead to and inspire ethical behavior. *The rituals serve as a catalyst for tikkun olam.* The introduction of *Gates of Mitzvah* states:

It was argued that the ethical commandments were valid eternally and thus binding upon Jews of every generation. The ritual commandments however, were considered linked to particular experiences or circumstances, and therefore they were considered optional or even superfluous. But this dichotomy is often arbitrary, for ethical resolve and ritual expression, intention and act, are in fact closely interlinked, as are reason and feeling. Ritual, as the vehicle for confronting God and Jewish history, can shape and stimulate one's ethical impulses. Therefore, the ancient advice is still valid: the very act of doing a *mitzvah* may lead one to know the heart of the matter.⁵⁸

Doing one *mitzvah* may lead to doing another *mitzvah*. For example, wearing tzitzit may serve as a reminder to observe other commandments, including ethical commandments such as helping the stranger or giving tzedakah. The ritual reminds us that we are not simply doing these ethical

⁵⁷ Goldstein and Knobel, *Duties of the Soul*. Goldstein, "Brushes with the Sacred: An Experiential Approach to Mitzvah." Page 95

⁵⁸ Maslin, *Gates of Mitzvah* Page 3

acts because we feel like being good people on one specific day, but because as Jews we dedicate our lives to serving God by doing *mitzvot* every day. Arnold Jacob Wolf writes:

Our task, as I see it, is to ritualize the ethical commandments and to ethicize the ritual commandments...If you ritualize ethics, then you are not just a Jew who does good; you are a Jew who has to do good. That's why the *mitzvah* is always better than the person who chooses. You are not someone who sometimes, or even often, or even usually does the right thing; you are someone who is habituated.⁵⁹

As rituals become habits, so will the ethical behavior we attach to them. We may use the value and power of tradition and ritual to increase ethical behavior and holy living.

Some Reform Jews may feel that observing *mitzvot* is inconvenient. It may seem hard to fit into our schedule in the beginning if it is not part of routine. For example, wrapping tefillin in the morning might be inconvenient for someone based on his or her work schedule. Maslin states, "The easy path is to do only that which is convenient, but living Jewishly is not and has never been identical with convenience. A *mitzvah* which might be inconvenient and even awkward at first can, with patience and practice, take on deep personal significance and provide moments of sacred meeting."⁶⁰ Clergy and Jewish educators should encourage Reform Jews to have patience when experimenting with ritual because often it is not the first time we do a *mitzvah* or partake in Jewish ritual that we find meaning in it, or that it changes our lives. Overtime we might notice change, but first we may need to make the *mitzvah* a habit that grounds us. The first time a congregant wraps tefillin, he or she might not feel "magically" connected to God or the Jewish people. But rituals are not magic. They do not instantly transform people, but when done consistently, they may influence the way we feel and the way we live our lives.

⁵⁹ Knobel and Goldstein. Duties of the Soul. Wolf, Arnold J. "Back to the Future: On Discovering Commandments." Page 19

⁶⁰ Maslin, *Gates of Mitzvah* Page 5

People seek calm—people seek a time out from the stresses of everyday life—a chance to press pause—a moment to achieve perspective. Ritual *mitzvot* have the potential to be a vehicle for achieving this peace. When we perform ritual *mitzvot*, we press pause—we take a moment to zoom out of our problems, concerns, and worries. We take a moment to remember that we are part of a community and a People much bigger and greater than ourselves. We take a moment to express gratitude for the blessings in our lives. We need these kinds of moments—we are desperate for them. Roland Gittelsohn states:

Human nature is such that we need to express our emotions and ideals with our whole bodies. Not just our tongues. We need also to be visually and kinetically reminded of our noblest values and stimulated to pursue them. As otherwise lonely and frightened individuals, we need common practices and observances which bind us into meaningful and supportive groups. All of which adds up to the fact that we need ritual as something more than social luxury or convenience. For us as Reform Jews, a particular ritual may not be *mitzvah*. But the need for a pattern of such rituals, this—because it grows out of and satisfies our very basic nature as human beings- is *mitzvah*. And this we desperately need.⁶¹

Therefore, whether a Reform Jew believes in a commanding God or not, whether a Reform Jew believes that God had anything to do with the creation of ritual, a Reform Jew still may find meaning and transformation in the power of Jewish ritual—the power of pattern—the comfort of connection to a community and a history.

Another reason Reform Jews might pass up the chance to grapple with ritual *mitzvot* is because the idea of God as “commander” is troubling to many liberal Jews. Reform Jews may not feel initially connected to or commanded by God, but they may find meaning in being part of a people who overtime has connected to God in a deep way. Herman Schaalman explains the issues that Reform Jews have with God as commander. If we do not necessarily believe that God wrote the Torah verbatim and commanded us to observe *mitzvot*, what do we do with *mitzvot*? He states, “Why do we do *mitzvot*? Why should we do *mitzvot*? Because we are the descendants

⁶¹ Maslin, *Gates of Mitzvah*. Mitzvah Without Miracles by Roland B Gittelsohn Page 108

of those ancestors, the children of those parents who said at Sinai: “Na-aseh ve-nishmah- we shall do and we shall hear” Exodus 24:7...”⁶² David Polish gives another argument for observing *mitzvot* as liberal Jews and states:

Mitzvot are related to historic experiences in which the Jewish people sought to apprehend God’s nature and his will. They are to be observed not because they are divine fiats. But because something happened between God and Israel, and the same something continues to happen I every age and land...*mitzvot* sanctify the Jewish people because they mark points of encounter by the Jewish people with God. They are enjoined upon us, because through them we perpetuate memories of the encounters and are sustained by those memories...*Mitzvot* have emerged from the womb of Jewish history, from a series of sacred encounters between God and Israel. When a Jew performs one of the many life-acts known as *mitzvot* to remind himself of one of those moments of encounter, what was only episodic becomes epochal, and what was only a moment in Jewish history becomes eternal in Jewish life.”⁶³

Observing *mitzvot* may help Reform Jews to be more disciplined. Again it takes us back to Sinai, to Abraham, to our ancestors and reminds us that the world is much greater than our current life, that we are part of something much bigger and more meaningful. We do not need to take every word of Torah as the literal word or command of God in order to take it seriously and find deep inspiration in the way that our People connected to the divine over time—the way that their deep love for God inspired them to make themselves a holy people who seek justice in a broken world.

Polish explains the benefits of disciplined observance and the way that it connects Jews to the Jewish People bringing meaning to his or her life.

The self-imposed discipline of observance, to which the Jew submits as a sacred *mitzvah*, this becomes a symbol of the commitment of his faith and of his people to the unending struggle to enthrone God in the world within the bounds of human history. It is also a sign of the Jew’s commitment to the covenant, which each generation renews, and which each Jew reenacts in the regiment of Jewish living. By this discipline he not only renews the covenant, but he chooses to renew it. He transcends time and stands with Abraham

⁶² Maslin, *Gates of Mitzvah*. Schaalman, Herman. “The Divine Authority of the Mitzvah.” Page 100

⁶³ Maslin, *Gates of Mitzvah* Polish, David. “History as the Source of the Mitzvah.” Page 104

and with our ancestors at Sinai, to play his part in helping to perfect the world under the kingdom of God.”⁶⁴

Reform Jews may be inspired by the fact that rituals, traditions, and *mitzvot* helped keep our people together over time.

Over the centuries our people were persecuted and tortured, but still, Jews preserved tradition even during the hardest times. Jews practiced their Judaism in secret, lighting Shabbat candles and performing rituals in private, passing this religion down to the children even during the scariest times. Polish states:

Finally, the *mitzvah* enabled the Jewish people to live creatively in cataclysmic times. *Mitzvah* was the defiant response of the Jew to effort at crushing his spirit. It helped preserve him as a person and it helped preserve the people...It would be an overstatement to say that *mitzvot* will guarantee our survival, but it can be said that our individual and collective decision to persist as Jews will be aided by cultivating a life of *mitzvot*.”
When we perform ritual *mitzvot*, we think about our ancestors who struggled to hold onto tradition, who even during the worst times found these rituals and traditions moving and important enough to hold onto. They lived their lives by these traditions, and when we bring them into our lives we feel part of something. We think about their perseverance and resilience through hard times, and we become inspired to bring that same perseverance and resilience through hard times into our own lives today.

Schaalman states, “The number of *mitzvot* I thus choose to perform is not nearly as important as is the fullness of my awareness and intention, for it is likely that in time I may hear the authentic “voice of God” in many more *mitzvot* than at first I could have imagined”⁶⁵ If clergy and Jewish educators can encourage Jews to find a few *mitzvot* that speak to them, that they may add into their routine and use to live more meaningful, intention-filled lives, then this is a success. It all begins with one *mitzvah*. *Mitzvot* may seem overwhelming or daunting when we

⁶⁴ Ibid

⁶⁵Maslin. *Gates of Mitzvah*. “The Divine Authority of the Mitzvah.” Page 100

think of them as six hundred and thirteen, but if we just grapple with one at a time, we may find some that truly transform us and bring holiness into our lives.

Encouraging Jews to grapple with ritual and tradition is a difficult task. Goldstein asks, “How, then, do we persuade Jews to practice Jewish rituals? Not by arguing that they come from God, but that they can lead to God. The *mitzvot* are our people’s response to God’s reality, our link between the human and the divine, the finite and the infinite. They are our gateway to inner redemption.”⁶⁶ Whether clergy or Jewish educators themselves feel inspired by ritual *mitzvot* or not, they have a responsibility to share these traditions with fellow Jews who might be inspired and transformed by these *mitzvot*—who might form a deeper connection to God and spirituality than they had ever imagined. I believe that performing ritual *mitzvot* has the power to deepen our spirituality, to bring holiness into our lives, and to connect us to our ancestors—I look forward to learning more about tefillin, tallit katan, and the *n’tilat yadayim* benediction so that my life may be transformed, so that I may share these *mitzvot* with my congregants, and so that I honor the tenants of Reform Judaism by educating myself and grappling with a *mitzvah* before deciding whether or not I feel called to perform it consistently.

⁶⁶ Goldstein and Knobel, *Duties of the Soul*. Goldstein, “Brushes with the Sacred: An Experiential Approach to Mitzvah.” Page 107

CHAPTER 2

The Origin, Purpose, and Spiritual Meaning of Wrapping Tefillin

I grew up without any education on tefillin. As far as I know, the educators at my synagogue chose not to include it in the religious school curriculum. My synagogue did not have a weekday morning minyan where I could have gone and seen Jews praying with tefillin. I did not see any Jew wrap tefillin until my El Al flight to Israel on birthright when I was 21 years old.

Then while living in Israel and participating in a MASA program called OTZMA, I tried wrapping tefillin for the first time. One of the men in my program was kind enough to teach me how to wrap tefillin. Wrapping tefillin did not feel Jewish to me because I had never learned about it in synagogue. It felt foreign. While I enjoyed trying something new and engaging in a

ritual that I knew my ancestors had taken part in, the foreignness of it turned me off. I felt proud of my Reform Judaism, and it did not seem to fit into that box.

After spending more time in Israel, I began to associate wrapping tefillin with Orthodoxy as I saw Orthodox Lubavitcher Jews on the streets of Israel encouraging men to wrap tefillin. One day in Jerusalem, I asked a man offering tefillin if I could wrap tefillin; he laughed at me. I told him I was serious and wanted to wrap tefillin, and he said he could not let a woman do that. My Reform synagogue did not encourage me to wrap tefillin, and Orthodox Jews believed I was mocking them for wanting to try it. These experiences distanced me from the *mitzvah*; I felt uninvited to wrap tefillin as far as both denominations of Judaism were concerned.

Finally, I tried wrapping tefillin at Hebrew Union College in Jerusalem. I was inspired by a Reform environment where men and women wrapped tefillin together and all were invited to try the *mitzvah*. I tried wrapping tefillin once, but still, I felt turned off. My relationship with God is warm, uplifting, and freeing. But when I wrapped tefillin, I became hyper-focused on the tightness of the straps on my arm; this tightness seemed to be the antithesis of my relationship with God. As part of this thesis, I wanted to learn more about the beauty of wrapping tefillin because this *mitzvah* is something I do not feel finished with. I have only tried it twice, and therefore I believe I have more wrestling to do with this *mitzvah*. I also want to have the resources to share with my congregants so that they may choose whether or not they feel called to perform this *mitzvah*. Wrapping tefillin is not Orthodox—wrapping tefillin is Jewish; Reform Jews should feel just as invited to experience its holiness as any other Jew.

Exodus 13:9 states, “And this shall serve you as a sign on your hand and as a reminder on your forehead—in order that the Teaching of Adonai may be in your mouth—that with a mighty hand, Adonai freed you from Egypt.” Deuteronomy 6:8 states, “Bind them as a sign on your

hand and let them serve as a symbol on your forehead.” Both of these texts led Jews to wrap tefillin. The *mitzvah* of wrapping tefillin does not come straight from the literal written Torah itself. These words from written Torah inspired rabbis to create a ritual that would allow us to bind these words upon our hand and keep them between our eyes; this ritual is the wrapping of tefillin. This illustrates the authority of the rabbis and of Oral Torah; their interpretation of a commandment becomes the commandment itself. Still, the Rabbis themselves understood the practice as *Halakhah l’Moshe miSinai*, an ancient tradition that they received that defines the “sign” and “frontlets/reminder” of the Biblical verses. “There are ten requirements for tefillin. All of them are halachot transmitted to Moses on Mount Sinai. It is necessary to fulfill them all. Therefore, if one made any changes with regard to them, the tefillin are not fit for use.”⁶⁷

Sefer HaChinuch, ascribed to Rabbi Aaron haLevi of Barcelona first published in Venice in 1523 is a work dedicated to giving the explanation of every single *mitzvah* and informing readers of where these *mitzvot* come from in Torah.⁶⁸ *Sefer Hachinuch* explains that the oral tradition teaches that Jews should bind the law of Torah onto their hand; this specifically includes four sections of Torah. When these are placed in black leather boxes and tied by straps, they are called tefillin.⁶⁹ These four portions of Torah are written on a sheet of parchment rolled into the form of a Torah scroll. It is placed inside a container of leather and straps extend from the boxes so that one may bind it to the left arm. After it is bound to the arm, it lies against the heart. In this way, we fulfill the *mitzvah*, “And these words shall be upon your heart.” The scrolls inside the tefillin are written by a *sofer*, a trained scribe. The parchment, boxes, and the straps

⁶⁷ Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhos T’filin* 1:3

⁶⁸ Rabbi Aaron haLevi. *Sefer HaChinuch*. Jerusalem/New York Feldheim Publishers 1978 Edition Volume 1

⁶⁹ *Sefer HaChinuch* Page 269 Volume 4 # 421 Deuteronomy 3:23-7:11

comes from a kosher animal. The head piece has a letter Shin on both sides, which stands for Shaddai, one name for God.

When Abraham binds Isaac on Mount Moriah, the angel of God saves Isaac's life; our people learn that it is not God's will for us to sacrifice our children. We do not bind people; instead, we bind words of Torah to ourselves as we connect to God—we are reminded of the covenant to which we are bound. Maimonides writes, "Three commandments in the Torah are designed by the term of a sign between the creator and Israel his people: circumcisions, the sabbath, and the tefillin. Phylacteries are not to be worn on the Sabbath or on holy days, those days constituting such a sign in themselves."⁷⁰ This explains why Jews do not wrap tefillin on Shabbat or festivals.

Because many Reform Jews only pray in synagogue on Shabbat and holidays, they do not experience the wrapping of tefillin, and therefore clergy and Jewish educators need to find other times to teach the *mitzvah* of tefillin so that these Jews become aware of it. These may include religious school or an adult education session. Before b'nei *mitzvah* would be a great time to teach parents and children about tefillin; once children have their bar or bat *mitzvah* ceremony, they may begin experimenting with tefillin and learning whether or not at this point in their lives it brings them spiritual meaning. Some parents spend large amounts of money on parties for their children's bar or bat *mitzvah*; perhaps clergy could encourage parents who have the financial resources to spend some of this "party" money on a set of tefillin that a Jewish child will keep all of his or her life.

Learning about wrapping tefiliin in an educational setting is not the same as experiencing it in tefillah and seeing whether or not it may uplift a person spiritually. Another way Reform

⁷⁰ Maimonides, *The Commandments: Sefer Ha-Mitzvot of Maimonides* Volume 1 #12 Page 18-21

clergy could expose congregants to tefillin would be for Reform clergy to lead a morning minyan, even one day of the week where tefillin is offered for people to try wrapping. This way, Reform Jews may experience this *mitzvah*.

Another setting for Reform Jews to grapple with tefillin is at URJ summer camps. URJ camps are a place where Jewish journeys are launched for children and young adults—they are a place where Jewish youth form strong Jewish identities. If these children were exposed to wrapping tefillin at camp, then the *mitzvah* would not be so foreign to them later in life when they visit a Conservative or Orthodox setting. They would feel more ownership over the *mitzvah* if they had childhood memories associated with it such as watching their favorite counselor they admire or a faculty member wrapping tefillin. There could even be art activities where children create their own “creative” tefillin as they learn about the process of what goes into tefillin and what the different sections mean.

Because these passages contain the verses that mention the *mitzvah* that the Rabbis understand as *tefillin*, the four sections included in tefillin include: Exodus 13: 1-10, Exodus 13:11-16, Deuteronomy 6: 4-9, and Deuteronomy 11: 13-21. I believe that Reform Jews who may not necessarily feel “commanded” by God to wrap tefillin or who do not read Torah as the literal word of God may still find deep meaning in these chosen sections; these sections are worth pondering on a daily basis as a form of inspiration and spiritual renewal and tefillin allows us to do this.

Section 1

The LORD said to Moses, ²“Consecrate to me every firstborn male. The first offspring of every womb among the Israelites belongs to me, whether human or animal. Then Moses said to the people, “Commemorate this day, the day you came out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery, because the LORD brought you out of it with a mighty hand. Eat nothing containing yeast. ⁴ Today, in the month of Aviv, you are leaving. ⁵ When the LORD brings you into the land of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Hivites and Jebusites—the land

he swore to your ancestors to give you, a land flowing with milk and honey—you are to observe this ceremony in this month: ⁶For seven days eat bread made without yeast and on the seventh day hold a festival to the LORD. ⁷Eat unleavened bread during those seven days; nothing with yeast in it is to be seen among you, nor shall any yeast be seen anywhere within your borders. ⁸On that day tell your son, ‘I do this because of what the LORD did for me when I came out of Egypt.’ ⁹This observance will be for you like a sign on your hand and a reminder on your forehead that this law of the LORD is to be on your lips. For the LORD brought you out of Egypt with his mighty hand. ¹⁰You must keep this ordinance at the appointed time year after year.

This first section reminds our people that we were slaves in Egypt, but now we are free. We must remember that God brought us out of Egypt, that we are no longer enslaved, but we are servants of God and that we have a sacred obligation to serve our creator. Reform Jews who may not necessarily feel “commanded” to wear tefillin may still find deep meaning in this theme of transitioning from being slaves to being a free people. Being reminded every single day of our freedom urges us to be responsible and helpful to others who are not free. This ritual may inspire ethical *mitzvot* because if we consistently wrap tefillin, then we may consistently reflect on our responsibility to help others who are enslaved the way we once were. Even Reform Jews who consider themselves ethical, moral people still could benefit from reminders to help others and live a holy life; ritual is one way to remind ourselves on a consistent basis.

This section also may inspire Jews suffering through hard times; they can wrap tefillin and find faith in a caring God who wants them to be free, a God who can help them achieve freedom when they may feel trapped in a horrible, painful situation. If possible, they may choose to serve God instead of whatever negative force they feel that they are a slave to in this world. There have been stories that during the Holocaust, Jews would sneak tefillin into Nazi concentration camps and put them on each morning.⁷¹ Wrapping tefillin can bring people comfort and be a grounding presence in their lives during the worst of times. The idea that God

⁷¹ “Jewish Concepts: Tefillin.” Jewish Virtual Library. <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/tefillin>

is watchful and caring with us may inspire Reform Jews to find God during times of struggle and pain, that God is still there watching and caring in whatever way that means to someone, that God is there with us.

Imagine a Reform Jew who is in the hospital and suffering through an illness. Tefillin could be a ritual that this Jew performs in the morning to remind them that God is watchful and caring for them even through this difficult time—that just as our people were brought out of Egypt, this person too can be brought peace, healing, and freedom by connecting with God during such an awful time, by feeling God’s holiness and presence around them.

The themes in this section are applicable to modern day life, and they can inspire us to live meaningful lives when we wrap tefillin consistently and remember that our people made it through slavery, and we too can make it through hard times. The mention of these other groups of people reminds us that in a world where we are assimilated to modern culture, we still are part of a special unique people different from others.

Section 2

¹¹ “After the LORD brings you into the land of the Canaanites and gives it to you, as he promised on oath to you and your ancestors, ¹² you are to give over to the LORD the first offspring of every womb. All the firstborn males of your livestock belong to the LORD. ¹³ Redeem with a lamb every firstborn donkey, but if you do not redeem it, break its neck. Redeem every firstborn among your sons.

¹⁴ “In days to come, when your son asks you, ‘What does this mean?’ say to him, ‘With a mighty hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.’ ¹⁵ When Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, the LORD killed the firstborn of both people and animals in Egypt. This is why I sacrifice to the LORD the first male offspring of every womb and redeem each of my firstborn sons.’ ¹⁶ And it will be like a sign on your hand and a symbol on your forehead that the LORD brought us out of Egypt with his mighty hand.”

This section reminds us to pass our tradition and story down to our children. Our children will ask us what all of this means and it is our responsibility to pass it down just as our ancestors have preserved it and passed it down to us. Again, we are reminded that we were slaves in Egypt but

now we are a free people and we have responsibility to serve God in this world. It is important to acknowledge that many Reform Jews may not feel connected to this depiction of God here as killing the firstborn and requesting sacrifices of the first male offspring. They do not have to feel connected to every word here literally in order to feel meaning when wrapping tefillin.

Section 3

⁴ Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. ⁵ Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. ⁶ These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. ⁷ Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. ⁸ Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. ⁹ Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

This section contains one of the central prayers of our people, the *Sh'ma*. We are reminded to love God with everything in us; we see that *mitzvot* are to be “upon our hearts.” *Mitzvah* should be something we carry with us each day that inspire us towards holy living. God “gives” us commandments.

Reform Jews may choose to think of *mitzvot* as gifts from God, gifts from our ancestors' relationship with the divine—gifts that we may choose to open each day that may uplift us and inspire us to be holier people. Again, we are reminded that we are responsible to pass these down to our children and teach them the story of our people. We are reminded to keep our homes holy places filled with *mitzvot*, and to keep these *mitzvot* with us wherever we are, no matter what we are doing. We have a guidebook for how to live our lives, we have an instructional manual for holiness; when life is frightening, challenging, and chaotic, *mitzvot* like tefillin ground us.

Section 4

¹³ So if you faithfully obey the commands I am giving you today—to love the LORD your God and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul— ¹⁴ then I will send rain on your land in its season, both autumn and spring rains, so that you may gather in your grain, new wine and olive oil. ¹⁵ I will provide grass in the fields for your cattle, and

you will eat and be satisfied. ¹⁶ Be careful, or you will be enticed to turn away and worship other gods and bow down to them. ¹⁷ Then the LORD's anger will burn against you, and he will shut up the heavens so that it will not rain and the ground will yield no produce, and you will soon perish from the good land the LORD is giving you. ¹⁸ Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds; tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. ¹⁹ Teach them to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. ²⁰ Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates, ²¹ so that your days and the days of your children may be many in the land the LORD swore to give your ancestors, as many as the days that the heavens are above the earth."

Now, a Reform Jew might say, "Well I don't believe that God rewards us with rain, or punishes us the way this part of Torah implies. This makes no sense rationally." Still there is meaning here. If we read this metaphorically, we think about the rewards we do reap by being good people and by consistently doing *mitzvot*. For example, a Jew who consistently gives *tzedakah* may experience the reward that comes with helping others and showing compassion to the needy. We think about the ways we do suffer when we face the consequences of sin, of failing to live up to our potential and serve God by making our lives a blessing.

We also think about the strong connection our ancestors had to God; they believed that God controlled everything and rewarded or punished them for all of their actions. As Reform Jews who might not have this theology, we can still be inspired at how much our ancestors turned to God in desperation during times when they did not have what they needed. These four sections of Torah all contain themes that Reform Jews may be inspired and grounded by each day that they wrap tefillin.

Sefer HaChinuch explains:

The reason why these four parts were chosen above the other sections of the Torah is that these contain the acceptance of the kingship of heaven and the oneness of the eternal lord, and the theme of the exodus from Egypt which compels a belief in the creation of the world as a new entity, and the watchful care and regulation of the lower earthy realm by the eternal lord and these are the foundations of the Jewish religion.⁷²

⁷² *Sefer HaChinuch* Volume 4 Page 281

The themes of exodus and creation are relevant and meaningful to liberal Jews even if they do not accept the kingship of heaven idea. This illustrates that wrapping tefillin is not geared toward Orthodox Jews specifically; this is a mitzvah that all Jews may find meaning in because the themes of the texts inside tefillin relate to all Jews.

In today's society, mindfulness has become attractive to people. People search for ways to be mindful, calm, grounded, and at peace. The ritual of wrapping tefillin can help Reform Jews to achieve this "mindfulness" through the roots of their heritage. It is a way for them to unite their minds and their hearts. Rabbi Aharon HaLevi explains the meaning behind connecting words of Torah to both our mind and heart. He states:

Therefore we were commanded to set these foundations of our faith every day between our eyes and on the tablet of our heart. For these two organs, say the learned scholars of nature, are the seat of intelligence. And by setting these objects on them for a remembrance, we will be strengthened in our faith by them, and will augment our remembrance of the ways of the Eternal Lord, so meriting to achieve eternal life."⁷³

Intelligence and faith can work together. Being rational and faithful at the same time is possible; we do not need to choose one over the other. For all of the Reform Jews who have trouble bringing together their scientific and rational knowledge with their faith, here we see that both can live side by side. Maimonides explains, "The position of the phylacteries against the heart, symbolizing the seat of the passions and emotions, and against the brain, symbolizing the diverse faculties and senses of the soul, indicates the worshipper's desire for complete self-subjugation to the service of the LORD."⁷⁴ In our daily lives we may struggle to balance what we know is rational and logical with our emotions and this ritual incorporates both our mind and our heart, allowing us to focus on this lifelong goal.

⁷³ Ibid

⁷⁴ Maimonides: The Commandments Volume 1 #12 "The Phylactery of the Head" Page 19

When Jews wrap tefillin, they are reminded of the words of Hosea. Consistently reciting these words may be uplifting and help Jews form a meaningful relationship with God that leaves them feeling comforted, loved, and grounded. Maimonides writes:

Seven rings symbolizing the seven branches of the candlestick are coiled in a descending spiral around the forearm, and three rings symbolic of Israel's spiritual betrothal to the lord are wound around the middle finger, the ensuing ring formations around the back and palm of the hand culminating once again in the name Shaddai. The following verses are recited on completing the intricate arrangement of rings: And I will betroth thee unto me forever; yeah, I will betroth thee unto me in righteousness, and in justice, and in loving-kindness, and in compassion. And I will betroth thee unto me in faithfulness; and thou shalt know the lord (Hosea II 21-2).⁷⁵

The idea of “betrothal unto me forever” “betrothal in righteousness, and in justice, and in lovingkindness, and in compassion...” these are tenants of Reform Judaism! Doing this *mitzvah* reminds Reform Jews of our foundation and our core values as Jews. Righteousness, justice, lovingkindness, and compassion! Throughout all of the platforms and principles these ideas have always been part of our mission as Reform Jews; this *mitzvah* reminds us of them in a tangible way. This is an activity that Reform Jews can do daily to remind themselves of the tenants of our people and the ways to live a holy life. Although some of our Reform Jewish leaders of the past urged that the ethical *mitzvot* are the only *mitzvot* that are binding, here is an example of a *mitzvah* that can inspire us to live up to those ethical *mitzvot*. Wrapping tefillin can be the catalyst.

Wrapping tefillin may help Reform Jews stay focused on being good, holy people without falling into the forces of negativity in the world, without making poor life choices that will hinder them from holy living and push them toward sin. “Great is the sanctity of the tefillin...as long as the tefillin are upon his head and his arm, a man is meek and in fear of heaven, being drawn neither into laughter no into idle talk—shunning all thoughts of evil, and

⁷⁵ Maimonides: The Commandments Volume 1 # 13 “The Phylactery of the Arm” Page 20

rather directing his heart unto words of truth and righteousness.”⁷⁶ While Reform Jews may feel disconnected from the idea of being meek and fearing heaven as well as having “evil” thoughts, they may feel connected to the idea of shutting out negative thoughts and energy and directing themselves toward truth and righteousness so that we may live meaningful lives and dedicate themselves toward helping others.

Wearing tefillin can help make us more disciplined, that we do not simply follow lust and act impulsively. When our yetzer ha-ra leads us toward doing something negative, we are able to think about what is right, and follow our yetzer tov. *Sefer HaChinuch* teaches:

At the root of the precept lies the reason that a man, being a creature of physical matter, would be drawn perforce after desires—for such is the nature of physical matter, to seek whatever is gratifying and pleasurable to it, as a horse, as a mule, without understanding (Psalms 32:9)—were it not that the spirit with which God graced him prevents him, as it is able to, from sin. Yet since it (the spirit) dwells in its (physical matter’s) region, which is the earth, and is far away from its own region, heaven, it cannot prevail against it (physical matter); its power overcomes it constantly. It (the spirit) therefore needs, in any event, many guards to protect it from its evil neighbor, for it (physical matter) might rise up against it and kill it, since it (the spirit) is in region and under its hand.⁷⁷

When we wrap tefillin, we feel the tightness, the binding. This tightness may remind us that we are bound by God to be good, ethical people working toward tikkun olam—that we have a sacred responsibility. Our sages believed that wearing tefillin would help protect the spirit from physical urges. *Sefer HaChinuch* states:

Yet the omnipresent God wished to make us, the people of holiness, virtuous; and so He commanded us to position mighty guards around it (the spirit)... t’fillin on our hands and heads—all to keep us remembering, in order that we may stay our hand from wrongdoing, and shall not go straying after our eyes and after the inclination of our heart’s thoughts.⁷⁸

This *mitzvah* may lead the Jewish people to be disciplined, to not simply act on every impulse and urge that may be selfish or negative—we are God’s people and have a mission. As we stray

⁷⁶ Ibid

⁷⁷ *Sefer HaChinuch* Page 271 #269

⁷⁸ Ibid

from negative urges, this *mitzvah* may lead us toward ethical moral behavior, again, the kind of ethics and morals pushed by Reform Judaism's principles.

As a 2nd year rabbinical student, Rabbi Andreu Kahn⁷⁹ created a project called Seker where he worked to expose the public at large, both Jewish and non-Jewish, to Reform Judaism's connection and approach to tradition. By being publicly available in Washington Square Park, Union Square Park, and Prospect Park, he offered individuals of all backgrounds and classifications experiential Judaism on their own terms.

He states:

Rather than confrontationally pushing individuals to join in, or making use of guilt tactics, Seker has empowered individuals to learn about a new practice and then make their own choice. Being easily available without pushing people to take part has allowed those who are interested to gravitate towards the experience without feeling that they are being coerced, and those not interested to walk away having learned something new, as well as having had a positive experience.

He states, "By making t'fillin available for all people to wrap and try - men, women, Jews and non-Jews - Seker has allowed people to involve themselves in a traditional Jewish practice on their own terms." He tried to create learning moments by showing a pair of un-kosher t'fillin was available for people to investigate. The box of the head t'fillin was open, so that participants could see the *klafim*, the parchment inside. The Jews working the table would teach people about the relevance of *k'lafim*. He states, "Along with the initial public space experience, information has been made available via the website, www.sekernyc.org, to allow people to continue their investigation of Jewish tradition."

Kahn explains that he was discouraged from using tefillin as the basis for this project. He states, "All of the people I discussed the project with believed that t'fillin were the wrong choice,

⁷⁹ This information came from an email exchange between Rabbi Kahn and myself in November 2017. Although his 2015 blog expired, he sent me some of the blog posts. His project took place in May 2015.

the most common explanation being that Reform Jews do not tend to use t'fillin, and people would mistake us for being Orthodox. In truth, through feedback I garnered from participants via an email survey, some did believe us to be Modern Orthodox at first.”⁸⁰ This illustrates the way that many Reform educators and clergy believe that tefillin is not something that needs to be encouraged and that it may be seen as either obsolete or orthodox.

Kahn explains why he felt moved to choose tefillin after all. He states, “After many discussions about the issues facing the Reform movement, in particular the perception that we are an "inauthentic" movement, and also that we are getting out-outreached by Chabad. So, we figured, why not go out in public and offer people the experience of wrapping tefillin in the same way that Chabad does?”⁸¹

One of the more interesting encounters was a man from Cicero, Indiana. He approached us asking for where the bathroom was, then looked at the table with confusion and asked what we were doing. I explained to him what tefillin are, and his interest was piqued. I walked him through the process of wrapping them and saying the blessings. After he unwound the tefillin, he looked up at me and asked, "Wait, did you just pray with me?" I smiled and laughed a little and said, "Yeah, I guess I did!" His eyes lit up and he simply said, "Wow." ⁸²

Kahn created prayerful, moving moments with people through the use of tefillin. This *mitzvah* has the potential to bring people together, to pray, to learn, to think about tradition and its place in modernity. Kahn’s participants expressed some of the challenges of wrapping tefillin consistently. Some of them found it hard to do it every day, and they also found it to be hard to break the idea in their head that tefillin are for men. Katalena, one of the participants wrote to Kahn stating:

⁸⁰ Ibid

⁸¹ Ibid

⁸² Ibid

Hi! Thanks for the follow up. I told my husband about you, and I've been thinking about it on and off for a while, but I'm unsure if I can get into a daily routine, and I'm still not sure I can get past my own discomfort with something that was traditionally for men. I know, I know, but old habits. I've been thinking about getting a set of T'fillin to maybe try out, but I'm kind of clueless as to how to go about it. Any suggestions?"

While we can educate people on tefillin and give them meaningful experiences, it can be hard to break the notion in their head that tefillin are for men or that tefillin are orthodox. This is a reason for bringing tefillin to URJ camps. We can teach the next generation of Reform Jews that all *mitzvot* belong to them and that they are invited to grapple with all *mitzvot* the way they called to.

Kylynn, a 2nd year rabbinical student at Hebrew Union College does not take the Torah to be God's literal word, but she has formed a connection with tefillin that has transformed her life.⁸³

"I still have no idea, anthropologically speaking, how we got from words to little scrolls in leather boxes. I still have no idea what the blind beggar who was born knowing G-d has to do with tefillin but I do know that we know tefillin are right because we have received them from every generation that has come before us...Most importantly, I learned that the reason we put a quote about being slaves in Egypt is that since we are not slaves, we must willingly accept the yoke of G-d. For me that is the essence of informed choice. I do not believe that the Torah is the literal, word of G-d. Really everything that exists is the word of G-d and the Torah is just a tool box for us to create holiness. I engage with tefillin not because G-d told me to, the rabbis certainly told me not to, but because it is a portal for me to find divinity and holiness in prayer..."

This is the perfect example of a Jew who finds meaning in this *mitzvah*, who is uplifted and inspired by it, who connects to God through it, without feeling "commanded" by God to perform it. Reform Jews with all different theologies may have a positive, inspiring experience with wrapping tefillin if they were only invited to try.

Bailey, a 4th year rabbinical student at Hebrew Union College explains, "There's a meditative quality about wrapping tefillin, and there are words that go with it, connect you

⁸³ This conversation took place in December 2017 at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati.

directly to God, a spiritual closeness.”⁸⁴ Reform Jews who are interested in meditation may choose to grapple with *mitzvot* like tefillin because of the meditative quality Bailey speaks about. She explains how wrapping tefillin helps her prayer experience and states, “there are different moments in the service where tefillin are mentioned like in the v’ahavta, acknowledging that I literally have the words on my arm and on my forehead...I experience God from above as a hand on my head, having tefillin on my head is really reminds me of God being with me and above me and in me.”⁸⁵ Having the tefillin on one’s head may remind this person that God is above them, which can create a sense of peace with all of our lack of control in this world-it may serve as a reminder that there is a greater force above us that can bring us comfort and peace during painful, unpredictable times.

I am curious to investigate how Conservative congregations teach children and adults about tefillin. If Conservative clergy and educators are successful at teaching Jews about *mitzvot* like wrapping tefillin, Reform clergy and educators may learn from their strategies. Rabbi Jeremy Ruberg who works at New City Jewish Center in New York spoke of some of the ways that his shul teaches Jews about *mitzvot* such as tefillin.⁸⁶ He explained that tefillin is taught in the course of bar *mitzvah* training, “the notion of putting on tefillin is seen as a legal requirement for boys therefore in the course of their bar *mitzvah* studies it is commonplace for boys to be taught about tefillin, our synagogue does not teach it to girls, but we are open to it. We teach our boys in a special class how to do it, open up boxes, show them the straps, speak to the importance.” He explained that this occurs two or three times during a special four week b’nei

⁸⁴ This conversation took place in December 2017 at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati.

⁸⁵ Ibid

⁸⁶ I spoke with Rabbi Jeremy Ruberg from New City Jewish Center on the phone in January 2018 for half an hour about educating Jews on ritual mitzvot.

mitzvah workshop. While the girls are not taught how to wrap tefillin, if they show interest, they are certainly allowed to wrap.⁸⁷

Rabbi Ruberg explains that parents of b'nei *mitzvah* students are told that they need to buy their child tefillin at this time. Of course, if they cannot afford it, it is not mandatory; but if the family is in a good place financially and already spending money on a large celebration, this should not be too large of an expense when thrown in with everything else. In regard to parents purchasing tefillin he states, "Does everyone do it? The answer is no; but if we don't tell them they need to, they won't."⁸⁸

The bar *mitzvah* students at this synagogue are invited for an *aliyah*, a call to the *bimah* to recite the benediction before and after Torah is read publically, on Thursday morning before their bar *mitzvah*. Ruberg explains that this is the chance for them to wrap tefillin for the first time as part of the minyan. It is a sacred experience for them when the clergy helps them wrap tefillin, and they join the community during this time of sacred transition. Ruberg explains that girls at his synagogue are exposed to wrapping tefillin at Camp Ramah where he says there are workshops for boys and girls to make their own tefillin.⁸⁹ I would love for my future b'nei *mitzvah* students to have this experience. This would be difficult at most Reform synagogues without morning minyans. I hope to work at a congregation does is open to having a morning minyan, even one day of the week, and on this day, we could wrap tefillin and invite b'nei *mitzvah* students to wrap tefillin for the first time as part of a minyan. This feels idealistic, but it is a vision I would like to work toward.

Ruberg informed me that for adults there is "World Wide Wrap Day" where men and women from Conservative synagogues around the country all wrap tefillin as part of a large

⁸⁷ Ibid

⁸⁸ Ibid

⁸⁹ Ibid

event.⁹⁰ Jeremy Kasman the Director of Operations of the Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs explained the way this event works.⁹¹ He explained that on "World Wide Wrap Day," Jewish organizations around the world get together to daven and put on tefillin. They sign up and they tell the FJMC. The FJMC keeps track of how many people and organizations are wrapping tefillin. The idea is to promote the *mitzvah* and to educate Jews and non-Jews about wrapping tefillin. Synagogues will run programs where they invite congregants and individuals outside of their communities to wrap tefillin and to learn about wrapping tefillin. Religious school students are involved, brought into the minyan, and shown what tefillin are. Some religious schools have their students create their own pair of tefillin as an art project. Synagogues will take pictures, videos, and even create music videos they may share with other Jews all over the world. There have been connections made between synagogues in different countries; for example, a synagogue in Chile or Australia might skype with a synagogue in New York and they will all wrap tefillin together! For eighteen years the Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs has run this program.⁹²

The event always takes place on Super Bowl Sunday. This is for a couple of reasons. It is easy to remember the date, children will be at religious school on Sundays, and there are already parties, celebrations, and excitement! Kasman stated, "What do we do between the morning minyan and the super bowl party? We wrap tefillin! There's something to do!" He said that congregations will have super bowl parties and conveniently invite those attending the party to learn about wrapping tefillin! Kasman stated that last year, at least one Reform synagogue participated in "World Wide Wrap Day."⁹³

⁹⁰ Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs "World Wide Wrap Day." <https://www.fjmc.org/content/world-wide-wrap>

⁹¹ I spoke with Jeremy Kasman on the phone in January 2018 and he taught me about "World Wrap Day."

⁹² Ibid

⁹³ Ibid

I believe that Reform synagogues and organizations could be inspired, educated, and intrigued by tefillin if they choose to participate in “World Wrap Day.” Not only does it sound like fun, but it would be a great opportunity for Reform Jews to learn about wrapping tefillin. One issue would be obtaining enough tefillin for people to participate as most Reform Jews probably do not have their own pair of tefillin. But if a Reform synagogue has even a few pairs, Reform Jews could take turns wrapping. This might even be a great opportunity for Reform and Conservative Jews to get together and engage in dialogue. Even though Reform Jews have a different theology than Conservative Jews, wrapping tefillin is a *mitzvah* we are all invited to try as Jews and “World Wide Wrap Day” is open to everyone.

Still it is not easy to teach and promote these *mitzvot* even in a conservative synagogue. Rabbi Ruberg states, “it is the same issue for all of us...” in regard to encouraging congregants to grapple with these *mitzvot*. Even when they feel commanded, they still may not perform these *mitzvot* for many different reasons.⁹⁴

Rabbi Ruth Abusch-Magner’s thesis from 2006 focuses on reinvisioning tefillin in a feminist way. She writes about the ways she would recreate tefillin, making it more feminine and even changing the prayers inside.⁹⁵ I believe that when you re-create a ritual and change it drastically, it loses its authenticity—it loses the connection to ancestors because it is so far from what they were doing that it becomes something new. While it is great for Reform Jews to reclaim *mitzvot*, I am weary on how much these *mitzvot* are changed before they no longer resemble the original *mitzvot*.

⁹⁴ I spoke with Rabbi Jeremy Ruberg from New City Jewish Center on the phone in January 2018 for half an hour about educating Jews on ritual mitzvot.

⁹⁵ Abusch-Magder, Rabbi Ruth. <http://library.huc.edu/pdf/theses/Abusch-Magder%20Ruth%20Ann-NY-Rab-2006%20rdf.pdf> *Revisioning Tefillin from a Feminist-Reform Perspective*. February 2006.

Still, I had a conversation with my mentor at Jewish Family Service and she brought up the idea that she has been turned off by practicing rituals and *mitzvot* such as the handwashing ritual *n'tilat yadayim* because she was worried she would do it wrong or accidentally speak when you are not supposed to, and this would be blasphemous. She would rather do the ritual on her own privately and make it her own, doing it the way that feels comfortable with her and not worrying about doing it incorrectly. If the goal of the liberal Jew when performing a *mitzvah* is to connect with the divine, feel part of the Jewish People, and have an uplifting spiritual experience, then perhaps changing the *mitzvah* and making it his or her own is not such a negative thing. Perhaps more Reform Jews would be inclined to experience the beauty of ritual and *mitzvot* if they had more freedom with the *mitzvah* and could adapt it for their own purpose and goal.

Wrapping tefillin has much to offer for all Jews, including Reform Jews, and I hope to share this with my future congregation.

CHAPTER 3

The Origin, Purpose, and Spiritual Meaning of the Tallit Katan

As a second-year rabbinical student, I became deeply interested in spirituality, and I wanted to feel God's holiness in every moment—I still do. I loved wearing my tallit during t'filah in the chapel, but then when I went into the classroom, I noticed that this experience did not feel as spiritual, even though I was studying Jewish texts. With the hope of making life outside of the chapel feel more spiritual, I decided to start wearing my tallit all day. I would wear it to class—I would wear it outside on the front lawn. I wanted to feel my tzitzit all day long as I remembered to serve God and perform *mitzvot*. But this became inconvenient because wearing a big tallit is uncomfortable, and I also did not want my tallit to get dirty.

A classmate, Rabbi Leah Citrin, suggested I try a tallit katan; initially I was appalled by the idea because I associated it with Orthodox men. Although I am a feminist and at the time I wore a kippah, I still felt somewhat uncomfortable wearing something that seemed reserved for Orthodox men. Wearing a tallit katan did not feel Reform and it especially did not feel like it was for women. But the idea of it was exactly what I was searching for—a way to feel my tzitzit all day and to remember that God is with me even when I am not praying in the chapel.

Finally, I went to buy my first tallit katan; I journeyed to a store in the Orthodox neighborhood of Monsey, New York. When I purchased it, I was asking the man at the store about sizes and he asked me, “What size is your husband?” I said, “Oh, he’s about exactly the same size as me.” I did not want him to laugh at me or to refuse to sell it to me, which was my own assumption; I did not feel comfortable telling him it was for me after my negative experiences in Israel getting yelled at and laughed at for wanting to try tefillin and for wearing a kippah. I bought my first tallit katan, and I became very fond of wearing it.

Putting it on in the morning became a holy moment I looked forward to. It reminded me that this day was a gift—a chance for holiness—a chance to connect with God and live out my potential. Throughout the day, I would run my fingers along the tzitzit and remember my responsibility in this world to fulfill *mitzvot*, to make my life a blessing, and to remember that God is always with me, inside and outside of the chapel. In a religion where God is not visible to the human eye nor an idol we can hold, a ritual with a visual and tangible reminder of holiness is incredibly meaningful for me; I believe it can also be meaningful for other Reform Jews searching for a constant reminder of God in daily life.

Over time Reform Jews have become more comfortable and inspired by wearing tallitot in synagogue, but they have not embraced the *mitzvah* of tallit katan. I would like to encourage congregants to try tallit katan and to understand that this is not simply an Orthodox tradition, this is a *mitzvah* that they are invited to grapple with. I do not believe that this will actually catch on, but early reformers probably never expected Reform Jews to wear tallitot in synagogue; we cannot necessarily know which traditions will catch on for Reform Jews. Whether it will catch on or not, I want my congregants to know what it is, to be educated on it, and to have the chance to grapple with it and see if it uplifts them.

The *mitzvah* of *tzitzit* comes from Torah. Torah teaches us, "Speak to the children of Israel and say to them: They shall make for themselves fringes on the corners of their garments... And this shall be *tzitzit* for you, and when you see it, you will remember all the commandments of G-d, and perform them"⁹⁶ There is an emphasis on "seeing it." There is a power in the visual reminder; seeing reminds of our mission, it reminds us that we are the Jewish people with sacred responsibilities. "The *mitzvah* of *tzitzit* is in effect only during the day because the Torah employs the words "You shall see it."⁹⁷ It is as though our people need a visual reminder to be holy, to live meaningful lives, and to do the right thing.

Just as the study of Talmud Torah may lead a Jew to perform other *mitzvot*, the *mitzvah* of *tzitzit* serves as a reminder for all of the other *mitzvot*. "The *mitzvah* of *tzitzit* is considered one of the most important of all *mitzvot*. The rabbis equate this one *mitzvah* with the rest of the 613. Then the rabbis playing on the numerical value of letters arrive at the conclusion that the five letters of the Hebrew word *tzitzit* amount to 600, which with the eight threads and the five knots make a total of 613."⁹⁸ As we wear a *tallit katan*, we remember throughout the day to perform as many of the other commandments we feel called to perform. Wearing the *tallit katan* is the foundational *mitzvah* that may lead us toward performing other ritual and ethical *mitzvot*.

Isaac Klein explains the difference between wearing a *tallit gadol* when praying and wearing a *tallit katan* throughout the day. He states:

When dressing one should add to his garments the *Talit Qatan* (little *tallit*), better known as 'Arba' *Kanfot* (four corners), which should be worn all day. The *Tallit Qatan* consists of an oblong piece of cloth with a hole cut in the middle large enough for the head to go through...In ancient times all garments with four corners that were worn during the day had *Tsitsist* on the four corners...Since the use of a fringed outer garment has been

⁹⁶ Numbers 15:38-39

⁹⁷ Abraham Chill, *The Mitzvot* Page 340 Citing *B. Menachot* 43a

⁹⁸ Abraham Chill, *The Mitzvot* Page 340 Citing *B. Menachot* 43b

limited to the Talit worn during morning prayers, only the Talit Qatan, which one wears the whole day, now serves as the prescribed reminder.⁹⁹ When one puts on the tallit katan one says the blessing, *al mitzvat tzitzit, over the mitzvah of tzitzit*, whereas when one puts on the tallit gadol in synagogue, one says the blessing *l'heet'atef b'tzitzit, to wrap oneself in tzitzit*. Chill explains that just because over time people may have stopped making a habit of wearing four-cornered garments, one should still try to wear a four-cornered garment so that one may fulfill this *mitzvah*. Still if one chooses not to wear a four-cornered garment, then this garment does not require tzitzit. “One who avoids putting tzitziyyot on a garment that requires fringes acts in violation of a positive commandment. The Rabbis taught that God punishes those who avoid wearing garments that require fringes to escape the obligation. It is therefore customary to wear a garment with tzitziyyot continually.”¹⁰⁰

Personally, I have gone through phases wearing tallit katan. Recently, I stopped wearing tallit katan because I did not like being the only one in my community who wore one. At first I appreciated the attention I got for wearing one; I felt as though I was modeling the *mitzvah*. But then, I grew tired of getting attention for it—I did not want to explain it all the time—I did not want to be “the girl who wore tzitzit”; I wished I was in a community where other women were wearing it as well. I also became less excited about it after doing it for so long, it lost its newness, even though this is not what *mitzvot* are about. I wonder if feeling commanded makes the *mitzvah* easier to perform; when Jews feel commanded to perform *mitzvot*, they know that they are responsible to perform the *mitzvah* whether they feel in the mood or not. When there is choice, it is not always easy to make the choice to do it every time.

Reform Jews hold strong to ethical *mitzvot* since the foundation of the Reform Movement. This is a *mitzvah* that can remind Reform Jews to perform ethical *mitzvot*. When

⁹⁹ Klein, Isaac. *A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice*. KTAV 1979 New York Page 4

¹⁰⁰Chill, *The Mitzvot*. Page 339

Jews grab onto the tzitzit, they have the opportunity to remember their responsibility in this world, each of the tzitzit may remind them of a different ethical commandment, whether they accept all of the ritual *mitzvot* as mandatory or not. This *mitzvah* may bring great meaning to reform Jews and inspire them to work toward social justice. It is the commandment that leads to all of the others, or for Reform Jews, the commandments they feel called to perform.

Some tallitot have *techelet*, blue die that comes from the *hillazon*. Chill explains:

The Torah also speaks about a “blue thread” which was included in these fringes. This thread was dyed blue with the blood of a mollusk called hillazon. This creature has not been seen or known for centuries; hence, the fringes today are all white. About one hundred years ago, the Rabbi of Radzin in Poland, claimed that he had found this hillazon and proceeded to dye his fringes with its blood. To this very day, his disciples are the only ones who put a blue thread into their tzitzit.¹⁰¹

Nachmanides teaches the way that techelet brings spiritual meaning to those who wear it on their tallit.

“Since the word t’cheilet contains in it the word kol (all) it alludes by its very name to that all inclusive attribute of Kol...Rather, the remembrance is through the blue thread, which alludes to the all-inclusive attribute, which is bakol and which is the aim of all. Therefore He said, that ye may look upon it, and remember “kol” (all), which is the commandments of the Eternal. This is why the Rabbis said: “(Why was blue chosen rather than any other color?) Because blue resembles the sea, the sea resembles heaven, and heaven resembles the Throne of Glory, etc.”¹⁰²

This is inspiring as it reminds Jews that God’s light is always present whether we realize it or not, that God is in all aspects of our lives. I believe that Reform Jews who may not feel “commanded” could still be inspired that there is a holy presence around us in all times and places. When I put on my tallit katan, I imagine God’s holiness in all directions of the world just as the four corners of the garment. It is a comforting reminder of God’s presence during hard times.

¹⁰¹ Chill, *The Mitzvot*. Page 338

¹⁰² Nachmanides, *Commentary on the Torah: Numbers*. Shilo Publishing New York 1975 Page 156 with Citation of Menachot 43b

Similarly to tefillin, the *mitzvah* of tallit katan may push us toward being moral people who stray from negative, sinful impulses. "...Through the t'cheileth he should not think of any skepticism or idolatry, but it shall be unto you for 'tzitzith'—that ye may look upon it, and remember."¹⁰³ When we are tempted to sin, we may look down at our tzitzit and follow in the path of our *yetzer tov*, our urge to do the most moral thing, instead of our *yetzer ra*, our urge to stray from what is right for a temporary pleasure. There were times that I wore tallit katan, when people around me were speaking *lashon harah*, gossip; when I was tempted to join in, I looked down at my tzitzit and was reminded that I am trying to live a holy, meaningful life. Engaging in *lashon hara* will pull me away from that. The tzitzit surround us with the potential to do *mitzvot* and help us remember to choose to act with kindness, righteousness, and compassion.

Again, wearing tzitzit may lead us to become more ethical people because it reminds us of the other commandments and it reminds us of God during moments when we might feel far from spirituality. When wearing a tallit in temple, we are reminded of God because we are praying and we are talking about God in our liturgy. But when we are outside of synagogue or places where we are more cognizant of God, we often need reminders. The mundane moments have the potential to be filled with holiness; wearing a tallit katan is a way to take the reminder of God of *mitzvot* with us all throughout the day. We may strive to be ethical moral people, but we can all use reminders. The tallit katan can serve as this reminder. "Now there is nothing in the world so good for remembering as carrying the seal of one's maker affixed to the garment in which one clothes himself constantly, so that his eyes and his heart are on it all the day."¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ Nachmanides, *Commentary on the Torah: Numbers*. Page 156

¹⁰⁴ *Sefer HaChinuch* Page 103 Volume 4 #386

The organization Netzitzot¹⁰⁵ creates tzitzit designed for female bodies to make it more accessible to all of the Jewish people. Netzitzot leaders created this project as a result of people who wanted to fulfill the *mitzvah* of tzitzit but felt alienated because the typical tallit katan did not fit their bodies. They wanted to create a tallit katan specially made for women so that women could feel empowered to perform this *mitzvah*.

Menachot 43b teaches, “Beloved is Israel, for the Holy-Blessed-One surrounded them with *mitzvot*: tefillin on their heads, tefillin on their arms, tzitzit on their clothes, and mezuzot on their doorposts.” Netzitzot leaders explain that they are inspired by this text, “by its description of gratitude for *mitzvot* and its expression of how a life rich with sacred customs creates a feeling of mutual belovedness between the Jewish people and God. Tzitzit surround the wearer in all directions, creating an image of *mitzvot* cascading from one’s being. They embody a life in which Torah overflows from every corner.”¹⁰⁶ Again, Reform Jews who may not feel “commanded” may still be inspired by this constant reminder throughout the day that God surrounds us from every corner and every direction. In the pleasant moments as well as the painful moments, God’s holiness is in our midst no matter which way we turn.

Since *tzitzit* is a positive, time-bound obligation, women are generally held to be exempt, *patur*, from the requirement to wear them.¹⁰⁷ But the word *patur* does not necessarily mean *asur*, *forbidden*. There’s an Ashkenazic tradition stemming from the Middle Ages for women to voluntarily adopt certain observances from which they are technically exempt. So if women wish to wear *tzitzit* they may do so, even though they are not obligated to do so. This is mentioned by the gloss of R. Moshe Isserles (*Rema* – רמ"א – the Ashkenazic “co-author” of the Shulchan

¹⁰⁵Netzitzot: Tzitzit for Women. <https://www.netzitzot.com/our-team-and-funders.html>

¹⁰⁶ <https://www.netzitzot.com>

¹⁰⁷ Shulchan Arukh, Orach Hayyim 17:2

Arukh) on this very passage (ומ"מ [מכל מקום] אם רוצים לעטפו הרשות בידן). Isserles says that a woman may observe this *mitzvah* and even say the blessing.

Still, Isserles does believe that since “it would appear arrogant” (מהזי כיוהרא) for women to aspire to this level of piety, “they should not wear *tzitzit*” (אין להן ללבוש ציצית), because *tzitzit* is not considered a *חובת גברא*, an obligation imposed upon each individual, but rather a *chovat mana*, an obligation having to do with an object. The individual is not required to wear *tzitzit* unless he chooses to wear a four-cornered garment. Therefore, Isserles teaches that women should not wear *tzitzit* in the first place, but if they do, they may say the blessing and make this a *mitzvah*. While Orthodox *halakhah* encourages men to wear the *tallit katan* so that they may perform the *mitzvah* of *tzitzit*, women are not encouraged to do so. While Chill had explained that one should still try to wear a four-cornered garment so that one may fulfill the *mitzvah*; Isserles explains that when a woman goes out of her way to do this, it could be seen as arrogant and overly pious, therefore she should not do so.¹⁰⁸

Maimonides believes that women should not be prevented from wearing a *tallit katan* if they choose to do so. But he is less lenient than Isserles because he does not think that women should be saying the blessing and making this a *mitzvah* for themselves at all. He states:

Women, servants, and minors are not required by the Torah to wear *tzitzit*. It is, however, a Rabbinical obligation for every child who knows how to dress himself to wear *tzitzit* in order to educate him to fulfill *mitzvot*. Women and servants who wish to wrap themselves in *tzitzit* may do so without reciting a blessing. Similarly, regarding the other positive commandments which women are not required to fulfill, if they desire to fulfill them without reciting a blessing, they should not be prevented from doing so.”¹⁰⁹

Netzitzot, among others, are seeking to return to that original Ashkenazic custom, encouraging women to adopt this *mitzvah* for themselves. The Netzizot website contains stories of several women who experimented with the *mitzvah* of *tallit katan*. I would like to examine

¹⁰⁸ Chill, *The Mitzvot*. Page 339

¹⁰⁹ Maimonides, *Mishne Torah: Hilchot Tzitzit* Chapter 3 Page 232

their responses and reflect on them based on how they might relate to Reform Jews who are contemplating experimenting with tallit katan because I think their opinions and reflections are relatable to liberal Jews. Although the website does not give too much biographical information on these women, their stories, thoughts, and opinions on tzitzit provide valuable insight into some of the benefits as well as challenges to wearing a tallit katan.

R. Shoshana Meira Friedman, the Associate at Temple Sinai of Brookline, writes about her experience wearing tallit katan. She states:

I wore one almost every day, carefully tucking in the tzitzit in to avoid harassment on the streets of pious, non-egalitarian Jerusalem. But in friends' homes I would take them out, and proudly show them off. When people ask why I wear them, I often say it's my friendship bracelet with God. I also love the four corners, which remind me of a foundation of a home, strong and rooted. Over the past few years, it has been hard for me to keep up the practice all the time, especially as not all my wardrobe choices work with a tallit katan. My guess is it will come in and out of my life as a meaningful *mitzvah*. I definitely recommend trying it.¹¹⁰

Friedman's story illustrates the way that wearing tallit katan may create a feeling of sanctuary, home, and God wherever a person is. Many of search for the feeling of being grounded and she suggests that this *mitzvah* makes one feel grounded and rooted in God and tradition. She brings up the fact that one may choose to display the tzitzit for others to see, or one may choose to keep them tucked into his or her clothing so that it becomes a private *mitzvah*. This is important as not all Reform Jews want to have their Judaism on display at all times; this *mitzvah* gives us the choice to show it off or to keep it to ourselves while still performing the *mitzvah*. But, if the point of the *mitzvah* is for us to "see" the tzitzit, so much so that we do not wear it at night because one cannot "see it" then it seems that one would not reap the full meaning of the *mitzvah* by tucking them into their clothes and not being able to see them throughout the day.

¹¹⁰<https://nebula.wsimg.com/c54cfc6f836b2d195903672421f533f8?AccessKeyId=934B1186794BBCE02C7F&disposition=0&alloworigin=1>

Friedman's point that tallit katan is her "friendship bracelet with God" is compelling to me. Some people where Jewish start necklaces or Kabbalah bracelets—there are all sorts of religious symbols that we wear to remind us of God, but wearing a tallit katan is a *mitzvah*, which might make it even more powerful for someone to wear as they connect with God. In a materialistic world where we devote our time to thinking about our clothing, shoes, jewelry, and accessories, the tallit katan is a piece of clothing that reminds us to live holy lives. It is a garment we wear not to be fashionable or stylish but to remember God's presence in our lives. I especially think this could be positive for teenage girls who may feel pressured to be the most fashionable or stylish. This piece of clothing may ground them and remind them of their values in a time when society pushes them to dress and look a certain way. Avigayil Halpern states, "Wearing tzitzit is meaningful for me because when they dangle for all to see, my values are on display."¹¹¹ Jews may display their religion and their values with their fashion choices instead of how much money they have or how stylish they are. Especially because it is the first thing they will put on in the morning under the rest of their clothes, it is the most pure and meaningful which may make the rest of their outfit not seem so critical and important the way it may have seemed before.

From my own experience, I felt uncomfortable eating un-kosher food while wearing my tallit katan. Although I am a Reform Jew and I feel comfortable observing the *mitzvot* that I feel obligated to perform, I still felt like a hypocrite when wearing a tallit katan with tzitzit representing commandments, and not performing all of the commandments. Wearing a tallit katan may appear to make a statement that a person is observing Judaism in its fullest, that commandments and *mitzvot* are important to this person. This may create pressure or

¹¹¹

<https://nebula.wsimg.com/c54cfc6f836b2d195903672421f533f8?AccessKeyId=934B1186794BBCE02C7F&disposition=0&alloworigin=1>

embarrassment for this person if he or she is not observing many of the other commandments. This can also lead to feeling judged by other Jews as well as feeling as though one is being a poor model of a Jew to non-Jews who see the tallit katan and look to this person as representing Judaism. Although it may feel inspiring to have an outward expression of Judaism, there are also challenges that come with this that can lead a person to feeling that they are a bad Jew because of the many commandments they do not yet perform or choose not to perform because they do not feel called to in this moment in time.

Sarah, another story writer on the Netzizot website mentions a Talmud story¹¹² in which a man is planning on having sex with a beautiful prostitute. He is getting ready to have sex with her and then his four tzitzit slap him in the face. He jumps out of bed and the prostitute is wondering what happened. He explains that his tzitzit reminded him of God's divinity and justice and therefore he is reminded to stray from it. She finds his rabbi, converts to Judaism, and marries him because she is so impressed at his piousness.¹¹³ Sarah writes:

When I first thought about wearing tzitzit, I was held back in part by the fact that they are a *mitzvah* attached to an undergarment. Did I really want my relationship with my intimate clothing to reflect that aggadah about the man and the prostitute, such that between my social self and my nudity was an everpresent reminder of my religious commitments? And even if I did want that, it was hard to imagine that tzitzit could really do for me what they did for the man in the story—that is, keep me from letting my bodily desires influence my better judgment, yet win me a life of totally halakhically sanctioned sex with a great looking partner who shared my religious commitments. I was afraid that even with tzitzit, I would not be able to live up to the example of the Menachot man in a battle against my yetzer hara; or alternately that my tzitzit would make me feel too self-conscious and restrained; or else that they would be a turnoff to partners for whom my intimate self would seem either too frum or not frum enough or just weird.

Sarah brings up an important point; the tallit katan is not magic, mitzvot are not magic. By wearing a tallit katan, one does not become incapable of sin. One can wear a tallit and still make

¹¹²Menachot 44a

¹¹³ Ibid

horrible decisions with poor consequences. The story is uplifting to think that wearing this ritual garb will help us to be better people, but this will not work in all situations, as we are human and humans do make mistakes. She writes “I would not be able to live up to the example of the Menachot man” which illustrates the pressure that wearing a tallit katan might put on people. It might make them feel that just because they are wearing this they need to be good at all times and always follow the holy path. This could turn someone off from wearing it because again they would feel that they are not a good enough person or Jew to wear it and be a role model for others about what being a good person looks like. She continues:

Sex and gender related anxieties about tzitzit are real and worthy of attention. Questions about self-presentation and Judaism are legitimately difficult ones. And everyone knows that finding the right match is harder than splitting the Red Sea. But I do think that ideally, tzitzit can and should help people seek out relationships with partners who, like the prostitute, value tzitzit wearers enough to at least be curious about their commitments and perhaps even to join them on their path. Tzitzit are a reminder (if, at times, one that can feel like a slap in the face) that even our most intimate moments include the Divine too.

Sarah points out that even our most intimate personal moments, even when we are getting dressed in the morning, God is with us, and God knows us on a deep level. God is not simply with us when we pray at temple but all throughout our day from the beginning to the end. Reform Jews may find comfort in feeling God’s presence with them in and out of the synagogue, especially in the times that may appear mundane.

Sarah also points out that wearing tzitzit is a good way to display your values to other people in hopes of finding a mate, it is an easy way to show what you are committed to. But at the same time, if we see someone wearing tzitzit, we should not assume he or she is a good person as looks can be deceiving. I do not see this becoming a trend for Reform Jews to wear

tzitzit in order to connect with partners who also have strong Jewish beliefs and commitments, but I do see it as something they might try on and off to feel connected to God.

Felicia Seaton speaks about the gratitude she feels when wearing tzitzit and the benefits of having such a tangible *mitzvah* to ground her and bring her peace. She states:

I started to wear tzitzit after studying my son's bar *mitzvah* parsha, *Shlach Lecha*. I realized that I had been seeking a reminder of God's presence in my life throughout the day and that this could be such a symbol for me. When I put my tzitzit on in the morning, I thank God for the opportunity and ability to wear him throughout my day. During the day, I feel the fringes under my clothing and immediately feel a calm come over me. I am so very grateful I knew other women who wore tzitzit, who could teach me and answer my many questions.”¹¹⁴

Felicia is connected to a community of other women who wear tzitzit. She has women to bond with over the ritual, to ask questions, to teach her. Not all women have this, and the *mitzvah* can feel quite isolating when one is not connected to a community where others perform this *mitzvah*. I would suspect that a Reform Jew who tried this *mitzvah* who did not have a community that was supportive might feel isolated performing this *mitzvah* and would stop performing it. Getting attention for being unique and doing something nobody else around you is doing is a nice feeling for a while, but it does not always last. Perhaps clergy could create ritual groups in the synagogue for people interested in experimenting with *mitzvot* so that they have others to share this experience with and they do not feel so isolated.

Netzizot provides Joanna's story, which illustrates how hard it can be to make this *mitzvah* work based on women's wardrobe, making it harder for women. She writes:

I started to wear tzitzit 10 years ago because it was an easy *mitzvah*. My thinking was that there are 613 *mitzvot* and some are intrinsically difficult for everyone and some are particularly difficult for me. I figured tzitzit could be an easy one for me wake up in the morning, put on my tzitzit *mitzvah* accomplished! I only have to do it once a day and I have to get dressed anyway. Over time there have been distractions and difficulties.

¹¹⁴ Netzizot Stories

<https://nebula.wsimg.com/c54cfc6f836b2d195903672421f533f8?AccessKeyId=934B1186794BBCE02C7F&disposition=0&alloworigin=1>

There have been times when doing this *mitzvah* inevitably became focused on how people react to my tzitzit and who reacted to them. During certain times of the year and occasions for dress up tzitzit have brought on conflict with ideas I had about fashion or modesty. When I was pregnant and nothing fit, wearing tzitzit brought an unwelcome focus to my relationship with my pregnant body. But for me, at its best and at its core, wearing tzitzit is about snagging an easy *mitzvah* and using that action to strengthen my resolve to look for other easy *mitzvot* to grab on to.

I remember when wearing dresses, I wanted my tzitzit to stick out; I considered cutting holes in my dresses so that my tzitzit would stick out and I would be able to feel them and grab onto them during the day. The dean of my school discouraged me from doing this and pointed out that we cut and rend clothing when we are in mourning; cutting my clothing to be able to do this *mitzvah* of tallit katan did not feel Jewish. If it was the norm for female Jews to wear tallit katan, maybe dresses would be made this way with holes for tzitzit, but this is simply not the case; women's wardrobes do not always work well with tzitzit. This would be a big reason that Reform Jews would not even given this *mitzvah* a chance, even with the Netziziot tzitzit that are made from women tank tops.

Joanna also brings up a good point that other women have made that sometimes it becomes too focused on other people's opinions and receiving attention from others. This is not the point of the *mitzvah*. If one is trying to connect with God and the Jewish people while performing a *mitzvah*, it can be extremely distracting if it becomes all about what others will think.

I am curious how Conservative clergy and educators teach Jews about tallit katan. Ruberg explains that the tallit katan is the least taught in his experience in the Conservative Jewish community. He says it is basically ignored for a few reasons. He explains that one of the reasons is sociological; Conservative Judaism is an outgrowth of American traditionalist movement which was meant to maintain aspects of the Jewish religion as it saw binding and necessary

while not upsetting the balance of American culture. He states, “Tzitzit were seen as a brazen expression in an era when Jews weren’t even openly wearing kippot—they wore hats and blended in.”¹¹⁵ Ruberg explains that it was only post 1967 after the Six-Day War when many more Jews start wearing kippot to express support for the Jewish People. The tallit katan was seen as overly religious and part of that has to do with the fact that it is not required unless one is wearing a four-cornered garment. It was seen as an Orthodox or antiquated custom. Many people who did tzitzit tucked them in so that they could fit into modern culture. Although there are Conservative Jews who choose to wear tallit katan and feel commanded to wear tzitzit throughout their day, Ruberg explained that his synagogue does not spend great energy or time teaching and encouraging this *mitzvah*.¹¹⁶

Although I do not see most of my Reform congregants trying on this *mitzvah*, I am inspired by my own experience wearing tzitzit as well as the stories of the women from Netzivot. I will teach my congregants this *mitzvah* and share the ways that it may uplift them, but it is their choice whether or not they want to fully grapple with it and add it into their life. Personally, after studying tallit katan in more depth, I hope to begin wearing tallit katan more often and revisiting this commandment that I have stopped performing over time.

¹¹⁵ I spoke with Rabbi Jeremy Ruberg from New City Jewish Center on the phone in January 2018 for half an hour about educating Jews on ritual mitzvot.

¹¹⁶ Ibid

Chapter 4

N'tilat Yadayim and Mikvah

One opportunity for holiness through a ritual *mitzvah* is *n'tilat yadayim*, ritual handwashing. Although we know the hygienic importance of handwashing, cleaning ourselves can feel like a mundane task. Our tradition allows us to take every day actions we would be doing anyway and transform them into opportunities to encounter the divine—opportunities to zoom out of our everyday worries and struggles and contemplate the greatness of the world.

Scott-Martin Kosofsky explains that after waking up in the morning, “To wash away the “impurities of the night,” one follows with the ritual of *n'tilat yadayim*: Wash hands using a pitcher and a receiving basin (usually a sink, today). Pour the water three times over one hand and then three times over the other. Then recite the blessing: Blessed are You, Lord our God, king of the universe, who has sanctified us through His commandments and commanded us to wash our hands.”¹¹⁷ He also explains that this ritual is done right before saying *motzi*, the benediction over the challah on Shabbat.¹¹⁸ Reform Jews who come together for services or dinner on Shabbat have the opportunity to perform this *mitzvah* together as a community.

Chill explains that the washing of the hands and feet was a symbolic purification act that every priest had to perform each morning before entering the sanctuary to worship God. Chill

¹¹⁷ Kosofsky, Scott-Martin. *The Book of Customs: A Complete Handbook for the Jewish Year*. 2004. HarperCollins Publishers. New York. Page 19.

¹¹⁸ Kosofsky, Scott-Martin. *The Book of Customs: A Complete Handbook for the Jewish Year*. Page 66

teaches, “This ritual had to be performed by the Priest only once each day unless he took a nap, relieved himself, or left the confines of the Temple any time during the day, or if he was diverted from his tasks by thoughts other than those relating to his priestly function. If any of these things occurred, he had to perform the ritual over again.”¹¹⁹ Chill explains that a priest who worshipped God without washing his hands in this way was sentenced to “*mitah bi-ydei shamayyim*” meaning “death by the hand of God.”¹²⁰ Chill states, “The priestly ritual of washing hands and feet has survived into the present day practice of washing one’s hands in the morning before reciting one’s morning prayers.”¹²¹

Jacob Neusner recounts that the reason this ritual is still observed today even after the destruction of the Temple is attributed to the Pharisees. The Pharisees were Jews who believed one must keep the purity laws outside of the Temple. Neusner explains:

...The Pharisees were a small group within Palestinian Judaism, a philosophical school with a particular set of beliefs and religious practices...They produced the rabbinical masters who, after 70 A.D., defined the law and doctrine that became normative for the Judaic tradition. Judaism as it is now known begins with the Pharisees of the two centuries before the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 70 A.D.¹²²

Other Jews believed that these rituals only took place when there was a temple and that the purity laws were only there for the temple priests to reach a state of purity in order to carry out rituals like animal sacrifice. All who went to the temple needed to be ritually pure, but without a temple, these laws were obsolete. The Pharisees on the other hand believed that without the

¹¹⁹ Chill, Abraham, *The Mitzvot* Page 131

¹²⁰ Ibid

¹²¹ ¹²¹ Chill, Abraham 131 *The Mitzvot*

¹²² Neusner, Jacob, *From Politics to Piety*. Prentice Hall. New Jersey. 1973. Page 11

Temple, in one's home, one should obey these laws where there is a parallel that makes sense, and to them this was the table.¹²³

Neusner states:

Therefore, one must eat secular food (ordinary, everyday meals) in a state of ritual purity as if one were a Temple priest. The Pharisees thus arrogated to themselves—and to all Jews equally—the status of the Temple priests, and performed actions restricted to priests on account of status. The table of every Jew in his home was seen as being like the table of the Lord in the Jerusalem Temple. The commandments, “You shall be a kingdom of priests and a holy people,” was taken literally. Everyone is a priest, everyone stands in the same relationship to God, and everyone must keep the priestly law.¹²⁴

The Pharisees believed in adding holiness to their lives with or without the Temple. They believed that rituals and *mitzvot* such as the *n'tilat yadayim* benediction could be the vehicle used to achieve this holiness. Although Pharisees were not priests, they felt called to perform these rituals; these rituals added meaning to their lives. This is same phenomenon we see with Reform Jews reclaiming ritual *mitzvot*. We are not Orthodox, but these *mitzvot* are Jewish, and therefore, they belong to Reform Jews just as much as they belong to Conservative and Orthodox Jews. Observing *mitzvot* and adding holiness to our lives does not make us Orthodox, it makes us Reform Jews who choose to use *mitzvot* to deepen our spirituality, connect to our heritage, and deepen our relationship with God.

Expanding on the ritual of *n'tilat yadayim*, Klein states, “Since this washing of the hands is not a hygienic measure (because one has to wash even if his hands are clean), but rather a religious ritual, it must be done in a specified way. The washing should be performed with a vessel, and it should result from human effort...One should fill a vessel with the water, hold it in one hand, and pour it over the other, and then do the same with the second hand.”¹²⁵ Klein makes

¹²³ Neusner, Jacob, *From Politics to Piety*. Page 83

¹²⁴ Ibid

¹²⁵ Klein 49

it clear that this is not the same thing as simply washing one's hands from the faucet. According to the *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch*, the reason we still perform *mitzvot* that would have been performed in the Temple is to prepare for the day when the Temple will be restored.

The laws of *netilas yadayim* (washing the hands) have their origin in the laws of *tumah v'taharah*, "ritual purity and impurity," that were once an integral part of the daily lives of the Jewish people in earlier times, when the Temple stood...Although most applications of the halachos of *tumah* are no longer applicable today, we are enjoined to adhere to these procedures so that we will be accustomed to these practices when the laws of *tumah* will again become applicable, with the rebuilding of the Temple.¹²⁶

There is not a specific amount of water that should be used in this washing. "Rav Chisda said, 'I washed my hands with full handfuls of water, and they gave me from heaven full handfuls of prosperity'...Nevertheless, ideally, one should not serve Hashem for the purpose of receiving Heavenly reward, but solely for the sake of the honor of Hashem, and the reward will come on its own."¹²⁷ While Reform Judaism does not promote the idea of doing *mitzvot* one by one as if earning points that will allow one to get into the world to come or any heavenly reward, we recognize that the rewards we perform from *mitzvot* are right here on earth. When we perform *mitzvot* we connect with ancestors, we deepen our connection to God and to our people. These are the rewards we might receive if we make performing *mitzvot* a habit.

Although I have personally been taught the tradition that we put the water on our hands three times each, the *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* teaches that we should pour water onto each hand twice, starting with the right.¹²⁸

After washing both of his hands, he should rub them together and lift them up to the level of his head as the verse says in (Tehillim 134:2) "Lift your hands etc.'" Then one should recite the blessing. One who is accustomed to pour twice on each hand should first pour one time on each hand, and then rub them, and recite the blessing, and after that he should pour the second time on each hand. He should take care to dry his hands well.¹²⁹

¹²⁶ *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* The Kleinman Edition Siman 40 Page 55

¹²⁷ Ibid

¹²⁸ Ibid

¹²⁹ *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* Simanim 35-71 Siman 40 Page 56

Klein explains that this ritual is done before eating bread, not just any meal. He states, “The rabbis made a distinction between casual eating...and a regular meal... Lest the distinction become arbitrary, they based it on the eating of bread and the recital of hamotzee. Bread is the staff of life, and therefore the eating of bread determines whether the meal is considered casual or regular. A meal at which bread is eaten must be preceded by the washing of the hands.”¹³⁰

I first encountered the *n'tilat yadayim* ritual in Israel when I visited the city of Tsfat. I celebrated Shabbat in an Orthodox-Jewish community with 30 other American visitors. We made Kiddush, but before we said Motzi, we washed our hands. It was special. It was not, *let's wash our hands as fast as we can so we can dig into this delicious meal*. It was slow—thoughtful—peaceful. A moment of awareness—a moment of gratitude.

Each of us walked over to the sink and took this cup of water with 2 handles. First we held the cup with our right hand and poured water onto our left hand a few times, then we held the cup with our left hand and poured water on our right hand a few times. We stopped for a moment, and then said the blessing: Blessed are you Adonai Our God, Ruler of the Universe, who hallows us with *mitzvot* and commands us in the lifting up of the hands.

It is tradition that when we engage in this ritual handwashing, we do not speak or sing words until we bless the challah. This is holy time of preparation when instead of blurting out the first thing that comes to mind, we stop—we take it all in—we become fully present. We all sang a wordless melody as we waited for everyone to wash their hands, and when that moment arrived we blessed the bread with our clean hands and our clean souls—then we ate our Shabbas meal.

This is a *mitzvah* that can be done every single day—in a group or by one's self. When waking up in the morning, and when eating a meal with bread. In the Torah portion Ki Tissa, we

¹³⁰ Isaac Klein 49

are reminded of the priests being commanded to cleanse themselves. God speaks to Moses and says:

Make a laver of copper and a stand of copper for it, for washing; and place it between the Tent of Meeting and the altar. Put water in it, and let Aaron and his sons wash their hands and feet in water drawn from it. When they enter the Tent of Meeting they shall wash with water, that they may not die; or when they approach the altar to serve, to turn into smoke a gift to the LORD, they shall wash their hands and feet, that they may not die. It shall be a law for all time for them—for him and his offspring—throughout the ages.¹³¹

We are not priests, and neither were the Pharisees; still we may experience holiness when we perform ritual *mitzvot*. As we are reminded of the priests sanctifying themselves and cleaning themselves as they prepared to serve God, we realize that in our own lives we may sanctify ourselves, cleanse ourselves, and prepare to serve God, making our lives a blessing.

The morning is an especially meaningful time to think about serving God and making our lives a blessing because it will help us start our day on a positive, inspiring note. Performing the *mitzvah* of *n'tilat yadayim* in the morning is one way to do this.

Because a person, upon arising from his bed in the morning is as if he has been created anew for the purpose of serving the Creator, may his name be blessed, he must therefore sanctify himself by washing his hands with water from a utensil. In this case he is similar to a Kohen who would sanctify his hands daily from the Kiyor (Laver) prior to performing his Temple service. While this morning hand-washing is a Rabbinic enactment, there is Scriptural support for this washing, as the verse states (Tehillim 26:6-7)—I will wash in cleanliness my hands, and circle around Your Alter, HASHEM—to proclaim thanksgiving in a loud voice etc.¹³²

So many of us begin our mornings checking our phones or wishing we did not have to get out of bed; a ritual like this allows us to think about God, to think about being grateful for the

gift of life, and to gain a sense of renewal.

There is another reason for this washing: since during sleep, when one's holy soul has departed from his body, a spirit of impurity comes and rests on his body. Now, when he awakens from his sleep, this impure spirit departs from his whole body except for his fingers from which it does not depart until he pours water upon them three times in an

¹³¹ Exodus 30: 17-21

¹³² *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* Siman 2 Page 13

alternating fashion...When a person sleeps, his hands move about, and inevitably touch parts of the body that are unclean. In his view, the Sages enacted the morning *netilas yadayim* to ensure that one would have clean hands for prayer.¹³³

By observing this *mitzvah* and saying this blessing when washing, we emulate the priests. We

turn our table into an altar, and we invite God's holiness into our lives. This is what

Judaism does. It allows us to connect all actions, times, and places to God's holiness.

In modern Hebrew, the term for washing hands is *R'chitzat yadayim*, but we notice that the blessing is *netilat yadayim*, which literally means "the lifting up of the hands." Our hands are being lifted to a higher level, a level of awareness of God's presence, and our own responsibility to follow God's commandments. When we strive to perform ritual *mitzvot*, when we make the conscious decision to consistently add ritual, tradition, and *mitzvot* to our lives, we become uplifted.

Ruberg explains that at his Conservative synagogue *n'tilat yadayim* is taught in pre-school. Every day before meals, they learn to wash their hands and then they learn *n'tilat yadayim*. They also do it on Shabbat as a community unless there is a large number of people and it would become more difficult. Reform clergy and educators have the opportunity to teach this *mitzvah* in nursery school, religious school, or even at Jewish summer camp as well as at Shabbat festivities.

¹³³ *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* Siman 2 Page 16-18

Rabbi Ofer Sabath Beit Halachmi recounts that his family has performed the *mitzvah* of n'tilat yadayim with a special bowl at the table to make it more fun. This way family members can do it together at the table, and it does not feel like a chore. This also makes it feel less connected to washing your hands for hygienic purposes.

Immersion in Mikvah is another ritual *mitzvah* that Reform Jews could become more educated on. Recently it has become more well known in the Reform Community as a result of the organization *Mayyim Hayyim*. Isaac Klein explains that a mikvah in modern days is used for conversion as well as niddah. It must contain at least forty se'ah of water which is 191 gallons. This is how much is needed for someone to immerse him/herself completely. It must be constructed in a way that permits complete immersion in one act, the container may not be portable, it must be built permanently into the ground, making it a part of the earth, and the minimum 40 se'ah of the Mikvah needs to be natural water from a natural source. It cannot have water that was tossed in by a bucket or other intermediary. Natural sources of water include rainwater, springs, rivers, lakes, oceans, snow or ice that has melted. Rainwater is the most common source. Rainwater from rooftops conveyed into a storage chamber built into the ground is the way that it remains natural and then can be transported. Plastic, rubber, metal, or concrete pipes are used for the transferring.¹³⁴

Klein explains that many people nowadays are wondering if an in ground swimming pool can be used as a Mikvah. While he says that many of these pools would fit the requirements, he brings up the reasons why it might not be the best idea. He suggests that there is a psychological point that people will more likely have a spiritual religious experience in a body of water that is set aside for this purpose alone and that does not also happen to be a swimming pool for people to have fun and socialize. He says that because swimming pools are public, people might feel

¹³⁴ Klein Page 518-520

embarrassed performing sacred rituals in them and this could lead to rushed immersions. He says that if a person uses a swimming pool for their conversion, he or she may later feel that it was not as legitimate because it is uncommon. He suggests using a swimming pool as a last resort.¹³⁵

Klein explains that natural water is required because water is a symbol of the life forces of the universe. “By using it we therefore affirm that God alone is the author of life, and to Him and Him alone do we turn for continued life for us and our descendants after us.”¹³⁶ When a woman completes her period of menstruation, the woman is obligated to immerse herself in a Mikvah. This immersion is called *tevilah*. This immersion should take place on the night after the completion of seven clean days. She should wash herself before going into the water so that nothing comes between her and the water. Klein notes that nail polish and hair dye are acceptable and count as part of the body they are on, so that women would not have to go through so much trouble each time. She should immerse in a way that the water will touch all parts of her body. She should recite the blessing *asher k'dishanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu al hatevila*. She should immerse once, say this blessing, and then immerse again.¹³⁷

Mikvah has become used for all different occasions, especially occasions that have to do with an individual's experience with transition or renewal. Elyse Frishman talks about the popularity and appeal of traditional ritual in our movement, specifically with Mikvah. She speaks about Mikvah as a tool for cleansing the body and the soul and explains that Rabbis may suggest mikvah as part of a healing process after rape, incest, marital infidelity and reconciliation, infertility, loss of pregnancy, end of mourning, menopause, invasive surgery, crisis points, and life changing situations. Of course Mikvah is simply *one part* of a healing process; it would be insensitive for a rabbi to suggest that going in a Mikvah alone would magically heal someone

¹³⁵ Klein Page 522

¹³⁶ Klein Page 520

¹³⁷ Klein Page 516

after a painful experience. For Mikvah to be used for a spiritual experience, it will take education and preparation. There should be creative or traditional liturgy used to accompany this act.¹³⁸

It seems highly appropriate that we consider the spiritual power of cleaning rituals in a world hungry for symbols positive mythology and meaning. People turn to us because they trust us to be open about the reappropriation of traditional images and rites, giving them new egalitarian or feminist meanings. Synagogue attendance is down but new age, chavurot and small spiritually inclined groups are emerging stronger each day. People want their lives transformed in a Jewish way, and often sadly note, in times of deep crisis, aside from death, Judaism itself does not offer solace. They turn to eastern and native systems, not knowing that Judaism already possesses a storehouse of possibility. The mikvah ritual rings true for them. It feels Jewish, it feels ancient, yet it feels creative and life affirming. The mikvah has the potential to be an ablution that can open the floodgates of reconnection to Judaism and wholeness of the self.¹³⁹

It is a shame that many Reform Jews are uneducated about rituals like Mikvah that could transform them during times of desperation, pain, or even happiness. This is a vehicle toward connecting their experience with God and bringing holiness into their lives, and many of them do not know about it, or simply think it is reserved for the Orthodox. There is much potential here, and it is the job of Reform educators and clergy to teach about Mikvah so that Jews may have this option.

The organization Mayyim Hayyim works to reclaim and reinvent Mikvah immersion for modern spiritual use and to educate all on the *mitzvah* of immersion. One of their goals is, “To make the mikveh a sacred space that is open and accessible to all Jews and those who are becoming Jews.”¹⁴⁰ They maintain and operate a kosher mikveh serving the Jewish community. Some of the other parts of their mission include:

Provide a welcoming, beautiful place for both traditional and creative mikveh uses.
Support a welcoming, beautiful place for converts to Judaism and their extended families.
Foster new uses for mikveh for the 21st century Jewish community (e.g. healing rituals following illness or loss). Provide educational resources regarding the uses of mikveh,

¹³⁸ Goldstein, Elyse, “The Mikvah as Spiritual Therapy” 42/43 Edition, Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1995-1996.

¹³⁹ Ibid

¹⁴⁰ *Mayyim Hayyim*. <https://www.mayyimhayyim.org/about/mission/>

including curricula, teacher training, and presentations by staff and volunteers. Serve as an example of an innovative and pluralistic Jewish institution that collaborates with local, regional and national organizations to provide meaningful resources and personal experiences to all interested Jews, and those becoming Jewish.”¹⁴¹

Mayyim Hayyim was created by Jews in Boston, one of whom is Anita Diamant, “who articulated the need for a mikveh that would serve Jews-by-choice, and others in the liberal community, in a more welcoming and dignified manner. Interest in mikveh as a way to mark transitional moments – from weaning to healing after cancer, from high school graduation to ordination – was “in the air.”¹⁴² People are looking for ways to mark sacred events in their lives—for ways to transition in a meaningful, spiritual way. The Mikvah is a Jewish way to do this.

Mayyim Hayyim meets a broad range of needs. In addition to traditional purposes, new uses include celebrations for milestone events such as a graduation, the end of a period of study, or an important birthday or anniversary. Immersion in the mikveh can also signify a new start in the aftermath of pain and trauma. Immersion provides an opportunity to mark the end of formal grieving or the beginning of healing from events such as suffering a miscarriage, undergoing chemotherapy, completing a year of bereavement, and recovering from divorce, rape or abuse. The goal is for visitors to the mikveh to emerge refreshed and renewed, ready for life’s next gifts.¹⁴³

I would like to try going to a Mikvah. I look forward to trying this before my rabbinic ordination. I appreciate the work Mayyim Hayyim is doing to make Mikvah accessible to all Jews, not only Orthodox. I hope to share their work with my future congregants and invite them to experience what Mikvah has to offer.

¹⁴¹ Ibid

¹⁴² Ibid

¹⁴³ *Mayyim Hayyim: Frequently Asked Questions*

<https://www.mayyimhayyim.org/about/frequently-asked-questions/>

CONCLUSION

After studying these ritual *mitzvot*, I would still like to add tefillin, *n'tilat yadayim*, mikvah, and tallit katan to the curriculum at my synagogue. I think it would be amazing to have it be part of a b'nei *mitzvah* program, so that younger kids look forward to trying these *mitzvot* when they are older. Also if madrichim find these *mitzvot* meaningful, they could model these *mitzvot* for younger kids, especially tefillin during religious school worship, making it again something that younger kids could look forward to trying. I would like parents and children to learn these *mitzvot* together.

I would like to have a morning minyan so that congregants can experience praying with tefillin each morning. If congregants are willing to come to synagogue on Friday night as well as Saturday morning, then I do not think it is unbelievable that at least ten congregants might come one morning a week for a morning minyan before work. Maybe this is idealistic, but if it was done, then tefillin would be experienced in a more meaningful way than at an adult education class.

I now realize that for Reform Jews who do not yet feel “commanded” to perform ritual *mitzvot*, it is extremely hard for these Reform Jews to consistently perform a ritual, especially outside of the synagogue. They may grow to feel commanded over time. Perhaps most Jews need

to feel commanded to perform *mitzvot* for the observance to be everlasting and not just an evanescent thing we do that feels exciting but then that fades. I find so much meaning in these rituals but I have not made a habit of wrapping tefillin; I have taken so many breaks from tallit katan when it gets boring, does not work with my outfit, or when I know I am going to eat unkosher food, and I feel like a hypocrite.

When it is not consistent, I do not believe the ritual is as powerful; I believe the highest benefit of ritual comes when a person performs it consistently. But, I do think it is good for Jews to have ritual as a way to connect to God and deepen spirituality whether they do this consistently or not. Then I think about rituals we have made part of our lives that we do not feel commanded to do. For example, active human beings who run, swim, or ride a bike consistently. They may not feel commanded to do these activities, but they consistently exercise because it has become their way of life; they feel that they are missing something when they do not do it. Is there a way to get ritual *mitzvot* to fall into this category for Reform Jews?—for it to become something like exercise or a hobby that a person does consistently because it brings them meaning and fulfillment and makes them feel generally healthy and happy? If this could be the case, then they would not need to feel commanded to consistently do it.

There is a difference between feeling commanded and feeling that performing this *mitzvah* is a sacred obligation. Perhaps Reform Jews do not feel that God will punish them if they do not do it, or that God is forcing them to do it, but these Jew may feel that they have a sacred obligation—they do it out of respect to their people and to God—they take the time each day or each week or however often to press pause on life and to do this *mitzvah*, which may inspire them to do other *mitzvot* as well. But will this sacred obligation be as consistent, as binding, as pressing, as something they feel truly commanded to do? Probably not.

Am I trying too hard to force ritual *mitzvot* on Reform Jews? If these *mitzvot* were originally designed for Jews who felt “commanded,” as in fully commanded by God to perform them for the sake of the world to come, and the intention was not for Jews to play around with them every once in a while when they feel like having a spiritual experience, then what are we doing? Are we turning *mitzvot* into a mockery? In some ways it seems like a medicine that was prescribed to be taken every day, but a person takes the medicine on and off for a few months when he feels like it and then says the medicine is not working. But he is not taking it the way it was designed to be taken. These *mitzvot* may appear to be obsolete to people who have never tried taking the prescription the way it was prescribed. Perhaps ritual *mitzvot* were not designed purely for those who felt “commanded” the way our ancestors did, but for the entire Jewish people, past, present, and future. For the Jewish People who would have different theologies and different definitions of “commanded” but who still consider themselves dedicated, passionate Jews who have a hunger for *mitzvot* and strive to bring them into their lives.

As Reform Jews we are innovative, and we take tradition and make it our own. I still find it difficult to balance all of this. Regardless of the issues this thesis has raised for me about the place of *mitzvot* in Reform Judaism, I believe that all Jews deserve to be educated on the full range of Jewish practice. My congregants deserve to know about ritual *mitzvot*. I look forward to teaching them about the ways ritual *mitzvot* have inspired our people over time and allowed them to deepen their relationship with God. I hope that I will always find meaning in ritual *mitzvot*, and I hope that my congregants will find meaning in them as well.

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