

This doesn't happen all the time but it does happen. I'll be talking with folks, not even about synagogue business. And someone will say some version of 'I'm going shopping on Saturday and then to a movie and then out to dinner where I'll eat food that's not Kosher.' Well, ok, not all of those things at once but at least one of them. Then there's always a pregnant pause and the person who says it turns to me and says, 'Sorry, Rabbi.'

I am immediately transformed from Rachel who was just having an interesting conversation with my friends to The Rabbi, capital T, capital R. It's true that I do observe the laws of *Shabbat* and *Kashrut*. It's also true that I know most people in our congregation don't. So I never understand why people think it's necessary to apologize to me when that issue comes up. Clearly if they wanted to, they could observe these mitzvot just like I do. So are they just apologizing because they feel guilty saying it in front of me? It's very confusing to me. But the bottom line is that I really don't want to be anyone's judge.

Having said that, of course, I would love to see everybody at CSI observing Jewish laws. It would make for a deeper feeling of connection among us and lead to wonderful conversations about how our laws have been given, received and followed. But I'm more realistic than that. What I would suggest instead is for all of us to find the laws that are meaningful to us and add them to our Jewish practice.

I do understand something about making choices about observance. I haven't always obeyed the laws of *Shabbat* or *Kashrut*.

Even though both set of my grandparents were observant, my parents ran as fast as they could away from *mitzvot* as soon as their parents died. It wasn't until I was a young adult that I began studying Judaism. Still I came to my learning with a preconceived notion. I believed there had to be a rational explanation for each law. And if there wasn't, there was no point in following it.

For example, I would say that the laws of *Kashrut* were created because there were very few ways to keep food fresh 3000 or even 100 years ago. We were commanded not to eat foods like shell fish and pork that easily went bad and caused disease. I would point out that is no longer the case. Since we have refrigeration, we can simply keep all of our foods at the right temperature, therefore, we can eat whatever we want. I was really proud of my logic and my way of dismissing my obligations to practice Jewish law. And thrilled that I could still eat shrimp.

But the more I studied our religion, the more I realized that the only reason to follow some of our laws, like *Kashrut* and *Shabbat* is to be able to make ourselves stay conscious about all of our actions and to be as connected to God and holiness as we can. When I began to practice the mitzvot of *Shabbat* and *Kashrut* in particular, I found I was happier and calmer. I had a reason to spend one day not doing anything I had to do. This gave me so much more than a 25 hour break. It gave me time to really renew my energy and to spend time just stopping. The following week became much more productive because I had taken that time off.

I also noticed a big change in how and what I ate. I had to think about what foods I was preparing, what I was combining them with and what utensils I was using. This was a daily practice that helped me be more conscious of what I was eating and more grateful for the food that I ate.

I had an interesting experience with a friend of mine about this very thing. When I came home from the hospital in December, my friend, Betty stayed with me. She did not keep kosher in her own home but there she was in my home with sole control of the kitchen. She very quickly realized how much consciousness it took to navigate her way around it.

She stayed with me for only four days but after she had been back home for a week, she still found herself questioning every utensil, dish, pot or pan she picked up even though she no longer had to do that. She said, it was the most conscious she ever been in her kitchen. That is exactly the reason to keep kosher: so that we can be conscious and consciously connected to holiness while we are preparing our meals.

There are two places in our Torah that give us the origin of our *Kashrut* laws, both say: 'Do not boil a kid in its mother's milk.' [*Shmot* 23:19 and *Devarim* 14:21] While our Sages have expanded our *kashrut* laws well beyond this one verse, they tell us that even this verse alone teaches us to be conscious about relationships. If we boil a kid in its own mother's milk, we are disrespecting the relationship the mother has with her offspring.

Another verse we find in the *Torah* says: [*Shmot*, 24:3]. "And *Moshe* came and told the people all the words of *Adonai*, and all the judgments; and all the people answered with one voice. And they said, 'All the words which *Adonai* has said, *na'aseh ve-nishmah*, we will do and we will understand.'"

It is odd for us to do something before we understand it. But regarding Jewish law, we are not supposed to ask why; we are expected to obey the law because it is given to us by God. We learn in the *Ahava Rabah* prayer that God gave us these laws because He loved us so much. They were not given as a punishment but as a reward.

We could paraphrase Tevya, from *Fiddler on the Roof* and say, 'What don't you reward someone else.' But really each *mitzvah* we practice changes our understanding of our simplest action and then it changes our understanding of our relationship to our religion and our relationship to God and holiness.

In this way, action leads to insight and understanding. Or we could also say that action leads to excellence. In the new bestseller, *Outliers*, by Malcolm Gladwell, we learn that success is not just dictated by talent alone but by luck and by practice. Gladwell says that there is a 10,000 hour rule. This is the amount of time we must spend doing something to become an expert at it. Living in the age of speed, we tend to want to be good at something very quickly and if we are not, then we stop doing it and move on to something else. But Gladwell and Judaism tell us that in order to be really good at something, to understand the intricacies of any subject, we must first practice, practice, practice.

I encourage everybody to imagine taking on some of the mitzvot particularly those of *Shabbat* and *Kashrut*. Perhaps deciding not to eat pork and shell fish; perhaps not mixing milk and meat together; perhaps choosing not to go shopping on *Shabbat* until 4 or 5 in the afternoon. If we give ourselves time on *Shabbat* without planning anything to do, we could choose to spend that time with our family and friends or with a good book or just having time to sit and reflect. If we each took on one new *mitzvah*, even just one per month, we would become more aware of how we live our lives, of how we relate to others and of what God and holiness mean to us.

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*Na'aseh v'nishma*, we will do the *mitzvot* and we will create a better life for ourselves and for all of those around us.

*Shana tova u'mitukah*. May we each have a good and sweet year.