The Ten Suggestions? Thoughts on Parashat Yithro, January 22, 2011

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Angel for Shabbat, by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Modern western civilization trains us to value independence, autonomy, freedom of choice. We have an aversion to being told what to do by authoritarian figures; rather, we like to make decisions based on our own judgment. We are open to advice and suggestions; but we are less than enthusiastic about being bossed around.

If a Revelation at Mount Sinai were to take place again in our times, we would probably prefer to receive the Ten Suggestions rather than the Ten Commandments. We can take or leave suggestions: commandments--especially from an authority like God--seem to leave us with little personal choice.

Because of popular discomfort with "commandments", the word mitzvah (which means commandment) is often translated as good deed or act of kindness.

Yet, for a religious Jew, commandments are viewed in a very positive light. They are not external burdens imposed on us, but avenues of connection with God. By living according to God's own guidance for us, we actually achieve a higher level of inner freedom. We are freed from extraneous concerns and worries; we can focus on what is really important in our lives, on our spiritual and moral development. When we fulfill a commandment, we feel the presence of the loving and all-wise Commander. Doing a mitzvah properly is liberating.

Dr. Barry Schwartz, in his book "The Paradox of Choice", powerfully demonstrates how moderns are less happy because of the wealth of choices available to us. We demand autonomy and freedom to make choices--but at some point, things spin out of control. Instead of liberating us, our multitude of choices can paralyze us. People find it increasingly difficult to make decisions because they have too many options from which to choose. Even in matters of marriage, people find it problematic to make a decision--perhaps there's someone else out there who is better, richer, smarter etc. The happiness index in the United States has shown steady decline, even as material prosperity and number of choices have grown.

Happiness is not equated with the choices available to us, but rather on our ability to make the right choices. Dr. Schwartz suggests that people would be happier if they were not "maximizers" who insisted on getting the "best" of every choice they make. Rather, people should be "satisficers"--they should make decisions based on fewer choices and know when to be satisfied with their decisions.

Mitzvoth are a God-given road map to becoming "satisficers". We are trained to know which foods we may eat, and which foods we may not eat; which relationships are proper, and which relationships are not proper; which conduct is moral, and which conduct is immoral. By eliminating many useless and unproductive options, the mitzvoth direct us in the path of inner strength and freedom to make satisfying choices. Life is seen not as a grand competition to get the "best", but as an adventure in becoming our own best by coming closer to the ways of God.

By studying and observing mitzvoth--commandments--we put our lives into context with God. This is not an insignificant achievement. When given the choice to follow God's commandments or human beings' suggestions, we would be wise to choose the mitzvoth.

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