



Sometimes we hear of divas - singers and rock bands and movie stars and rabbis - who make demands in their riders before they will go on stage. It's easy to make fun, requesting that everything backstage has to be pure white, or that there is an endless supply of some obscure food, or that no one looks them in the eyes. It sounds ridiculous, like they are babies needing everything just so, otherwise they will leave in a huff.

I'm sure it has been going on for millennia - prima donas with fragile egos making sure that they are pampered by peons, but the modern version of this started with the 80s rock band Van Halen. They had so many pyrotechnics and moving pieces in their touring show that, in addition to each venue signing a regular contract, they had to sign a safety rider to ensure the musicians and audience would not get injured during the concert. Slipped somewhere in the middle is the part about no brown M+Ms backstage.

It all came about because, during a show in Colorado, the local promoter had failed to read weight requirements, and the heavy equipment would have fallen through the arena floor. After that, David Lee Roth, the lead singer of Van Halen, came up with this ingenious plan and insisted on this rider. If they saw brown M+Ms in their green room, they knew that the rider had not been read, and there was no way to ensure their safety during the show.

It had nothing to do with being a diva, with being so demanding and needy. Merely a way to make sure that people are following rules. An

outward sign, something noticeable, representing all of the invisible, difficult to spot, yet vital pieces of information.

This is how I understand mitzvot, the 613 commandments in the Torah. This is the soul of Judaism. God gives us these outward signs, these big commandments - keeping Kosher, Shabbat, building a Sukkah, celebrating Pesach, wrapping tefillin. These are the brown M+Ms. They show us, the community, God, if you have read the fine print of the rider.

What is in the fine print in the rest of the rider? It is next to our brown M+Ms. Kashrut - the rules of keeping Kosher - is a reminder of how we treat animals and how we treat our bodies. It is a reminder to look at, to know and understand, what we eat before we scarf it down, blindly. Do we treat our bodies as if they are a representation of the image of God, as described at the beginning of the Torah? Do we treat animals with care, as is said multiple times in the Torah, or do we harm and abuse them when trying to feed ourselves? It is difficult for us to convey to the world how we treat animals, how we treat our bodies, so we have a system of Kashrut as the brown M+Ms to represent the invisible rules we are trying to follow.

Shabbat is another brown M+M. Shabbat is about putting everything else aside for a day. There are 39 m'lakhot, things the Torah says you cannot do on Shabbat. I don't think God is noting that we sorted things today, a violation of Torah law, or that we winnowed. I think God gives us restrictions on Shabbat so that we can make sure we are taking care of our souls. It is so easy, in a society that prizes productivity and checklists, to never take a break. In a society that praises capitalism, to go shopping every day, to close

a deal. A new package arrives on our doorsteps every day. But the Torah put in place this fine print of stopping.

Of using the things you have and appreciating them and not buying or making or selling or working, but just being. For one day a week. Basking in who you are and what you already have. What you can share with loved ones. The essence of Shabbat.

The Torah asks us over and again to eat matza on Pesach. It is not for its delicious taste, it is not for its health benefits, it is not for Manischewitz's stock prices. It's because it demands of us to think about what it must have been like to escape. To be on the run. To know the harrowing experience of being enslaved. To think of others who are held against their will, waiting for their Moses. And what are you going to do about it? You take a week to eat matza to show yourself and others that you still think about the people who feel like strangers in a strange land. It's our outward sign, and our personal reminder, to still care.

Sukkot is my wife's favorite holiday. It is as close to camping as she can get me. It is a holiday where we feed our bodies to the mosquitos. [This blood is the wine of the anointed!] It is not for its own sake, not just so we can get splinters and climb ladders and make paper chains. The Torah does not demand this of us for nothing. It is to remember the plight of our ancestors who wandered with no permanent home, and to think of - every year, right after we come through these holidays, knowing how fortunate we are - to think of those who still have no permanent home.

Every commandment in the Torah - all 613 of them - are for one end. To bring godliness into the world. To bring God into the world. It is not for

the minutiae of mitzvot - that is only in place to make sure we are reading the text about how to be holy.

To make sure we and others don't get hurt with all the moving parts of this crazy stage and pyrotechnics. To make sure we are taking care of ourselves and each other. That's all it is.

Maybe you know this story from our Talmud. A person is thinking of converting to Judaism and goes to Shammai, the great rabbi of 2,000 years ago. "Oh, Shammai, you wise man, I will stand on one leg and you will teach me all of your religion. What does your Torah tell us?" And Shammai grimaces. "Our Torah is too complex to teach you while you stand on one foot. There's language and history and characters and interpretations. You don't have the balance to learn our beautiful tradition."

The person then went to another teacher, Hillel, and asked the same ridiculous question. Hillel, the greatest scholar of his day, smiled a slow, wide smile. "Bubbele," he said, "Stand on one leg. You ready? Here it is. Don't do to others what you don't want them doing to you. That's all of Torah. Go and learn."

You can learn Torah, Judaism, tradition, kugel recipes, every day of your life. And our tradition boils Judaism down to what you can learn while balancing on one foot (and this is before Jews got so into yoga). Treat others with kindness. As if the image of God were in them. That's it.

One of the most repeated prayers this week is the litany - the long list - of our sins. But notice them. If you were to sit down and write your mistakes from this past year, what would you write? Really, what would you write? An interesting conversation to have at home. If I were to ask you to write down

your *Jewish* mistakes, what would those look like? What Jewish mistakes did you make this week, this month, this year?

You might think you should write Al chet sh'chatanu l'faneikha for not remembering the things I learned in Hebrew school. Al Chet sh'chatanu l'faneikha eating a lobster roll. Al Chet sh'chatanu l'faneikha for not even knowing what certain Jewish holidays are. Ay-yay-yay-yay-yay. Not wearing tefillin. Not saying Shma. Not counting the Omer. Not remembering what the Omer is. Ay-yay-yay-yay-yay.

No. The poem, the long list, says nothing of Shabbat. Nothing of Pesach or Sukkot or Shmini Atzeret or pulled pork sandwiches or fasting on Yom Kippur. It is only about who you are, who you are trying to be. We don't apologize for the big things, the visual things, for the Brown M+Ms in the Torah.

Madison Square Garden, the Hollywood Bowl would not have to apologize for putting Brown M+Ms in the green room. They have to apologize for forgetting the contract, thinking the rider was merely superstition.

If you think the laws are put there to limit and restrict us, then you, like the music venue, think you are working with an idol. Something empty and fake and punishing for its own well-being. But it is not for God. God does not need our Shma, does not need us to forgo bacon, does not need us to lay tefillin and light candles. We need it, because those are the reminders, the constant reminders all day every day about the fine print in the Torah - about how to be a decent human being.

We put on a tallit with these fringes because those are the reminders to leave the corners of our field for the poor, to take care of those who have less, to bring food to the shul for Project Isaiah.

God does not need me to wear this piece of fabric every morning - I need it. As the reminder to be someone who pursues justice, who practices Tzedakah.

We sit in the sukkah - rain or shine - not because God needs us to, but because we need to remember that we, our family, used to have nothing, and but by the grace of God did others - family, friends, strangers, organizations - help us establish ourselves, over and over, in so many generations, but there are others who are not so lucky. We sit outside for a week, but they have not yet gotten the hand to be lifted. I need the reminder.

Every outward mitzvah - saying Kiddush and blessing our children and putting up a mezuzah and and and - is a brown M+M, reminding us to be good people.

So we stand this week, wrapping our knuckles lightly against our chests, to apologize to ourselves for treating the Torah like we treat the terms and conditions for a new cell phone - just click Agree and move on.

We remind ourselves that all Judaism needs of us, all God needs of us, all this community needs of us, is to be kind, to be holy, to be honest, to care for each other. Everything else is just the Brown M+Ms - signs to the world that (hopefully) we are bringing beauty and sanctity into our community.

[ending story - Menachem Mendl of Kotsk?]

My classmate Chana told me a story. She was at Gelson's in Calabasas and, as she was walking in, she saw a man asking shoppers to buy him a little

something because he was hungry. And she witnessed another man get out of his nice car and, as he was walking in, the hungry man asked him to buy a little something so that he could have a meal.

The wealthier gentleman looked at the man in need and said, “How dare you! How dare you stand outside Gelson’s asking for food. If you’re going to beg, go to a cheaper store. You don’t need local, organic, non-GMO Gelson’s food.”

My friend Chana, a short woman in her 50s, who you would not know is an ex-Marine just by looking at her, walked right up to the wealthy man and, in all her chutzpah, said back to him, “How dare you! Are you Jewish?” The man was confused. “What does that have to do with anything?” “Do you know what time of year it is? It’s Elul. Rosh Hashanah is around the corner. Is this the world you want to live in? Is this who you want to be? Where you can’t give this man in need an apple or some pretzels? It’s up to you to change the world.”

Now, we know that this could have backfired. That this man who was a foot taller than Chana could have reacted in an unsavory way. But little Chana is a force, and he seemed to get it from this small interaction. He was reminded that he was a mensch. The man seemed to realize that Judaism does not require him to pray for a better world, but to tip the balance towards a better world. To do it himself. Everything else he does as a Jew is just the reminder to be the person he should be.

My teacher, Rabbi Schulweis, used to ask, “What is the most important word in our siddur, in our mahzor?” And the answers were always wonderful. Shalom and Amen and Baruch and any one of God’s names. All great

answers. But his response was the word for Therefore. Therefore. We take the things we pray for here, the world we imagine here, the godliness of our ideals here, and then take them out into the world.

Make sure that we're not just the showiness of those Brown M+Ms - the big picture items, but really bringing Judaism to life with our actions.

The next words we say in the service, U'v'chen in three separate paragraphs, are the word Therefore. U'v'chen - Therefore, may all of God's creatures unite in fellowship to do God's work in the world. U'v'chen, therefore let us help those who are in need. U'v'chen, therefore wickedness will be silenced. Page 294.