

Reform Judaism - Ethical & Ritual *Mitzvot* **Rabbi Michael Lotker**

One simple way to understand the differences among the three major Jewish Movements (Orthodox, Conservative and Reform) is to compare their approach to Jewish Law. Orthodox Judaism teaches that all of the commandments (*mitzvot*) are binding on all Jews – period. Conservative Judaism also teaches that the *mitzvot* are binding on all Jews (that, for example, all Jews should keep kosher, pray three times a day, etc.) but that the laws can change with the time. By contrast, Reform Judaism teaches that the ethical laws (those that relate to how we treat each other, animals and the environment) are binding on all Jews but that the ritual laws (keeping kosher, daily prayer, wearing a *kippah*, etc.) should be studied and then followed based on whether we hear God speaking to us in the laws. We sometimes say that these laws “get a vote but not a veto.”

I teach pre-school kids, *B'nai Mitzvah* students, their parents and grandparents and even their non-Jewish friends, family members and neighbors that the essential gifts and lessons of the Jews are all wrapped up in a powerful insight – the idea that history should have direction, that we should be taking the world from a flawed past toward an improved future. I teach that our approach to Jewish laws and traditions should be to focus on the ethical, but not to dismiss the ritual. Why wear a *tallit*? Why eat *matzah*? Why study the rituals? Because they build teamwork among us – because they keep us happily working on the task of making the world a better place.

Using an analogy from the world of sports, these ritual *mitzvot* are like the uniforms a team wears. Uniforms and logos don't really help the team play better, but just as wearing our Laker's shirts and Dodger caps give us a sense of community spirit, wearing our Jewish stars, *tallitot* and eight days of *matzah* eating inculcate the spirit of *Am Yisrael Chai*. Moreover (to continue the analogy), just as there are many positions in any sporting team working toward the same goal, so too has God created many faiths and traditions which must work toward this end. I stress that it is these rituals, the songs, the prayers, the holidays, even the clothing that helps to keep us working together on God's most important mitzvah – *Tikkun Olam* – the repair of the world.

So we at Temple Ner Ami teach the prayers, sing the songs, present a *tallit* at your children's *B'nai Mitzvah*, conduct *Pesach Seders*, dress up for Purim, and light the Hanukkah candles. Judaism would be a dry and sterile religion indeed if we only limited it to the ethical.