

HIDDUR MITZVAH: WHAT A BEAUTIFUL MITZVAH!

by Rabbi Osher Chaim Levene

Imagine that you are a music-lover.

What inspires you is not the modern popular songs that fill the airwaves but the melodious, rhythmic music of the classical composers.

And, if there is one musical instrument that fires your enthusiasm, that moves you and absolutely captivates you, it is the musical notes of the piano. So how would you go about to listen and enjoy a breath-taking rendition of a magnificent piano concerto by Rachmaninov?

Well, to start with...you would probably select a world-famous pianist to play this favorite classical piece for you. And to complete your perfect experience of its performance, you surely could not improve upon having your chosen musician perform his take on a Steinway grand piano in an international concert hall renowned for its excellent acoustics.

In order to capture the fullness of mitzvah performance, it is similarly ideal for a Jew to experience the command of G-d in all its beauty, glory and splendor. The joy and love of fulfilling G-d's command is expressed through a dedicated, all-embracing attitude to mitzvah observance. The Jew endeavors to perform each commandment in the most beautiful fashion.

The beauty and importance of the action is matched by the quality of the tools used. The Jew's efforts and endeavors should, likewise, seek not only to fulfill the basic commandment but also to be involved in hiddur mitzvah, beautification and enhancement of the mitzvah in the most beautiful manner. The Sages interpret the verse, "This is My G-d and I will glorify Him" (Exodus 15:2) as an exhortation to beautify the commandments in the most glorious fashion.

And it is all because... the Jew is a mitzvah-lover.

Full expression of this outlook is apparent from the magnificent construction of the Sanctuary in the desert mentioned in our parsha and its successor, years later, the Temple in Jerusalem.

The Jewish commitment to establish a Divine Residence was made when they experienced their salvation at the splitting of the Reed Sea. This is an alternative translation of the aforementioned verse "This is My G-d and I will build Him a Sanctuary" (Exodus 15:2).

Gold, silver and precious gems were integral to the fabric necessary. But these were lovingly brought by the Jewish nation as they strove to create a magnificent abode for the Shechinah, Divine Presence. Artisans and craftsman were assembled to direct their skills in this enterprise. In fact, the

nation's generosity was so great that Moshe had to request for the people to halt their dedications.

In the same manner that the pianist's chosen tool and choice instrument is a Steinway grand piano, in his avodas Hashem, divine worship, the Jew sets out to obtain beautifully written tefillin and has no hesitation to purchase an expensive, flawless estrog (Talmud, Shabbos 133b). His aim, like the musician, is to achieve the most exemplary result using the best instruments to render this in the most attractive way. His knowledge and commitment to fulfill the laws with all their conditions and nuances is to reflect in the lifetime of dedication by the pianist to perfect his art.

The hiddur mitzvah emphasizes a loving willingness to fulfill G-d's command. He does not see it as a burden but as a pleasure. He does not treat it as a yoke to dispense with or shirk off. Nor does he view it as a responsibility that he has to discharge. Instead, he perceives it to be the most wondrous and joyous opportunity to draw closer to his Creator.

Not surprisingly, he shows his unrestraint "chivuv hamitzvos, the unbounded love for mitzvah". The mitzvah is a means of expressing his love. Accordingly, he invests all the necessary effort, money, energy...and much more. He is unimpressed just to get by with the minimum. Rather, he strives for the most stringent standards of kosher, he employs a G-d- fearing, diligent scribe to write a mezuzah with a clear script and the requisite intentions etc. (See Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzato, Mesillas Yeshorim Ch.18 how this reflects the trait of Saintliness). That he is not pushed off by the greater expenditure reveals his love of the mitzvah (See Talmud Succah 41b and Bava Kamma 9a).

The late Manchester Rosh Yeshiva Rav Yehuda Zev Segal was once traveling with his shemurah matzos (unleavened bread made from 'guarded' wheat from contact with moisture). When informed by airport officials that his luggage was over weight, he happily paid the excess charge. With a smile, he observed that this was part-and-parcel of his hiddur mitzvah.

A silver goblet upon which to recite the Shabbos Kiddush, for example, is testimony that we are not content with performing the act with due proficiency. We desire more. We are only satisfied when the vessels used in this endeavor are themselves surrounded and permeated with beauty. The beauty apparent in all our deeds goes back to the splendor invested in the construction of the Sanctuary that housed the Divine Presence.

Judaism is intrinsically beautiful. Accordingly, we want our relationship with G-d to be just as beautiful. Yes, Jewish living is "dear" - in both meanings of the word. But we wouldn't have it any other way. Text Copyright © 2006 by Rabbi Osher Chaim Levene and **Torah.org**.