

This time of year always brings back fond memories: the warm glow of a Hanukkiah filling the room, the crinkle of wrapping paper hastily thrown to the floor, the smell of fried latkes in the air and the sweet taste of chocolate gelt on my tongue.

I remember one year, a gift from my grandmother came in the mail. It was a long, flat box wrapped in sturdy brown paper. I picked it up, weighed it in my hands and shook it a bit. There was no telling what it could be and I couldn't wait to open it. The thick paper didn't give easily, but when it did, it fell quickly to the floor. Opening the box was easy after that. When I looked inside, I was a bit surprised to find a hand-knit sweater masquerading as my gift. I pulled it out to see what it was covering, but there was nothing else in the box. The sweater **was** my gift. It slipped out of my fingers and back into the box. A video game or something else would have been more exciting. Sweaters aren't exciting.

My mother reminded me that grandma went to a great deal of trouble to make the sweater. On top of that she had to package it up and send it out to me. This was a gift of love that required significant effort to get into my hands. The **least** I could do was try it on, and see how it felt. So, being the good boy that I was, I tried it on. It wasn't really my style, but it was more comfortable than I expected. I never actually wore it out of the house, but there were a number of occasions when the chill of winter struck me at home and that sweater provided the perfect warmth and comfort.

I thanked my grandmother for the gift, and for some reason she continued to send me hand-knit gifts over the years. Hats, gloves, scarves, socks, anything that could be knit, she sent. Sometimes the gifts were hideous, and I had to put on my best acting voice when I called to thank her. Although, a number of times, the gifts fit well and felt right, and somehow appealed to my current fashion sense. A hat she sent me once was an especially favorite gift of mine. I wore it all the time.

In many ways, I view my Judaism the same way as these hand-knit gifts. My grandmothers and grandfathers, and their grandmothers and grandfathers hand-crafted a set of rituals and practices, woven from the strands and threads of traditions that were passed down to them. And then, they packaged it up and took every effort to ensure that it made it into my hands. And often this act of passing it on was much harder than putting a package in the mail. It meant standing up for what they believed, struggling through oppression and difficulties, no matter the cost, to make sure I received this gift of Judaism.

This gift of Judaism is open to all who will accept it and embrace it. The threads of tradition are now in our hands, and we weave these threads into our own gifts for the future. And we will ensure that our children and grandchildren get them, as well.

However, before we can pass on this great gift, shouldn't we first try on all of its different aspects. Even if at first glance, something is clearly not our style, who knows, it may end up being more comfortable than we expected. Some practices we may not want to

perform outside the house. Some may end up being our favorites and giving us warmth and security when the chill of fear and doubt creep into our bones.

We don't have to like everything that has been passed down to us, but as my mother reminded me, our ancestors went to a great deal of trouble to get them into our hands and the least we could do is try them on.

For example, have you ever tried wrapping t'fillin? Well, there's a group of congregants who have found a great deal of meaning and comfort in this mitzvah. If you are interested in trying on this gift, drop by the Temple at 9:30 on Sunday mornings.

Or, have you tried wearing a tallit? Although it is traditionally only worn in the mornings, it is our custom here to wear it at night, if you choose. There is a nice supply of them in the cabinet in the back corner. Next time you're here, maybe you'll try on one.

A particular favorite mitzvah of mine is to say "HaMotzi" before eating a meal. It helps me to pause and appreciate that I actually have food to eat, unlike so many others in this world.

Or you could try the "new" mitzvah that we spoke about tonight. You could replace the bulbs in your house with compact fluorescent light bulbs, to use less energy and produce less carbon-dioxide. This is the mitzvah of taking care of our planet.

There's also the mitzvah of lighting candles in your home on Shabbat. In fact, there are a number of mitzvot (the plural of mitzvah) associated with Shabbat. The big one is refraining from work. When was the last time you truly had a day off? A day without checking work related emails or letting an issue at work weigh on your mind? When was the last time you took a day for yourself and your family, to escape from the trap-pings of our fast-paced consumer society? Shabbat is a great opportunity to do this. It is one of the most precious gifts we have been given from our ancestors, perhaps we should try it on.

A famous Jewish essayist, Achad HaAm, said, "It is not that the Jews have kept the Sabbath, but rather that the Sabbath has kept the Jews."

Now, before we can try on new mitzvot, it is important for us to understand this word. We may have heard it translated as "good deed" - as in "helping an old lady across the street is a mitzvah." It's true that many mitzvot can be understood as good deeds, but this is only a partial definition.

A more precise translation of mitzvah is "commandment." Although this meaning of the word is not entirely congruent with how we understand mitzvot today. As liberal Jews, we maintain the power of choice through knowledge. We hardly feel "commanded" sometimes. I would like to suggest instead of calling them "commandments," that we call them "commitments." A mitzvah is something we choose to take on for ourselves, and when we do, we feel its weight and importance. We are making a commitment to

ourselves, to God, and to our past. We are making a commitment to carry on Judaism into the future.

Ultimately, what's most important is that we put ourselves into Judaism. It is only our love and our attention that will keep Judaism viable and secure enough to pass on to future generations. I encourage you to make the commitment tonight to try your best to incorporate one new mitzvah into your lives each month. At the back of the room is a list of some suggested mitzvot that you may want to try on, to see how they fit.

Just like my grandmother's hand-knit gifts, they may not all fit our style or feel comfortable, but some may bring more warmth to our lives than we imagined.

Shabbat Shalom & Chag Orim Sameach