



WOMEN'S LEAGUE SHABBAT

Devar Torah on Hiddur Mitzvah

This year, Women's League for Conservative Judaism, the parent body of our sisterhood, launched a new initiative called The Hiddur Mitzvah Project - the beautification or embellishment of a mitzvah. The concept of hiddur mitzvah is thought to originate with Rabbi Ishmael, who comments on a verse from the Song of the Sea in Exodus (15:2): *This is my God & I will glorify God*. Rabbi Ishmael asks in a midrash: "How should we glorify God?" and then he answers his own question by saying: "I shall prepare before God a beautiful lulav, a beautiful sukkah, beautiful tzitzit, beautiful tefillin, a beautiful shofar, and a beautiful Torah scroll." This verse is considered the source of Jewish aesthetics. Hiddur mitzvah is a way for each of us to personalize a mitzvah through our own creativity.

With this theme, which is shared programmatically with the 2011-2012 Torah Fund campaign, we each have the opportunity to breathe new life and beauty into old formats as well as to add new ones to our daily lives and the yearly cycle of holidays. Hiddur mitzvah is not limited to creative handcrafts; it can be construed more broadly to include any type of enhancement of a mitzvah. When we reflect on enhancing holiday celebrations and semachot, we should think of all our senses, because it is the smells, tastes, sights, sounds, and feelings that make them special.

We have the opportunity to utilize this concept often in our Jewish lives. We can embellish our holiday tables by acquiring new ritual objects that we've made ourselves, our which have belonged to our families for generations, or which we've purchased from the many Judaic artists at work today. We can prepare new recipes to add new textures to our

table — that essential center of Jewish celebrations. We can study texts and read commentaries to expand our knowledge base and understand the whys of what we do, and thereby enrich our experiences.

We can create personal and communal moments in which to adopt the concept of hiddur mitzvah. For instance, during a weekend bar/bat mizvah, give each guest a piece of dough to fashion into a small challah to decorate with raisins, chocolate chips, poppy seeds, or other goodies and then serve them at the shared meal. Each challah is unique. Their odors and tastes enhance the experience.

Think out of the box and create meaningful ceremonies to mark events and changes in your life, like beginning a new career, an impending move, starting college, joining sisterhood, becoming a parent, or the end of menopause. The list is infinite, the possible ceremonies limited only by your imagination.

A final example is this Women's League Shabbat. Many of us have had personal hiddur mitzvah moments as we participated in the service. Some of us have done things we've done dozens of times in the past; others are participating for the first time or doing things they've never done before. Some of us might be wearing a new tallit or a first tallit or a new kippah we've put on just for today's service. No matter what our role today, we are all having a Shehecheyanu moment because coming together to participate in Women's League Shabbat enhances Shabbat for us as individuals and as a community of women. It is our own hiddur mitzvah experience.

When a pebble is thrown into a body of water, it creates ripples radiating outward. May the beauty of today's Shabbat experience be the pebble that moves us to personalize the way we practice mitzot and encourages us to add new mitzvot to our lives. By tapping into the world around us and focusing on our own senses, we can add new dimensions, practices

and observances that enhance the beauty of our lives and the lives of our families and our community. As we leave today, may we each carry the memory of our own hiddur mitzvah moments and the determination to create more.

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