The Talmud teaches [B. Kiddushin 31a]:
“Gadol ha-m’tzuveh v-oseh,
mei-mi sheh-eino m’tzuveh v’oseh.”

The one who is obligated and fulfills
is greater
than the one who is NOT obligated, yet fulfills.

This counterintuitive approach challenges us moderns.
Shouldn’t there be greater merit for doing what you are not obliged to do,
rather than merely fulfilling an existent obligation?

Certainly that’s our approach in modern America.
Bumper stickers regularly encourage us to
“Practice random acts of kindness and senseless acts of beauty.”
We are told that charity should come from the heart.

But in Jewish tradition,
while inspired moments of personal choice and unplanned commitment
certainly are deemed to have value, merit and even reward,
such impromptu actions, by their very nature,
are considered an unreliable and unsustainable approach
to maintaining our Jewish communal identity and purpose.
Judaism, in all its varieties and variations, 
is defined by both its empowerments and its obligations, 
not simply by optional moments of inspired action.

As we have been taught, 
“we may not be obliged to complete the task, 
but neither are we free to desist from it.”

Rabbi Rick Jacobs at his installation as URJ President 
here in Brooklyn this past June 
focused his opening remarks on exactly this topic.

“the Jewish tradition and the Jewish community 
make serious claims on us. 
Our texts and our history 
call to us to live lives of courage and conviction. 
Reform Judaism teaches that each of us is an autonomous individual, 
able to make thoughtful, religious choices. 
And yet, there is more.

“Consider this [scenario, Rick said]: 
Your daughter has the lead in the school play. 
The play is scheduled during one of the busiest weeks in your year, 
but still 
you mark the date of the performance in your calendar with red ink. 
Are you obligated to be there?”
“The Jewish philosopher Emanuel Levinas taught that we come into the world already obligated by the mere gaze of the other, a gaze that demands a response from us.
By this, Levinas means that relationships always come with obligations. Is it written somewhere that we have to go to our child’s school play? No.
Some of the COVENANTS in our lives are UNwritten, others written, but they are ALL binding.”

“Reform Judaism, when practiced with commitment,” Rick reminded us, “is no less demanding than other expressions of Judaism – and some would argue even more demanding because we do not practice our religion by rote but by informed choice.”

Rick uses the word covenant to describe the source of the claims laid upon us. The word covenant, B’rit in Hebrew, is an indispensible concept in Judaism.
God and all humanity
   are connected through the B'rit with Noah,
   symbolized by the Rainbow.

God and the People of Israel
   are connected through the B'rit established at Sinai,
   which gives us the name B’nai Brit, Children of the Covenant.

God and the individual Jew
   are connected through B’rit Milah or B’rit Bat,
   the rituals by which we enter into the Covenant
   thereby establishing identity
   along with its obligations and empowerments.

And marriage, is called B’rit Nisuim—the covenant of marriage,
   Not merely love and romance, but commitment and expectation.

B’rit, then, is the Jewish way of establishing relationships
as well as
the claims and empowerments
that attend all such relationships.

Like the prophets Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Hosea,
who metaphorically envisioned the relationship between God and Israel
as the commitment between human spouses,
--bound by a marital covenant—
Modern Orthodox philosopher Rabbi David Hartman, in describing his theology of covenant, offers the metaphor of marital commitment: “a voluntarily accepted bond, founded on love.”

And based upon this metaphor, Hartman stresses the responsibilities AND freedoms, The obligations AND empowerments, that such a covenant entails between partners.

Hartman is arguing for a Covenantal vision --of God’s relationship with us-- that considers its partners as equals, “that recognizes the intellectual and moral autonomy of its partners.” Where individual Jews are not simply expected to be submissive and compliant to God and tradition, but to engage, challenge and transform them.

For we Reform Jews, Hartman’s Covenantal vision, reminds us that In our relationship with our Judaism, there can be no true freedom without responsibility no real empowerment, absent obligation
As my teacher Rabbi Eugene Borowitz affirms, 
“Authentic relationship obligates.”

But if I’ve learned one thing over 21 years in the Reform Rabbinate, it’s that the word ‘obligation’ tends to be a non-starter in our Reform synagogues.

Indeed, ‘Obligation’ is a language to which we autonomous individualistic Reform Jews, even we autonomous individualistic Reform Rabbis, seem indisposed.

Why is that? Are we all simply unbridled spiritual individualists, The Libertarians of Jewish religious practice?

Before modernity, to be a Jew meant to be part of a mostly autonomous Jewish community, a community which had almost complete control over every aspect of an individual Jew’s life, even to the extent of seizing a person’s property, incarcerating individuals, inflicting corporal—and even on rare occasion, capital—punishment.
The only way to exit the controlling power of that Jewish community, was by exchanging one communal identity and set of obligations for another. You could reject one communal covenant, but only by embracing another.

It was only with the advent of Modernity in the last two centuries, and the rise of the modern nation-state, that personal, individual identity was transformed, from communal and obligatory, to personal and optional. Before modernity, there was no opting out. But the advent of Modernity, left it up to each person to choose to opt in. All identity and all religious covenants became optional and voluntary.

Identity was no longer the imposition of communal norms, Identity now became the province of either individual acceptance or rejection.

Where previously the Jewish community could both define, and compel, the behaviors that defined Jewish identity, now the individual was given primacy.
Religious obligation became for Jews (and Christians) a private and voluntary matter.

The metaphor of Covenant was re-written
No longer was it defined as Sovereign to Subject,
no longer was it envisioned as the hierarchy of Master to Servant,
or even Parent to Child
During the Emancipation, as tens of thousands of Jews fled the newly opened gates of the Ghettos,
many were ready to cast off all previously imposed commitments, connections and identities.
Significant numbers went so far as the baptismal fount.

But most Jews—like most Christians in Europe—were content,
and even more, intrigued,
by a new covenant of sorts, one political rather than religious,
by the possibility of secular citizenship with its modest demands of our actions and activities,
and its primary focus on preventing the violation of basic civil and criminal prohibitions.
By and large, if we pay our taxes, observe the traffic regulations and avoid running afoul of the police and regulators, Modern secular society is indifferent to our actions And, barring fortune or fame, will leave us alone.

Reform Judaism
was born amidst the attempt
to recast Judaism as a voluntary system,
a new understanding of the Jewish Covenantal relationship
one that is worthy of
the individual Jew’s identification, commitment and participation.
But, having been nurtured in a society (perhaps unique in history) that offers many opportunities, but few outright demands,
We have become unaccustomed to the language of Obligation.
Relegating the language and concept
as the province of our Orthodox brethren.

And yet we still recognize — if not quite acknowledge —
that our own moral and religious insights and experiences make their own claim on us as individuals.

Yes, says Rick— “Each of us is an autonomous individual,
able to make thoughtful, religious choices.
We do not practice our religion by rote, but by informed choice.
And yet, there is more.”
The Jewish people's Covenant did not begin with this generation, writes Rabbi Borowitz, it is a Covenant that has evolved over millennia. . . .
“Exodus, Sinai, settlement, Temple, Exile, Return, the Destruction of the Second Temple, Diaspora, the rise of the rabbis, medieval triumph and trial, . . . Emancipation, the Holocaust, and [the Modern State of Israel]. We too live by Jewish memory. . . . Hence, much of what they did as their Covenant[al] duty will likely, still lay a living claim on us. For the Jewish self, then, Covenant means Covenant-with-prior-Jewish-generations.” But it is not only prior generations that make claim upon us. For we Jews, the claims of covenant are mediated through our own personal encounter with our sacred texts:

“Whether we are aware of it or not, the [text] seek to make claims upon us. When we read a work of literature, we respond to the claims being made upon us. We may like what we hear in the work, we may be confused by it, or we may find it offensive, but at a deep level we respond . . . “
The scholar David Nowak writes that by engaging the sacred texts of Judaism, we discover their power to make claim upon us, to discover what God may want of us.

“The text is making a direct claim on me and my fellows to know what its author wants us to know. In theological parlance, this is called revelation, which we are to approach by "learning" (talmud). . . . The most important question asked in the Talmud — and which should still be asked by us — is "where does this claim come from" (mena hanei millei)? May we then have the courage to approach sacred texts in order to be claimed by their content. In the Musar tradition, which focuses on daily ethical living, the study of our sacred texts is understood to be the heart of Jewish identity and commitment. The goal is not mastery of these texts, but rather their acquisition.

In Musar, “the acquisition of Torah depends on bearing the burden of another. What is it that we acquire when we acquire Torah? We acquire a thirst for a call or claim upon us."
We acquire a desire
to be called upon by another and another and another
. . . an infinite desire.
. . .
Our motivation is not simply that studying Torah
will make us better people.
Rather, as people who have accepted the burden of the other,
we are now motivated to delve deeper and deeper,
to discover additional possibilities for accepting
even greater responsibility for others.”

That is the nature of the claim of our Covenant —
whether we experience that claim upon us
most profoundly
from our history, or our ancestors, or God or Torah. —
we are responsible--not just for ourselves--but for others.
Covenant envisions and necessitates community.

The foundation of Jewish life,
upon which all else is established,
is the commanding claim of community.
We cannot be Jews in isolation from one another.
“If we don't have a fundamental commitment
to create [and maintain] community
then we have no place to pitch our tent.”
The power of Covenant
is that it establishes and anchors the autonomous individual
firmly within community.

Of course, we each belong
to a whole variety of communities,
each of which, by virtue of our loyalty or membership,
has a claim upon us,
to which group we will give priority?

As Reform Jews
we begin by affirming our commonality with all human beings.
As B’nai Brit, Children of the Covenant made at Sinai,
We are not excluded from being part of God’s first Covenant with Noah.
“And yet. there is more.”

Rabbi Borowitz teaches that as Reform Jews
“We understand all human [beings] to be covenanted to God . . .
[But our] Jewish selves relate to God not simply as one of humankind,
but as part of the people of Israel’s
historic, ongoing Covenant[al] relationship with God.”

As Reform Jews, our Jewish commitments and practices, TODAY
derive far less from communally formulated exterior obligations,
and far more from individually or familially negotiated interior obligation, 
or in the language that speaks to our current generation, 
from those commitments and practices 
that we experience having claim upon us.

Yet we must also affirm that as individual Reform Jews, 
each element of tradition 
will NOT necessarily have EQUAL claim on us.

Claim.
“Whenever we enter a serious relationship, 
the very reality of that relationship 
makes us feel a claim on us 
[by and] toward the other person.”

Our children and parents have claim upon us. 
Our spouses and siblings have claim upon us. 
Our careers and our nation have claim upon us.

What about Judaism? 
What sort of claims will we acknowledge upon ourselves? 
What priority will we give 
to experiencing those claims? 
to acknowledging those claims?
Tonight, I’d like to make a serious and sincere request, and ask you, to consider—and respond to—during the coming months and year, in your own authentic, autonomous and individualistic voice, the following questions:

What does it mean to me to be a member of the Covenant?
What claim might God make upon me?
What claim might Torah make upon me?
What claim could the Jewish people have upon me?
What claim do my ancestors have upon me?
And finally,
what claim will the future of Judaism and the Jewish people make upon me?

For even greater than one who is obligated and fulfills,
is the one who seeks out that which will claim him or her, and fulfills!