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From The Editor

Decision Making

The sociologist Peter Berger, in his book *The Heretical Imperative,* describes modernity as a time characterized by "choice over fate" and "decision over destiny." What for our ancestors was taken as a given — that what is, is what must be, and that what is wrong and what is right is necessarily what is wrong and right eternally and everywhere — is no longer self-evident for moderns.

As Berger notes, modernity pluralizes. Education, communication, technology and information continually broaden our awareness of cultures other than our own. We become increasingly self-conscious of how what we take for granted as being "out there" is in fact socially-constructed reality determined by circumstances of time, place, politics, economics, gender and a host of other variables. We discover the opportunity as well as the anxiety inherent in making decisions about values, behavior and belief.

As Mordecai Kaplan first noted over seventy years ago, if this situation is true for cultures in general, it is also true within individual cultures as well. Thus Kaplan's model of Judaism as the "evolving religious civilization of the Jewish people" implies that in modernity, the Jewish people must also choose from a variety of possibilities regarding belief, practice, liturgy and social structure, among others.

How do we make the decisions by which we consciously shape Jewish life? How do we make choices regarding the application of Jewish concepts, values and beliefs to contemporary issues? What models of theory and practice determine how we balance the claims of tradition with the needs of modernity?

Traditional Jewish communities have most often assigned authority and responsibility for decision making to religious authorities whose knowledge of religious texts was comprehensive. Working within the framework of Jewish law (*halakha*) these authorities use primary and secondary texts in conjunction with the records of subsequent generations of interpretation and ruling.

Modern Jewish communities question the *a priori* authority of the *halakha* and the presumption that all decision making must take place within its structures. Yet modern Jewish communities also face inevitable moments of decision making, for the collectivity as well as for individuals. How, in the absence of agreed-upon centralized authority, can meaningful Jewish decisions be made?

In this issue, we focus on theoretical as well as practical discussions of contemporary Jewish decision making. What is the role of *halakha* in Reconstructionist decision making? How does "values-based decision making" actually work? How does the relationship between a rabbi and congregation work effectively so that decision making is a shared responsibility? What values and processes inform decision making on a practical level in our agencies, organizations and synagogues? Our authors provide a variety of options, ideas and approaches that illustrate the many ways in which contemporary Jewish communities continue the processes by which collective norms and practices continue to be shaped.

In our "Viewpoint" section, we present discussions focusing on spiritual silence and spiritual speech, examining the current interest in Jewish meditation, and the pastoral opportunities and responsibilities involved with eulogies. Book reviews return us to the themes of recent issues of this journal (healing, public policy) as well as addressing spiritual vocabulary and the environment.

Correction

In our last issue, we incorrectly identified Rabbi Cheryl Jacobs ("Not A Typical Rabbi") as Vice-President of Public Affairs for Planned Parenthood in New York City. Her correct title is Vice President, Public Affairs, Planned Parenthood Hudson Peconic, Inc. (serving Westchester, Rockland, Putnam and Suffolk counties). Our apologies.

We wish our readers a relaxing and renewing summer!

— Richard Hirsh

To Serve or Not to Serve: Creating an Alcohol Policy for Jewish Communities on Campus

By Daniel Aronson

As a novice Hillel professional over a decade ago, I had the misfortune to oversee a potentially disastrous Purim party. Hundreds of rowdy college students converged on Hillel House to drink vodka punch and to hear a popular student rock group called, of all names, "God." Among those who paid the $2 cover charge were students from a neighboring campus who drove to our party. As far as we know, no one got hurt that night; at least we were not aware of any traffic accidents caused by the deadly combination of drinking and driving, or incidents of date rape, where alcohol is quite often an exacerbating factor. The worst to happen was that the students organizing the party themselves became intoxicated and forgot to guard the cash box — $800 was stolen.[1] Fortunately, money was all that was lost that evening, for money was a commodity easily replaced.

After this party, the other Hillel professional and I realized that we needed to set parameters around the dispensing of alcohol at our parties. Student trust and empowerment needed to be balanced with a discussion of responsibility and liability in light of changed circumstances. First, students were driving to Hillel events, whereas previously we could be relatively sure that all attendees had walked. Second, there was increasing awareness of and education around the horror of date rape. How could this community understand alcohol consumption at its events given these new realities and the attendant issues of liability?

We went through a protracted pe-

Daniel Aronson is Dean of Admissions at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. He wishes to thank Rabbi Alan Flam for his assistance in both recalling and analyzing the events cited in this article. Rabbi Aronson is also grateful for the assistance of a student who was present during these events but who asked to remain anonymous.

riod of deliberation and debate to establish an alcohol policy to avoid a repeat of that night. Over the next few years, we experimented with a "responsible" alcohol policy, in which beer — not vodka punch — was served, first to all comers and then eventually to all who could show proof of being 21 years of age or older. Eventually the students, with guidance from the professional staff, established a no-alcohol policy. But when that policy was implemented, hardly any students came to the function, and so we went back to serving beer to those with proof of age, a policy which was extremely difficult to enforce. Perhaps a more thoughtful process of decision making would have yielded a more sound policy — a process which would have maximized the amount of communal ownership of the resultant policy, which would have accorded with the law of the land, campus policies, and Jewish teachings, and which would have reflected the central values of the community.

A Talmudic Precedent

The urgency for such a decision making process is well illustrated by a Talmudic tale: Raba and Rabbi Zera are sitting together for a Purim feast, drinking wine and becoming tipsy. Raba eventually loses his senses altogether, arises and cuts Rabbi Zera's throat. The next day, Raba prays for his friend's life and revives him. A year passes and Raba says to Rabbi Zera, "Come, sir, let's make a Purim feast together." Rabbi Zera declines, responding, "A miracle doesn't happen all the time." (BT *Megillah* 7b)

Indeed, at our "Purim feast" it was miraculous that no greater damage was done (again, I emphasize, that we know of). Like Rabbi Zera, though, those in authority opted not to tempt fate in succeeding years. The staff and students acted to tone down future parties by undertaking a process of evaluation and policy formulation. That process, however, was flawed in many ways.

A Flawed Process

It is worth examining the process by which the community came up with its alcohol policy, for I believe it exemplifies the way in which decisions are often made within the Hillel setting.[2] First, overseeing the process were two professionals with divergent views on alcohol service at Hillel, who hadn't agreed upon how to present their views in a way that would fully educate the students about the complexities of the issue. One advocated a "responsible" alcohol policy; the other a no-alcohol policy. Each met individually on an *ad hoc* basis with some of the key student leaders. These meetings, while characterized by an honest exchange of points of view, primarily represented efforts at lobbying their positions, rather than educating the students about the effects of alcohol consumption or the positions on alcohol taken by the Jewish tradition. From the beginning, therefore, the decision mak-

ing process was a political one, rather than an educational one.

Eventually, the student leadership decided to devote one — but only one — of its weekly meetings to the topic of alcohol at Hillel events. Dozens of students attended the meeting, many more than would normally have attended a meeting of the Jewish Student Union. The discussion was impassioned. The majority of students favored serving alcohol at Hillel events, and argued their positions vigorously. Nevertheless, it was the vocal minority, who favored a no-alcohol policy, that won the day. Even though they invoked legality and safety, it was an appeal to conscience that proved determinative.

One person posed the following scenario: What if the campus paper were to publish a headline tomorrow that reads, "JSU Debates Alcohol Policy: Votes to Violate Law and University Policy"? No one in good conscience could have voted to continue serving alcohol at Hillel parties after that. It is true that the appeal to conscience represented a valid ethical argument. Unfortunately, the students did not elaborate on the argument's inherent Jewish values — e.g. *ma'arit ayin* (concern for appearances) or *shem tov* (the value of bearing a good name) — opting to settle for the guilt-inducing value of their hypothetical scenario. To be sure, none of the arguments presented on either side were presented consciously in a values-based idiom, let alone a Jewish one. In the end, this stage of the process was characterized by high emotions and, again, political maneuvering.

Good Intentions, Mixed Results

After the decision was made, the students held a Purim party without alcohol. The attendance was dismal, and the students felt like failures. As a result, rather than recommit themselves to the policy that had been decided upon, and to think creatively about how to implement it the next time, the students in conjunction with the professional who had advocated the "responsible" alcohol policy began to question the wisdom of that policy. In fact, the no-alcohol policy was short-lived, and we later adopted a policy that permitted alcohol in a controlled way.

The decision-making process that resulted in a no-alcohol policy was not without merit. It appeared to be inclusive; anyone who wanted to participate could participate, and was invited to participate. It was also democratic; after all the arguments had been heard, a clear majority voted against the service of alcohol. In addition, there was a hint of values and ethics in the discussion, even though these values and ethics were not presented with sufficient force. Finally, after the policy was implemented, staff and students informally evaluated its effect and decided to try a different policy the next time they held a communal celebration. All these attributes point to the good intentions of all involved.

The process was flawed, however,

primarily because it was highly truncated and devoid of deliberate, thoughtful discussion before the issue came up for a vote among all members of the community. The staff and students who facilitated the decision-making process did not provide opportunities for thorough explorations of communal norms and values, scientific data concerning alcohol consumption, general societal views of alcohol, or Jewish texts dealing with alcohol before the final (and only) communal discussion. Given that the issue at hand did not present itself as a crisis that required immediate attention, the staff and students missed an opportunity to enact a truly inclusive, consciously values-based, learning-centered approach to decision making.

The Principles of Process

What might an alternative process to the one that we used look like? First, it would be based on four principles:

1) Democracy: Every effort would be made to include as many voices within the community as possible. As will be seen, an effective process would allow for discussion, learning and decision making among a smaller group of representatives of the community before all members of the community would be invited to contribute to the process. Ultimately, however, all members of the community, who have a stake in the issue and a desire to be included in the process, would be included at some level.

2) Values: The community, through representatives, would examine its core values and how those values become manifest in its mission. It is critical that the ultimate decision regarding alcohol service reflect the deepest beliefs of the community and contribute to the mission which garbs those values. Without such consonance, there is a great chance that the final decision will be viewed as inconsequential or, worse, inconsistent with what the group is trying to accomplish. Consequently, the community will have little commitment to the implementation of the new policy, and some members of the community may try to subvert it.

3) Balancing the past with the present: The Jewish textual tradition would be revered as a wellspring of wisdom, yet there would be an understanding that, in their writings, our forebears were responding to a set of historical circumstances shaped by particular political and sociological factors. Staff and students would see themselves as heirs to the wisdom of our ancestors but with a new set of concerns shaped by current political and sociological factors. Any effective decision-making process would be guided by inherited wisdom and contemporary norms, values and concerns. To paraphrase Mordecai Kaplan, the past would have a vote, but not a veto.

4) *Kedusha* or holiness: The process

would take into account that all beings are created in the image of the Divine and bear sparks of the Divine within. Moreover, the staff and students would elevate that which is mundane and routine to something with potentially transcendent meaning. How members of the community comport themselves in times of celebration, for example, may bring holiness to those moments or reduce them to moments of mere self-indulgence and, possibly, endangerment.

Stages of Decision Making

Guided by these principles, the process would take place over a period of time, perhaps one month, one semester or one year, to be predetermined by the committee convened to explore the relevant issues and to draft a policy. Whatever the time span, the committee would commit to extending the period should circumstances warrant such an extension, or abbreviating the process if it is clear that the process can be completed in a shorter time without compromising its integrity. While both staff and students may be tempted to get to the bottom-line early on, the process itself and its end result will be stronger if all parties work patiently and deliberately.

The decision making process that I am proposing entails ten stages, some of which can be combined, others of which are necessarily discrete:[3]

• Stage I: Form a Committee or Task Force

The staff and student leadership (e.g. the executive committee of the student organizing body) should create a committee of five to ten people who will commit themselves to a relatively long-term period of study, discussion, debate and decision making. The committee should be comprised of individuals who come to the issue of alcohol service at Hillel with differing opinions but with an openness to exploring the issues fully and to having their opinions change by the end.

In addition, committee members should represent various constituencies within the Jewish community and wider community on campus. It would be insufficient to have only currently active, "empowered" Jewish students participating in the process. Therefore, the committee should include the less involved, perhaps marginalized "engagement students," in the process as well.[4] In addition to the "engagement students," the committee should also include students who enjoy working on Hillel's social programming and others whose primary interest is in religious activities. The Board of Directors, alumnae and parents should also be represented. The goal is to establish a maximally representative committee with a balance of complimentary and contrasting perspectives.

Once the members of the committee have been chosen by the staff and key student leaders, such as the president of the student governing body and the chair of the social committee, the committee should be invited

to attend a first meeting. This meeting should be dedicated to establishing a commitment to the decision-making process and to creating an environment of honesty and trust. At this meeting, committee members should also identify other groups on campus and beyond who may be affected by the outcome of the process but who are not represented on the policy-making committee. This will help the committee members broaden their discussion to include the concerns of the maximum number of stakeholders. Finally, the staff person who is overseeing the process should provide committee members with an outline of the process. Once this work has been done, the committee should proceed to Stage II.

Values and Texts

• Stage II: Values Clarification

At this stage of the process, the committee should lay the foundation for all future stages by examining the core values of Hillel and how Hillel's program reflects these values. Since the committee has some members that may be new, it is important to provide them with some readings or presentations that will help orient them as well as reorient those who are already active in Hillel. Whether through the written word or a presentation, key leaders should provide the committee with their understanding of Hillel's core values and how those values become manifest programmatically. Thus, the committee might hear from the President of the Board, the President of the Jewish Student Union, the rabbi of the Hillel, and the Director of the Hillel (who may also be the rabbi).

Once the core values have been identified, they should be written down and distributed to all members of the committee. When the decision-making process begins to go off course or gets stuck altogether, the committee should refer back to these values. By doing so, the committee will be better able to move ahead with the proper focus. In a sense, Hillel's core values will serve as the compass for the decision-making process.

• Stage III: Jewish Texts

Once Hillel's own core values have been identified, the committee should then mine the Jewish textual tradition for the values that have informed Jews' relationships with alcohol throughout the ages.[5] This study could take place within the group as a whole, among smaller groups or among dyads. It would be worthwhile for the whole group to summarize in writing the viewpoints they study so that this learning will not get lost as the decision making moves closer to the creation of an actual policy.

The committee might bear the following questions in mind as they study with a rabbi or another learned teacher who can bring out the nuances of the texts in their original languages:

—How did alcohol fit into the lives of our forebears?

—What values are inherent in

their views of and practices around alcohol?

—How have the values, views and practices changed over time?

—How do the values inherent in these texts coincide with or conflict with contemporary norms and values?

• Stage IV: Contemporary Viewpoints and Sources

The committee should next balance the viewpoints of the Jewish tradition with contemporary scientific, sociological and legal understandings of the role of alcohol on campus (and in the larger society) as well as the effects of alcohol on the body. Effort should be made to explore a variety of sources and perspectives including those that would mitigate against the service of alcohol altogether and those that would argue that responsible service of alcohol and moderate consumption are appropriate. Here, too, the committee's findings should be summarized in writing and distributed to the committee members.

Moving Towards Policy

• Stage V: Synthesis

Now that the values of the organization have been articulated, the various perspectives from Jewish texts have been studied, and contemporary viewpoints have been analyzed, the committee should evaluate what has been learned and choose those aspects of the learning that will shape the policy. The committee should meet to discuss which Jewish values and practices are to be upheld in their entirety, given new value or "reconstructed," or discarded altogether in light of contemporary research and/or Hillel's core values. Are there compelling Jewish values that accord with Hillel's core values and that would somehow suggest privileging one set of contemporary understandings over another? Is there a point at which contemporary understandings might override the teachings of Jewish tradition and the community's core values? All possibilities should be considered before moving on to drafting a policy.

• Stage VI: Drafting a Policy

A sub-committee of three or four individuals should be chosen from among the larger committee to draft a written policy that takes into account all previous discussions. Derived through consensus, the policy should include a preamble that describes the decision-making process and articulates the insights, information, and values that inform the policy.

• Stage VII: Policy Review and Provisional Approval

Once the policy has been drafted, the full committee should review it, allowing ample time for individuals to read the policy beforehand and for discussion to take place at the time of the review. Upon fully reviewing the proposed policy, the committee should then seek to refine areas that do not adequately reflect the values

that the committee has chosen to uphold as primary in Stage V, or change the proposal in other ways as necessary. Again through consensus, the committee should prepare a final proposal that will then be shared by the larger community and revised to incorporate communal feedback.

Implementation

• Stage VIII: Communal Feedback and Policy Revision

A meeting of the community should be scheduled to educate the community about the decision-making process, to present the final proposal, and to discuss the impact of the proposal on the community. The meeting itself ought to be in the form of a panel presentation. The panel of three or four would be comprised of members of the policy committee and would represent different constituencies. On another occasion, the panelists might also present to the Board, a body which most often includes parents and alumnae as well.

In advance of the meeting, staff and students should make copies of the proposed policy available to all members of the Jewish community who would like to participate in the process of formulating Hillel's alcohol policy. Student leaders should also be sure to make copies available to "engagement students" and ensure that that group is represented at the communal meeting. By distributing the policy ahead of time, the student leaders are more likely to elicit feedback that is well informed.

Finally, the meeting is not just to educate the community but to enable members to give feedback on the proposal. While some feedback may come in the form of visceral, emotional responses, much of it will also be thoughtful and contribute to the formulation of an even more effective policy. Indeed, it is the responsibility of the committee to discuss the communal input and to consider incorporating suggestions that would, in fact, strengthen the policy. In addition to bolstering the policy itself, allowing community input will strengthen the communal sense of participation in the overall decision-making process and enhance communal support of its outcome.

After all feedback has been collected, the committee should fine tune the policy and issue a final document that states the policy and the process by which it was created.

• Stage IX: Implementation

At the first opportunity, staff and students should implement the policy, being careful to remain faithful to the policy and the process behind it.

Reflecting on the Process

• Stage X: Evaluation and Adjustment

Students and staff should evaluate the policy on a regular basis. They must be aware of the ways in which the policy either accomplishes or fails to accomplish the policy committee's goals. They also must be aware of

unforeseen benefits and deleterious effects, and adjust the policy as needed to maximize benefits and minimize negative side effects. By reflecting on the effectiveness of the policy, the students and staff are very likely to ensure that their alcohol policy will stay current, continuing to meet the needs of an ever-changing community.

The challenge of serving alcohol that faced our Hillel Foundation years ago continues to be shared by many Jewish communities on campus.[6] The model presented here of a democratic, values-based decision-making process, when adapted to the needs and character of a particular community, can assist Hillel professionals and students in producing a policy that addresses this challenge. The versatility of this model is noteworthy. While I have applied it to the service of alcohol, it may be applied to other issues with which Hillel Foundations contend, such as the role of instrumental music during Shabbat services or the place of Jewish extremist groups within the collage of groups represented on the student governing body. Furthermore, the model may be utilized in settings other than Hillel: Jewish Federations, religious schools or young adult centers, to name just a few. This model is designed to assist all communities in seeking a balance between traditional Jewish wisdom and contemporary values through an inclusive, democratic process. In this way Judaism itself will continue to evolve and to respond to myriads of ethical issues.

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1. Upon reading of the theft in the school newspaper, a professor donated $800 to the Jewish Student Union, who in turn gave the money to *tzedakah.*
2. It is possible that Hillel professionals and students often make decisions in this fashion because so many demands are placed upon both groups that there is little patience for a more deliberate process. In addition, since students are essentially a transient group, the primary constituency for any policy has little long-term investment in the process.
3. For examples of a similar process see the Reconstructionist movement reports, *Boundaries and Opportunities, Homosexuality,* and *The Rabbi-Congregation Relationship: A Vision for the 21st Century,* available from the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation (www.jrf.org). These reports represent the outcomes of three Reconstructionist commissions and include detailed discussion of their processes.
4. In the parlance of today's Hillel movement, "engagement students" are those who are unaffiliated or marginally affiliated with the organized Jewish community on campus. In contrast, "empowered students" are active in the community.
5. A selection of texts that represent a spectrum of viewpoints on alcohol, the law, and care for the body within the Jewish tradition might include: Genesis 9: 20-25, 1 Samuel 1:12-17, Isaiah 28:7-8, Song of Songs 5:1, BT *Megillah* 7b, BT *Nedarim* 49b, BT *Baba Batra* 12b, *Leviticus Rabba* 34:3, BT *Gittin* 10b, and Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Rotzeach* 11: 4-5. For additional sources see David Novak, "Alcohol and Drug Abuse," *Judaism,* vol. 33, no. 2, 221-232.
6. This observation was confirmed through discussions with Hillel professionals at the Western Hillel Organization Kallah in Simi Valley, CA, February 16-19, 2001.

Decision Making in the Congregational System

By Richard Hirsh

Reconstructionist Judaism has exemplified a commitment to democratic process and values-based decision making. At its best, democracy in our congregational communities should be a process that both rabbi and congregation experience as Jewishly authentic; that is community-building; that incorporates Jewish principles, values and categories; and that balances the congregation's mission of representing and transmitting Judaism with the needs and circumstances of a contemporary congregation's constituency.

Problems of Polar Positions

The valuable core ideas of democratic participation should be saved from the problematic and unhelpful extremes to which they can sometimes be taken. At one extreme are congregants who deny rabbis any authority, often displaying hostility towards and showing a need to control them. Democracy at this extreme can become a pretext for unhealthy and disruptive rebellion against authority that has less to do with lay empowerment than with rabbinic disempowerment.

At the other extreme are rabbis who strongly assert rabbinic authority, exercising a veto over religious policy issues and denying laity a voice in the establishment of key congregational policies and procedures. Authority at this extreme can become a pretext for the expression of frustration, resentment and disparagement, and has less to do with reclaiming the role of the rabbi than with restraining the role of the laity.

Between these unhelpful extremes, congregations can live out the best implications of a democratic community. Reconstructionism has correctly identified the importance of engaging Jews with Judaism, and encouraging, even requiring, that they take responsibility for their Jewishness.

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Reconstructionist rabbis are not in the role of surrogate Jew, the one expected to fulfill Jewish ritual on behalf of congregants. Reconstructionist rabbis are teachers and guides, leading congregants into deepening cycles of personal involvement with Judaism and the Jewish people. Reconstructionist laity seek the opportunity to learn by doing, to take on ritual roles, to study, to deliver *divrei Torah*, to participate in life-cycle events rather than only to watch the rabbi presiding over them.

Systems Theory

In applying these insights to the issue of congregational decision making, it is helpful to have a common conceptual framework within which to work. When rabbis and congregations start from the same point, establishing a model for productive decision making becomes a shared opportunity.

When it comes to the role of the rabbi and the rabbi-congregation relationship, social scientific research and theory helps frame the discussion in innovative ways. In the past few decades an enormous amount of research has become available to organizations and their leaders regarding the nature of their identities, their work, and their interaction.

Beginning in the 1960s and 1970s, "systems theory" emerged in the fields of family therapy, anthropology and communications, as well as in the business world. A systems approach looks at the totality of a social organization and the interaction within it. This approach recognizes that the parts interact organically, with the whole being greater than the sum of its parts.

Peter Steinke writes:

> Systems thinking is basically a way of thinking about life as all of a piece. It is a way of thinking about how the whole is arranged, how its parts interact, and how the relationships between the parts produce something new. A systems approach claims that any person or event stands in relationship to something. You cannot isolate anything and understand it. The parts function as they do because of the presence of the other parts. All parts interface and affect each other. Their behaviors are reciprocal to one another, mutually reinforcing. Thus change in one part produces change in another part, even in the whole. There is a "ripple" throughout the system.
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> No problem can be seen in isolation. The problem is in the whole, not the part. The system is the locus of the problem. The problem is in the interaction between the parts. The same is true for solutions and corrections. With a systems approach, we "see" the interactions that take place, the information that is exchanged, and the influence that is reciprocally reinforced.[1]

Activities, Jobs and Roles

As applied to synagogue life, a systems approach sees the totality of the congregational system along with the interaction of the component parts, rather than looking only at individual roles or functions. There are significant and promising implications in this approach for understanding decision making within a conception of the synagogue as a system.

A systems approach implies new ways of thinking about issues inherent in the rabbi-congregation relationship. At any given moment, for example, specific individuals may be responsible for exercising leadership, but leadership is an activity of the congregational system, rather only than the job of one or more persons. Similarly, decision making is an activity of the congregational system, although at a given moment in terms of a given issue, the responsibility for decision making may lie with one or more persons, with a committee, or even with the entire congregation.

Individuals, of course, play a role in and affect a system, as do subsystems of the congregational system. Any individual congregant or congregational subsystem can unbalance the entire system. For example, a decision of the education committee to increase the academic requirements for bar/bat mitzvah will have an impact on the membership committee, the ritual committee, and the synagogue board. It will also affect, among others, the rabbi, the cantor, the students and parents, the bar/bat mitzvah tutors and the president (who is likely to get both irate and supportive phone calls).

Strong Leadership Indispensable

Strong leadership is indispensable for healthy congregations, and should be welcomed rather than avoided. While some of the inevitable tensions and difficulties of the rabbi-congregation relationship are tied to the rabbi's role as leader, many of the best opportunities in that relationship are also found in the leadership role that a rabbi can and should play. *How* the rabbi leads, rather than *should* the rabbi lead, is the key issue.

Democracy is a value shared by Reconstructionist rabbis and congregants. As applied to congregational life, this creates a vision of rabbis and congregations working in mutually respectful partnership. Of course, because congregations are also organizations in which rabbis are leaders, specific areas of authority will need to be explored and resolved. But rabbis, by virtue of their education, skill and experience, are normally best qualified to represent Jewish teachings and the scope of Jewish perspectives on issues.

What the rabbi has to teach should be taken seriously and considered appropriately; his/her voice is not just one among many. A rabbi can be viewed as *an* authority without having to assume that the rabbi is *in* authority.

Ronald Heifetz writes in *Leader-*

ship Without Easy Answers:

> Imagine the differences in behavior when people operate with the idea that "leadership means influencing the community to follow the leader's vision" versus "leadership means influencing the community to face its problems." In the first instance, influence is the mark of leadership; a leader gets people to accept his vision, and communities address problems by looking up to him. If something goes wrong, it is the fault of the leader. In the second, progress on problems is the measure of leadership; leaders mobilize people to face problems, and communities make progress on problems because leaders challenge and help them to do so. If something goes wrong, the fault lies with both leaders and the community.[2]

Viewing the rabbi as a leader does not and need not imply ceding power or decision-making responsibility. A systems perspective enables Reconstructionist rabbis and laity to avoid the unproductive polarization whereby one person's leadership is presumed to be at the expense of another's, with leadership understood as a finite resource. If leadership is thought of primarily as an activity residing in the congregational system, rather than an attribute residing in the rabbi, president and/or board, then ultimately responsibility for leadership (as well as for success or failure) in the congregation should be shared.

Reconstructionist Models

From its inception, the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College sought to shape a model of the rabbinate in which the priestly role was minimized, the teaching role was maximized, and the ability to engage with congregants on a mutually respectful level was assumed and encouraged. This approach developed into thinking of the rabbi as a "resource person," one not vested with clear decision making authority (the *mara d'atra*) but functioning more as a consultant-expert seeking to empower congregants to take responsibility for their own individual and collective Jewish lives. Reconstructionist congregations came to see democratic decision making as a hallmark, suggesting that the rabbi had "a vote but not a veto."

There have been many positive dimensions to the Reconstructionist rabbinic model. A high degree of participation and a sense of comfort, welcome and informality are often cited by Reconstructionist congregants as major factors that attract them to our communities. These attractions are directly related to the Reconstructionist style of the rabbinate. Reconstructionist rabbis welcome the opportunity to teach and to learn with congregants. Together, they engage in the common goal of balancing fidelity to Jewish tradition with appropriate adaptations for con-

temporary Jewish life. Our rabbis exemplify the importance as well as the satisfaction that derives from teaching people the knowledge and skills with which to expand their Jewish lives.

The demystification of rabbis and the empowerment of laity remain central to the Reconstructionist vision of shared responsibility. Ideally, democracy and lay empowerment ought to result in a mutually satisfying partnership. But there has been a down side as well, which is often cited by Reconstructionist rabbis as a particular source of unhappiness with and conflict in their work. When democracy is incorrectly invoked, it is often experienced by rabbis as disempowering, and delegitimating of their leadership, expertise, learning and experience.

Rabbis are not the only ones who are unhappy when democracy and empowerment go astray; congregations often report that the leadership they would in fact welcome from their rabbi is lacking. A rabbi can be a strong and effective leader in a democratic organization when the rabbi embraces the opportunity and the congregation supports and welcomes the rabbi's leadership.

Executive and Legislative Decision Making

In most modern organizations — and congregations are no exception — decisions often divide into either "executive" or "legislative." For effective and efficient day-to-day functioning of the congregation, executive decision making cannot be subject to democratic process. The congregational board needs to vest a professional with this function. Often this executive is the rabbi, although depending on the issue, it might be the executive director, the school director or the cantor.

While it is not possible to anticipate every contingency, rabbis and congregations should define as clearly as possible — especially to board members, committee chairs and other synagogue staff — what executive decision making functions are vested in the rabbi. This will avoid many potential problems that can arise because of unclear lines of authority.

Democratic process is both necessary and desirable for legislative decision making, where decisions shape the life and culture of the community. In such cases — examples being a change in choice of prayerbook, a structural change with regard to schedule of religious services, engagement in a controversial social action project, or a change in dues structure — congregants want and need participation. While the rabbi is both a leader and a participant in such processes, the broader community — in the language being advocated here, the congregational system — should be actively involved, engaged and ultimately responsible.

Issues will not always neatly fall into one of these two categories. In some cases, even when a rabbi can in theory exercise executive decision

making authority, s/he should understand the value of working with the appropriate committee, board member, or staff person rather than operating independently. The way in which a decision is reached can be as important as the decision itself.

Religious Policies and Procedures

The rabbi is actively involved with all aspects of congregational religious practice and ought to be involved in the decision-making process around issues of religious policy and procedure. Depending on the issue and the congregation, such matters may come before the religious practices (or ritual) committee, the synagogue board, or the entire membership.

For example: a religious practices committee might handle an issue such as trying an experimental format for a once-a-month Shabbat service, while a board might take responsibility for adopting bar/bat mitzvah policy guidelines, and the entire congregation might be involved in a decision about the role of non-Jews in Jewish rituals. Regardless of the venue, the contribution of the rabbi as a leader, teacher and expert in areas of religious policy and procedure is central.

Democracy is an imperfect system, predicated on people seeing their participation as a right coupled with responsibility. All citizens who are eligible can vote on election day, irrespective of their awareness of issues and understanding of the positions of candidates. But even though people can exercise their rights in an uninformed way, this is far from optimal. Just as we endorse citizens becoming informed and personally committed in our civic life, so should our congregants have a significant degree of literacy with Jewish sources and involvement in the religious life of the congregation in order to participate maximally in the democratic fashioning of policy and making of decisions.

Reconstructionist congregations should set expectations of involvement and study as prerequisites for participation in certain decision-making processes. Congregational by-laws may allow any congregant to vote in certain settings — for example, on a slate of officers presented at an annual meeting. But a congregation can and should establish conditions for participation in a decision-making committee or process affecting ritual and religious policies— for example, debating levels of communal Shabbat observance or the *kashrut* of the synagogue kitchen.

Such requirements might include an attendance requirement (to vote, one had to have been at X% of the meetings devoted to the topic under debate), a study requirement (to participate in a ritual policy decision, one had to have engaged in study of relevant Jewish sources), or a participation requirement (to be on the *siddur* selection committee, one has to be a regular attendee at services).

Individual and Communal Decisions

It is useful to distinguish between decisions that affect individuals and issues that affect the congregation. When working with individual congregants, rabbis make decisions in response to the individual's circumstances, being careful to operate with an awareness of congregational policies and procedures. While the rabbi may inform the congregational president of such decisions, they do not require input from congregational leaders. When rabbis are engaged with issues that affect the culture, policies and practices of the entire community, they convey their positions and exercise their leadership by teaching and/or attempting to persuade, but they normally will not have final decision-making authority.

One useful indicator of when to broaden the decision-making process is to gauge the impact of an issue on the congregational system. The congregation will benefit when issues with a deeper, long-lasting impact are handled in a collaborative lay-rabbinic process. Another useful indicator is to anticipate strong reactions among congregants to certain issues and decisions. Significant congregational decisions underscore the importance of broad accountability.

Many conflicts over authority between rabbi and congregation can be avoided when issues are viewed systemically. Decisions which shape the character and culture of a community need to reside within the congregational system, hopefully with concord between rabbi and congregation. A shared and broad decision making process provides credibility, which both supports the decisions and helps bind a congregation together despite differences of opinion.

While the distinction between individual and communal issues is suggested as one guideline, the two areas cannot always be kept discrete. Individual life-cycle events, for example, often occur in communal space and time — such as a baby-naming at Shabbat services. The choice of which Rabbis' Manual to use is made by the rabbi, while the choice of *siddur* being used at that same Shabbat service reflects a decision of the congregation.

Making the Personal Public

Personal or familial issues can easily become communal issues of the entire community. Whenever possible, controversial and sensitive issues should be anticipated and dealt with before they arise for a specific congregant or congregant family. But in a time of changing demographics in the Jewish community, with a variety of understandings about what constitutes Jewish identity, there will inevitably be moments when there will be disagreement over what the congregant, ritual committee, board and/or rabbi believes appropriate.

Congregations and rabbis today find themselves engaged in the sensitive task of responding to the un-

precedented circumstances of our open and rapidly changing society. For many of the most pressing issues, there are as yet no clear guidelines. The recent report by the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation, *Boundaries and Opportunities,* for example, outlines suggested positions on a number of ritual issues as they apply to the role of non-Jews, but also indicates the responsibility of each congregation to review and decide if and how to incorporate those recommendations.

Inevitable Tensions

The rabbi-congregation relationship is a *brit* (covenant) in which *ḥesed* (loyalty) and *raḥamim* (compassion) are indispensable. At no time is this more important than when feelings are the strongest. Even where consensus is unattainable, the rabbi and congregants need to be heard and respected, and to be given the opportunity to make their case based on the teachings of Jewish tradition, Reconstructionist positions and the nature of the community.

As leaders, rabbis have the opportunity to push the congregation beyond where it might feel comfortable, to encourage risk-taking and innovation. But simply asserting rabbinic authority without the support of the relevant committees or lay leaders can create a negative ripple effect through the congregational system. The more buy-in rabbis can generate through teaching and persuasion, the more receptivity there will be for the positions they advocate — and the more positive the impact on the congregational system.

Ideally, both rabbi and congregation should have clarity about bottom line issues at the time of interviewing and hiring, so that they do not end up in a partnership when there is fundamental disagreement on basic issues. Even with the best intentions and clear communication, however, unforeseen issues may later arise. In some extreme situations, the congregation may face the possibility of making a decision with which the rabbi not only cannot agree, but which, if made, would result in the rabbi no longer being able or willing to serve in that community.

Wherever possible, in the interests of preserving the rabbi-congregation relationship and with an awareness of what it would mean for the congregation to lose its rabbi, rabbis should receive the benefit of the doubt, and their strong convictions should be taken into account by congregational leaders. For their part, rabbis need to understand the importance of limiting the exercise of such power to an absolute minimum.

In such a conflict, the congregation and rabbi both need to examine ways in which the discussion can be *l'shem shamayim*, "for the sake of heaven," argued on merits rather than politics, argued with passion but not with anger, argued with an awareness of a common stake in the welfare of the congregation as well as with respect for the employment implications for the rabbi. It is always to be

hoped that a compromise, option or alternative can be reached and the rabbi-congregation relationship can continue. Occasionally, regrettably, such a resolution may not be attainable. Regardless of outcome, both rabbi and congregation should act towards each other *l'khaf zekhut,* "with an assumption of the best motives."

An Opportunity for Change

Decision making takes place in all systems. Within a congregation, dozens of small decisions are made on a daily basis; many of these decisions do not reach the public eye, do not affect many people, and are routinely absorbed into the ongoing life of the community without comment. Other decisions, especially those that have a broad and deep impact on congregational culture and self-perception (identity), can become a prism through which the strengths — or the weaknesses — in the congregational system become evident.

In working towards a systemic approach to decision making, Reconstructionist congregations and rabbis have an opportunity to shape alternative models that can serve as vehicles for learning and as conduits for community.

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1. Peter Steinke, *Healthy Congregations: A Systems Approach* (Alban Institute, 1996), 3-5.
2. Ronald Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Massachusetts, Belknap Press, 1994) 14-15.

Values-Based Decision Making

By David A. Teutsch

Values-based decision making (VBDM) has become a catch-phrase in Reconstructionist circles, reflecting a desire to develop an orderly and valid process for individuals and groups to decide upon their policies, procedures and behavior. The need for a system as self-consciously considered as VBDM grows out of several realities. Most Jews no longer consider themselves to be bound by *halakha*, and will not simply accept the opinion of a rabbi. Indeed, most liberal rabbis do not consider themselves bound by the decisions of the rabbis' rabbi.

Furthermore, most Jews know they are living in a society that does not reflect an ethical orientation with which they fully agree. The two most obvious ideologies in America today are those of the Christian Right and the materialistic hedonism purveyed by the media and advertising. Most Jews are seeking an approach closer to their own moral outlook, an outlook partly shaped by their Jewish backgrounds. VBDM provides a way of thinking through and expressing our commitments, allowing us to create ground to stand on somewhere between the *halakha* and the *New York Times*. It has been used within the Reconstructionist movement for twenty years and is most recently embodied in the new guide to Jewish practice, the first experimental section of which was recently published.*

Decision Making Process

Many of those who talk about VBDM, however, do not recognize that it involves the application of many other criteria besides values alone. In fact, employing values occurs nearly at the *end* of VBDM process. A typical VBDM process contains the following steps:

1. Determine facts, alternative actions and their outcomes.
2. Examine relevant scientific and social scientific approaches to understanding these.

*David Teutsch, *A Guide to Jewish Practice — Introduction; Attitudes, Values and Beliefs; Kashrut* (Reconstructionist Rabbinical College Press, 2000).

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3. Consider the historical and contemporary context, including the history and rationales of Jewish practice.
4. Look for norms that might exclude some actions.
5. Assemble and weigh relevant attitudes, beliefs and values.
6. Formulate decision alternatives.
7. Seek consensus (if a group is deciding).
8. Make the decision.

VBDM has its roots in the British-American tradition of moral philosophy that sees our lives as subject to a complex series of facts and concerns that cannot be reduced to a few very broad principles from which everything else can be deduced. One example of the broad-principle approach is the work of Immanuel Kant and such successors as John Rawls. The Kantian school attempts to derive all conduct from such principles as the categorical imperative, which states that we should only do things that would benefit people if everyone did them. Other people use the Golden Rule ("Do unto others") as a broad principle.

One problem with moral philosophies that derive ethical systems from just a few core principles is that they do not capture the richness and complexity of most people's moral concerns. How do I apply the Golden Rule, for example, to the question of euthanasia for someone whose beliefs and values are totally different from my own? For a decision-making system to work in real life, it must work in a cultural context that reflects the thicket of our moral experience, which is a tangle of beliefs and attitudes, rights and norms, obligations, values and practices.

First Principles

Systems that start from a few basic principles (sometimes called "first principles") are difficult to interpret and apply — fatal flaws if non-philosophers are to use them. When we apply the Golden Rule to end-of-life issues, we need to explore what we want for ourselves, and why, and how the other person differs in what that person would want and why. Then we would need criteria for exploring the legitimacy of these distinctions in values, attitudes and practices. We would also need to weigh how all this should affect the application of the Golden Rule.

For example, a Catholic believes that only God should take a life. If I disagree, how does that affect the decision I need to make regarding that person? Clearly the outcomes in different cases will vary person to person because considerations far beyond the Golden Rule would have to be brought to bear.

As for euthanasia, applying the Golden Rule usually involves many other moral considerations which shape the decision maker's thinking whether or not that person is conscious of them. Unless these moral considerations are examined in their full complexity, the legitimacy of the conclusion is undermined.

Understanding the Context

VBDM takes for granted that good decisions reflect consideration of the context in which they are made. That context is made up of political, economic, social and techno-scientific factors over which individuals and small groups often have little control. The context is also cultural in the broad sense (e.g. American, Jewish, Reconstructionist) and in the narrow sense (the culture of a congregation, family, or organization; the web of such cultures within which an individual lives).

Sometimes people divide decisions into moral ones and ritual ones. But virtually all decisions have a moral component. For example, the decision about whether to keep kosher, and if so, where and how, raises issues that touch on ecology, kindness to animals, and the centrality of Jewish community. So while issues and decisions may also have aesthetic and prudential components that are not moral, they virtually always have a moral component as well. The decision-making method can stay largely the same.

Thus the best approach to food distribution in a drought-stricken African nation with poor transportation and communication systems will differ considerably from the best method in an American city. This illustrates that the moral dimension to decisions exists alongside an array of prudential concerns. These prudential concerns need to be clarified at the first stage of VBDM because they provide the required context for decision making. Determining the facts, possible courses of action, and their costs and consequences provides knowledge needed to make ethical decisions. Skipping this step often creates acrimony and confusion.

Universal and Particular

Once the facts and consequences underlying a major decision have been established, it is helpful to employ the insights of relevant academic disciplines. Depending on the decision, this might entail considering the issues from the perspectives of anthropology, medicine, psychology, the sciences and other fields. This process is likely not only to shape the understanding of the decision maker. It will often help in the discovery of unselfconsciously held beliefs and assumptions that shape decision making. Those beliefs and assumptions might be about human nature, or expected community conduct, or the reliability of information or commitment-based action, or dozens of other areas.

All of this information must be placed in its cultural context. We don't make decisions that are valid for all people in all places. We make decisions that are sensible for a certain time, place and group of people. But aren't there some rules that are universal? It may be true that under some circumstances one can legitimately kill — for example, in self-defense — but isn't it the case that one should never murder? Jewish tra-

dition accepts this as a universal rule, which is what a norm is. Such norms require some actions and forbid others, and they guide us at the extremes of conduct. The Ten Commandments contains many norms. VBDM only operates away from these extremes because our conduct at the extremes is regulated by norms. In other words, VBDM operates within the areas not determined by norms.

These norms operate in consonance with our underlying attitudes. For example, one fundamental Jewish teaching is that human beings are created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God. That supports the belief that each of us has infinite worth. This belief supports the norm that forbids murder. The attitudes and beliefs we have also support our values.

Moral Building Blocks

When our attitudes, beliefs, norms, values and practices are in harmony with each other, they are mutually reinforcing. Since we often absorb these moral building blocks unselfconsciously, absorbing one of these elements does not always precede the others in time. While we might understand some of them as being more fundamental than others, each of them depends on the others for creating moral lives of substance. Even our understanding of virtues is interactive with the other moral elements.

Mentshlikhkeit, for example, is a peculiarly Jewish virtue that reflects many of our values and beliefs. It includes such other virtues as honesty, courage, and compassion, which in turn tie to our vision of a just and caring society. The Reconstructionist understanding of our civilization as evolving and of our sacred texts as emerging from their historical contexts contributes to the possibility of linking our contemporary moral sensibilities with our encounters with Jewish texts and traditions. This helps us integrate our theological language, experience and morality. This is critical if we as a minority group are to sustain our moral practice.

The very idea of values, of "value," comes from our consciousness that the world is God's (I would prefer to say that the world is infused with the divine); that the world has worth is one corollary of that attitude. What we recognize as having worth is at best consistent with our attitudes, but our attitudes cannot fully predict our values. Our values grow out of our experiences and cultures. The attitude *Ladonay ha'aretz umlo'o* ("The world and all that is in it belongs to God" — Psalm 24) means that everything in the world has the capacity for good, but this insight has to be fleshed out by values before we can easily act on it.

Beliefs and Assumptions

We cannot make decisions wisely unless we are aware of what shapes those decisions. Our beliefs about the right balance between community responsibility and individual autonomy are so powerful in shaping

decisions that they need careful examination to ensure that the balance between those beliefs is the one we consciously mean to apply. Often decision making goes awry because people are not aware of how their beliefs and assumptions drive their conclusions. When beliefs and assumptions are not articulated, dialogue often generates more heat than light, and individual decision making becomes erratic and confused. Once made explicit, beliefs and assumptions can be tested against knowledge and experience, creating a more rational and orderly universe of discourse.

Assuming we have clarified the facts and scholarship relevant to a decision and that the decision is not completely determined by norms, we next will need to understand its context in past history and practice as well as in contemporary culture. Understanding our predecessors' practices and what motivated them helps us to explore our own attitudes, beliefs, norms, and values. Empathetic consideration of our heritage gives Judaism a vote. Having done this, we can turn to exploring the rest of the values relevant to a decision.

Each decision that we make has a moral component to which values can be applied, but each decision is also affected by different values. Even when two decisions are shaped by similar values, some values will be more central to one decision than the other. Once we are at the values stage, it is time to consider which values are more important and, in light of all the previous steps in the decision-making process, why. Some values have a more direct connection to a particular issue, and some are felt more strongly. The history of values and their origin affects the weighting of values as well. The value of community is far more central to deciding whether to attend a *shiva* minyan than it is to how expensive a cut of meat to buy.

Applying that emerging hierarchy of values to the decision and its consequences prepares the decision maker to select the best — or sometimes the least bad — choice. Thus in VBDM, exploring values is the last step in the process before actually making the decision.

Who Decides?

When groups need to make a decision, they should begin by seeking agreement about who ought to make it. Decisions can most efficiently be made by the smallest group with sufficient authority and competence to make them. Sometimes a series of groups needs to be involved; in a synagogue, a membership or ritual committee decision of importance might require board approval. If the issue is fundamental enough, the board might seek ratification by the congregation's members. Critical to the legitimation of the decision is the broad affirmation in advance of the legitimacy of the process and the decision making group. Groups' decision making therefore needs to be carefully planned. If the process is

affirmed in advance (in part because those who care will have sufficient input to satisfy them) the outcome of the process will usually be accepted by those who disagree with it.

At the group level where the recommendation is formulated, the group should go through the same decision-making steps outlined above. Once the group reaches a conclusion, it needs to work on leading other decision makers through the process in a shortened form so that they can affirm the group's conclusions.

This model of decision making requires both an educational process and access to a variety of information. While a sophisticated and dedicated group of volunteers can use it, a professional often aids in facilitating the process and assembling expert input. When a rabbi does this in a congregational setting, the rabbi can often play a critical role in successful decision making. This requires differentiating among three functions:

- facilitation that creates safety for open inquiry and exchanges of views;
- teaching about Jewish sources and providing other insights;
- stating personal values, reasoning and conclusions.

When these functions are suitably differentiated and labeled, the rabbi can successfully play a central role in an effective process. When the rabbi does not differentiate among the factors, this can fuel interpersonal conflict, disrupt decision making, and prevent the emergence of a decision that the group will accept. The rabbi's expertise is very much needed. Its exercise requires reflection, self-discipline, and commitment to the VBDM process.

Negotiating Priorities

Group conflict often peaks at the stage when members negotiate value priorities. At this stage it is possible to look ahead and see which priorities will lead to which conclusions. This is a time when active listening and facilitation can help build consensus, which is not the same as unanimity. For a consensus to emerge, points of commonality must be discovered and emphasized so that people are willing to move forward despite their differences.

Which decisions should a group make? It first ought to make the decisions needed to mount its core programs and provide for their administration. As it adds to its program, new decisions will have to be made. When congregations start, they typically begin making ideological and ritual decisions and then quickly move on to dealing with financial and structural decisions as well. Before long decisions relating to employment and social action are added to the mix. All of these decisions have moral components.

Communities inevitably need policies and procedures, necessitating frequent decisions. In the open society of the United States, group decisions limiting the freedom of individuals

("Who are you to tell me what to do?") are usually accepted only to the extent that they are needed for aspects of group life that the individuals seek. Thus we make decisions about whether the synagogue will have a kosher kitchen or avoid styrofoam products, but those decisions are not binding on synagogue members when they go home.

Shaping Conduct

One of the major benefits of VBDM can be consensus-building and establishing shared group behavior. This in turn shapes the moral conduct of the members of the group. Research shows that most people conform to the attitudes and behaviors of the groups they are in. Thus groups using VBDM both provide a model for personal decision making and reinforce the moral conduct of their members.

If a Reconstructionist congregation has as one of its goals shaping the personal conduct of its members, it will use a broadly inclusive process to produce guidelines for personal conduct — but will not enforce them as rules unless the rules are needed for the welfare of the congregation. This situation results from the fact that today congregations are voluntaristic communities that require the consent of their members. Their health and legitimacy requires that they validate their activities through the consent of their members and act no more coercively than needed to fulfill their agreed-upon purposes.

In our post-modern world, we know that no one group has the sole claim on justice or ethics. But creating a way of living that we share with our community, a way of living shaped by our attitudes and beliefs, norms and values, allows us to live morally coherent, meaningful lives. When our lives are lived in harmony with the rhythms of our Jewish community, we are reinforced in our morality. If that morality includes attention to improving our world, as authentic Jewish morality must, then it has value that extends beyond our own lives. It brings us to living lives of transcendent meaning.

The Role of *Halakha* in Reconstructionist Decision Making

By Daniel Goldman Cedarbaum

Many Reconstructionists and other liberal Jews seem afraid of the term *halakha*, reacting as if it invokes some dark presence coming out of the past to crush them with its oppressive weight. They would be surprised to learn that Mordecai Kaplan wrote that "Jewish life [is] meaningless without Jewish law." They would be more surprised to learn that Kaplan made this statement not as the young rabbi of an Orthodox congregation, but relatively late in his career in one of his most thorough and systematic examinations of Jewish life in America, *The Future of the American Jew*.[1]

Kaplan's Advocacy of *Halakha*

Years earlier, one of the five planks of the platform of the proto-Reconstructionist organization that Kaplan founded in 1920, The Society for the Jewish Renascence, stated as follows:

> We accept the *halakha*, which is rooted in the Talmud, as the norm of Jewish life, availing ourselves, at the same time, of the method implicit therein to interpret and develop the body of Jewish Law in accordance with the actual conditions and spiritual needs of modern life.

A close reading of this plank reveals that what at first appears, from a Reconstructionist perspective, to be a remarkably conservative statement is in fact, from an Orthodox perspective, a remarkably subversive statement.

First, Kaplan diverges from the Orthodox approach by identifying as the foundational halakhic text the Talmud (more particularly the Gemarah) rather than the *Shulḥan Arukh* or the other medieval law codes. The differences in style, and often in substance as well, between

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the law codes and the Talmud are well-known and dramatic. The law codes (as the term implies) generally consist of dry, impersonal recitations of legal rules. The halakhic portions of the Gemarah, on the other hand, generally consist of relatively free-wheeling discussions of legal issues, with particular views generally attributed to particular, named rabbis and with dissenting opinions often respectfully set forth. (This shift of emphasis from the law codes to the Talmud is one that I understand the Conservative movement to have adopted.)

Even more striking is the next part of Kaplan's statement. He claims for "ourselves" (and not just for traditionally recognized halakhic authorities) the right "to interpret and develop" Jewish law. He then goes on to recognize the changed "spiritual needs" of today's Jews, in addition to the changed "actual conditions" of today's Jewish communities, as a valid basis on which to make changes in Jewish law.

Fear of *Halakha*

The liberal Jewish fear of the term *halakha* is mixed with a type of awe, leaving many of us scared to touch Jewish law, much less wrestle with it. But by leaving *halakha* to the Orthodox and other "traditional" Jews, Reconstructionists in particular, and liberal Jews in general, have unintentionally promoted the perception that the Orthodox are the only "authentic" Jews. And I believe that we have collaborated in creating this impression, for I am willing to stand with Kaplan in asserting that any form of Judaism that does not recognize *halakha* as an essential component of the fabric of Jewish life is not authentic. (Even the Karaites are not an exception, although their version of *halakha* may be very different from the rabbinic version.) The value of individual autonomy has been elevated by liberal Jews to the point where it conflicts with the essentially communitarian nature of Judaism.

At the same time, I recognize that the traditional halakhic system is incapable of producing a code of conduct that is meaningful for, and acceptable to, the vast majority of contemporary Jews. And I am also willing to stand with Kaplan in asserting that non-Orthodox Jews have evaded and avoided the challenge of reconstructing *halakha*.

Even among the Orthodox, no one today would argue (other than as a pure statement of traditional faith divorced from historical reality) that Jewish law has not undergone tremendous evolution over the past 2,000 years or so, or that Jewish law has not shown remarkable variability as it has been adapted to the local conditions and needs of Jewish communities around the world. Indeed, in the preeminent academic treatise in the field, *Jewish Law: History, Sources, Principles* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: The Jewish Publication Society 1994), the renowned Israeli scholar and jurist Menachem Elon, himself an Orthodox Jew, celebrates

the enormous elasticity and adaptability of Jewish law across time and from place to place.

Halakha Evolves

The practice of treating *halakha* as an unchanging monolith that can speak independently of human voices is perhaps traceable to Maimonides, who wanted to create the perception that *halakha* was an impersonal, fixed and unamendable body of law even as he was making significant changes to it. And yet, as Ira Eisenstein and others have pointed out, Jews of all denominations often err by saying that the "*halakha* says thus-and-so" when we should instead say that "particular halakhic authorities said thus-and-so at particular times and in particular places." The real debate among Jews today should not be about whether Jewish law can change, but about who has the authority to make changes in Jewish law, and in what manner.

A related phenomenon is what I believe to be the pervasive misunderstanding by Reconstructionists of their own favorite aphorism about Jewish law, "The past has a vote but not a veto." Too many Reconstructionists read this as, "The *halakha* has a vote but not a veto," making it a sort of declaration of independence from what is perceived to be an ossified legal system.

A better reading of the aphorism might be "Past understandings of *halakha* have a vote but not a veto in our formulations of contemporary *halakha*," thereby reflecting our interpretation of the fundamental halakhic principle that legal rulings are to be made by contemporary judges (see chapter 17 of Deuteronomy).

We must move away from the liberal Jewish approach to *halakha* that typically has looked something like: "Here is the collection of fixed rules that we have received from traditional Judaism. Now we will decide (whether individually or, in some sense, communally) which of these rules to obey and which to disregard." Our approach to *halakha* should instead look something like: "Drawing on the wisdom that we have received from thousands of years of Jewish legal thinking, we, as a community, must construct for ourselves a set of rules that are at once rooted in our tradition and consonant with the actual conditions and spiritual needs of modern life. We must then commit ourselves to obeying those rules."

Is This a "Post-Halakhic" Age?

Many Reconstructionists, as well as other liberal Jews, like to say that we are living in a "post-halakhic" age. By this they generally mean that, like it or not, Jewish communities (at least outside of Israel) no longer possess the juridical sovereignty that once enabled them to impose sanctions for violations of legal rules, and that without such an ability to impose sanctions, Jewish law cannot function in any meaningful sense.

In a technical sense, this proposition (that I call the "post-halakhic thesis") seems self-evidently true; but on another important level, it seems false. In any case, the validity of the post-halakhic thesis is anything but self-evident to our Orthodox brothers and sisters, and to the leaders (at least) of the Conservative movement as well, for they sincerely believe that they are bound by *halakha*. The main problem, I believe, with the post-halakhic thesis is that it rests on an unnecessarily strong reading of the word "law," as I will attempt to illustrate with some non-abstract examples.

Practical Examples

For the past eight years, I have been a member of a trans-denominational Talmud study group, in which the primary teacher is an Orthodox rabbi and the majority of the other participants are Reconstructionists. The group meets at lunchtime, and many of its members typically eat lunch while they study.

Early on, the organizers of the group announced the rule that, while the lunch foods of the members need not be kosher-certified, they could not include meat or non-kosher seafood, and no member expressed a dissenting opinion at that time. Ever since, no one has brought a "forbidden" food for lunch.

And what would happen if someone brought shrimp salad? Someone else would remind that person of our eating policy, and most likely that person would immediately dispose of the offending food. In the unlikely event that the person for some reason insisted on eating the shrimp salad, he or she would be asked to leave the room. Repeated violations would result in the person's being told that he or she could no longer participate in the study group. In other words, sanctions can apply to violations of the "dietary law" of this small community. Failure to follow our rule subjects the offender, first, to shaming and, beyond that, to the possibility of expulsion from our community.

Sanctions and Freedom

These are precisely the two sanctions, I believe, that have historically been the most important and effective in securing obedience to *halakha*. What primarily differentiates the operation of these sanctions within my Talmud study group and within, say, the 18th century Kehillah of Vilna, are the sizes of the communities involved and the consequences of the sanctions to the wrongdoers. For example, expulsion from the Vilna Kehillah might well have resulted not just in social stigmatization, but in the loss of one's ability to make a living, at least in the absence of the extreme step of conversion to Christianity.

That my study group is a small, voluntary association and that the consequences of expulsion from it may not be objectively severe do not

alter the fact that expulsion, and shaming as well, are meaningful sanctions for the members. Membership in good standing in the study group confers real benefits on the member; otherwise, he or she would not choose to participate.

Moving to the level of a larger community, I have heard members of my synagogue say that they are not subject to any binding community obligations ("laws") that go beyond the rules of the American legal system or the norms of common courtesy. They might deny that the congregation even attempts to impose any rules of "Jewish law" on its members. But they are wrong. For example, the congregation has a formal policy against bringing non-kosher meat into its building. Although many of the members eat pork in restaurants and in their homes, my sense is that, once informed of the congregation's *kashrut* rules, none would even think about disobeying these rules in our building, even though the rules are in fact infringements on their freedom.

Perhaps more significantly, our congregation does not permit an interfaith marriage ceremony to take place within its building. Although quite a few of the members probably object to this policy, and some might work to change the policy through a vote of the board of directors or perhaps of the entire membership, I believe that all accept the current policy as a binding restriction on their behavior.

From Option To Obligation

Moving to yet another level, what happens if a member of my congregation whose parent has just died wants to recite *Kaddish*, in the presence of a *minyan*, in his or her home during the full *shiva* period? A synagogue community is, I believe, seriously deficient if a mourner has to worry about whether the community will make sure that such *minyanim* are present. The congregation should have in place a formal or informal structure for contacting members of the congregation and asking them to go to the house of mourning at the appropriate times. A member who receives a call to do so should regard such a call in much the same way that he or she would regard a summons for jury service, as a civic obligation that, in the absence of compelling extenuating circumstances, must be fulfilled and in that sense is not voluntary.

We are too squeamish about using the word "must" rather than the word "should" when we discuss these and similar issues within our communities. "Must" is appropriate, not because we believe that the obligation is literally ordained by God, but because it has its source in a democratically determined social contract, informed by our people's evolving understanding of how best to make Godliness manifest in the world. That should have the force of law for the community.

Some used to say that the defining slogan of Reconstructionism was

"Act kosher, think *treyf*." Less flippantly, some Reconstructionists used to say that they espoused "maximalist liberal Judaism" and that Reconstructionism is the only real "liberal alternative to Orthodoxy." But by ceding *halakha* to Orthodoxy, we have left these catch-phrases with no real content. Kaplan at one time proposed the creation of an international Sanhedrin, composed both of rabbis and of educated lay people from all denominational backgrounds, which would reconstruct *halakha* in an essentially democratic manner. That proposal (at least today) seems more like a messianic dream than a practical call to action.

Reconstructionist Responsa

More realistically, though, the process of reconstructing *halakha* could begin with the creation of a responsa commission, or similar body, of the national Reconstructionist movement, which could, on a case-by-case basis in response to questions from rabbis or lay members of Reconstructionist affiliates, issue pronouncements on various matters, both of ritual or ceremonial practice and of interpersonal conduct, that would make up, over time, our understanding of *halakha*. Such a commission would be made up both of rabbis and of educated lay people, and they would (at least indirectly) be democratically selected.

At some point in the future, when the commission had produced a significant body of written legal decisions, all affiliated Reconstructionist congregations and havurot might be asked formally to adopt the commission's body of work. Eventually, acceptance of this evolving *halakha* by a congregation or havurah might become one of the requirements for affiliation with the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation.

What the specific substance of such a reconstructed *halakha* might look like is, of course, beyond the scope of this article (indeed, is beyond the scope of anything but the communal process that would, over time, create it). However, in the interest of making my argument less abstract, I will offer a few thoughts about the direction that such a process might take.

Guiding Principles

First, it would likely involve an emphasis on the traditional distinction between those rules of Jewish law that pertain to obligations that are *beyn adam la'ḥavero* (between or among people) and those rules that pertain to obligations that are *beyn adam la'Makom* (between a person and God). The primary, though by no means exclusive, focus of this halakhic process would presumably be on the former category of rules, as they are the ones that directly affect the functioning of a community.

However, within the realm of ritual or ceremonial practice rules (generally assigned to the latter category), a distinction might well be drawn between those matters that are

nevertheless communal in nature (for example, the recitation of a blessing before eating a communal meal) and those matters that are truly private in nature (for example, the recitation of individual prayers upon waking).

Among the questions of communal ritual practice that could be answered for the entire Reconstructionist movement are whether the shofar should be blown when Rosh Hashanah coincides with Shabbat and whether the *regalim* festivals should retain *Yom Tov Sheni* (the additional days of observance mandated in traditional *halakha* for the Diaspora).

Other traditional halakhic categories or concepts could also play a fruitful role in this process. One important example is the traditional classification of actions along a spectrum that might include: *ḥayav* (forbidden actions that subject the transgressor to full sanctions); *pattur aval assur* (that we could interpret as actions to be avoided but for which there are only minor sanctions); *pattur mi'klum* (that we could interpret as actions that carry no sanctions, but from which it could nonetheless be beneficial to refrain); to *mutar* (fully permitted actions).

Thus, an individual's eating of pork in his or her home might be found to be *pattur mi'klum*, an individual's eating of pork in a restaurant (that is, in a public place) might be found to be *pattur aval assur* and an individual's serving pork to fellow congregants at a congregationally-sponsored dinner in his or her home might be found to be *ḥayav*.

As suggested above, the shirking of one's obligation to be the tenth person in a *shiva minyan* would presumably be *ḥayav* (result in full liability), as would failing to give *tzedakah* at some reasonable level. The extent of one's obligations, if any, to participate in worship services (when the presence of a *minyan* is not in doubt) is among the questions that are much more debatable.

Reviving the *Takanah*

Another example of something that could usefully be drawn from the traditional halakhic process is the recognition that changes in Jewish law are not always evolutionary and sometimes need to be discontinuous, for which we have available the traditional tool of the *takanah*. Basically, use of a *takanah* is appropriate when changes in social reality make a particular traditional halakhic rule run counter to a fundamental purpose of *halakha*, such as furthering *tikkun olam* (repair of the world) or *darkhei shalom* (promotion of peace).

Takanot appear frequently in the Mishnah, the most famous example of which being Hillel the Elder's ordaining that, for a certain category of loans, the obligation of repayment is not canceled by the Sabbatical Year, which in effect overturned the rule stated in Deuteronomy 15:2. (Calls for the revival of the *takanah* have recently been heard in the Conservative movement, and even in some Orthodox quarters.)[2]

The Private Realm

In formulating Reconstructionist *halakha*, giving attention even to matters of purely private ritual practice might be desirable, not for the purpose of regulating behavior but for the purpose of providing the individual with a communally-determined set of guidelines with regard to such practice. The operative term here would be "should"" or "ought," rather than "must." As Kaplan once wrote: "Ritual practices are the concern of every one who wants to be a Jew in the fullest sense of the term. However much or little either the observance, or the neglect, of these practices may affect our human relationships, they cannot be ignored. They can serve as a source of immediate good in the life of the individual. In their present state, they are either a nuisance, or an occasion for a sense of guilt."[3]

Standards of Observance

A knowledgeable and committed Reconstructionist once told me that he felt guilty about the fact that he rarely puts on *tefillin* in the morning, an act that for him apparently has little spiritual value. What I believe he was saying is that he wants to be an observant Jew (as he is, by traditional standards, in many areas of practice), and that his failure regularly to put on *tefillin* is undermining his ability to consider himself an observant Jew.

The underlying source of his problem, I think, is not his ritual behavior (or lack thereof) but the limited definition we currently have of "observant Jew."

In other words like many other non-Orthodox Jews, he is seeking a non-subjective yardstick against which to measure the adequacy of his ritual practice. He is quite familiar with the traditional yardstick, and, unfortunately, the liberal Jewish world has not provided him with any alternative objective measuring device. Creating such an alternative measuring device could be one of the goals of the Reconstructionist halakhic process.

A Reconstructionist responsa commission might well determine that the act of putting on *tefillin* is of little spiritual benefit to most Reconstructionist Jews, and that, because the practice (at least when done in private) does nothing to strengthen Jewish community, it should fall into the category of ritual practices that are (of course) permitted but that are not held out as normative.

Ritual And Ethical *Halakha*

Grappling with issues of even purely private ritual conduct in reconstructing *halakha* also has the advantage of helping to preserve the traditional concept of *halakha* as a seamless fabric. Over the past 2,000 years, only the architects of the Reform movement have attempted to draw sharp distinctions between ethical rules, on the one hand, and ceremonial or ritual rules, on the other hand, and at least some of the lead-

ers of the Reform movement have in the recent past confessed error in this regard.

The problem here is that once one takes the position that some of the rules that are part of a coherent legal framework are not worthy of respect, rationalizing disobedience of other rules becomes much easier. In other words, when a person has been taught that ignoring the dietary laws presents no problem, then such laws as, for example, assisting the communal poor may seem less like obligations and more like ethical suggestions.

Still, care must be taken to avoid confusing ritual practices in themselves with the ethical agendas with which the ritual practices are, or ought to be, associated (for example, saying a blessing before eating and having a renewed commitment to helping to feed the hungry). As Kaplan wrote: "Rituals can be abused by the tendency to assume that the performance of the symbolic rite is itself a virtuous act, whether it impels one to serve the ethical ideal it symbolizes or not." But, as Kaplan went on to say, "as with religion in general, so with its ritual aspect, it would be folly to dispense with it because of its possible abuse."[4]

Avoiding Insularity

Finally, in reconstructing *halakha*, we should be mindful of Kaplan's admonition that "Jewish law . . . [must] refrain from interfering with the freedom of economic and social intercourse with the non-Jewish elements of the population."[5] Kaplan saw that, at least in America, erecting artificial barriers between Jewish and non-Jewish communities could ultimately harm Judaism, and Jews.

There are three ways that such barriers could have negative consequences. First, by depriving Jews of the economic benefits and social pleasures of full interaction with their non-Jewish neighbors; second, by making the incorporation of the highest ideals of the American civilization into Jewish life more difficult; and, third, through a sort of cultural protectionism, weakening the products of Jewish creativity, including a reconstructed *halakha* itself, by insulating them from the rigors of competition in an open marketplace of ideas.

Return to Roots

In advocating the reconstruction of *halakha*, I am simply calling on our movement to return to some of its fundamental Kaplanian roots. For Kaplan, as for his ancestors, Judaism was at least as much a matter of the head as of the heart, and one could perform no more important religious service than fully using one's intellect to ascertain and advance divine purpose in the world. And for Kaplan, as for his ancestors, Jewish life without Jewish law was unthinkable. Kaplan empowered us; may we have the strength to carry on with his work.

1. Mordecai Kaplan, *The Future of the American Jew* (New York, Reconstructionist Press, 1948), 387-401.
2. See Michael Graetz, "Reviving *Takanah* in the Halakhic Process" reprinted as Appendix A in Naomi Graetz, *Silence Is Deadly: Judaism Confronts Wife-beating* (New Jersey, Jason Aronson, 1998).
3. Kaplan, *op. cit.*, 394.
4. Mordecai Kaplan, *Questions Jews Ask: Reconstructionist Answers* (New York, Reconstructionist Press, 1956), 227.
5. Kaplan, *Future of the American Jew, op. cit.*, 392.

Shabbat and the Community Center: A Case Study in Decision Making

JOY LEVITT

When the Jewish Community Center in Manhattan opens the doors in January 2002 to its new facility on 76th Street and Amsterdam Avenue, in the heart of one of the largest, most diverse and most vibrant Jewish communities in the world, it will run a broad range of programs seven days a week. Among the myriad of decisions that had to be made in order to create the building and its program, one of the more interesting was the nature of Shabbat programming. The process involved many different groups of people, including community members, rabbis, the executive committee, board and staff of the JCC, and yielded results far beyond the specific policy that emerged. In addition to establishing an atmosphere of respect and channels of communication for all the interested parties, we designed a truly innovative program for Shabbat that we believe can be replicated throughout the country.

Shabbat Opportunities and Issues

The issue of whether a JCC should be open on Shabbat has been discussed for many years in many communities with differing responses. While in some places the JCC is obviously open or obviously closed, in other communities it has become a hotly contested issue that polarizes various segments of the community. Some JCCs address this question by closing from Friday afternoon until Saturday night. In one community where I lived, for example, the JCC responded to strong feeling from a few rabbis (and not all of them Orthodox) and chose not to open despite the desire of the community at large. As one of the rabbis involved

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in that discussion, I remember being mystified by the position of these rabbis, one of whom insisted that the JCC must be kept closed "as a symbol of the importance of Shabbat." When I suggested that perhaps more people would participate in the spirit of Shabbat if they had a Jewish environment that was open and supported that spirit, there were some appreciative nods from the lay people around the table but stern disapproval from my colleagues. The powers-that-be decided that the issue was too hot (or the potential loss of financial support too great), and the discussion was over.

While I haven't done a poll of that particular community, my sense is that the overwhelming majority of Jews there continue to spend Saturday afternoon participating mightily in the commercial culture. Whether that would have changed were the JCC to open on Shabbat afternoons is of course conjecture. I'd like to think that at least some people would have embraced an opportunity to take a day off from shopping had there been wonderfully creative, warm, and enriching options for them.

When considering the policy on Shabbat for the JCC in Manhattan, the staff and board first put the issue within the broad mission of the JCC. As a community institution, the mission of the JCC is to provide a warm, welcoming home for a pluralistic, richly diverse population that seeks ways to explore Jewish life in expansive and creative ways. Our job is not to determine ritual policy for the community; it is to be respectful of the multiple views on that as well as other issues of Jewish life, while also continuing to create pathways into the tradition.

Principles for Policy

The process undertaken by the JCC in Manhattan was a comprehensive one that not only yielded a decision that we believe is good for the entire community, but one that involved a set of well thought-out principles that drive the institution as a whole. Those principles can be summed up as follows:

- True pluralism means listening to everyone and respecting everyone's practice. One group is no less and no more important than another in deciding on a particular practice of the JCC. While for some institutions, pluralism is a code word for allowing the Orthodox community to determine community standards, for the JCC it means helping each segment of the community, from secular to observant, understand each other's needs and positions.

- True partnerships are based on solid listening and concern for the institutions in the relationship. For ten years, the JCC in Manhattan has built enduring partnerships, particularly with the synagogues on the Upper West Side, by immediately signaling understanding of the complexities of JCC/synagogue relations.

By listening carefully not only to the concerns of the synagogue leaders, but also to their hopes and dreams for their institutions, determining the priorities of the JCC could be accomplished with our partners' visions in mind as well.

• True responsiveness is complicated and time consuming. Grassroots institutions such as JCCs are most successful when they respect the diversity of their community and are able to hold multiple needs and concerns without creating polarization. This has been one of the most crucial goals of the mission of the JCC in Manhattan. It has been accomplished almost entirely because of the sensitivity and determination of the agency's executive director, Debby Hirshman, who was willing and able to go back and forth continually between different groups of people to test assumptions, listen carefully, and use her role as communal leader to communicate core values of different groups in a way that established the JCC as an honest broker.

Defining the Issues

At early meetings of the executive committee and board of the JCC, the policy on Shabbat was discussed. A scan of the community practice revealed that similar Jewish facilities (the "Ys") in Manhattan were all closed from sundown on Friday until the conclusion of Shabbat. While it was always clear that the JCC would not hold religious worship services at any time during the year, the JCC in Manhattan is nonetheless, in many ways, a unique institution with a clear mission to help people engage in Jewish life. What would it mean to close the building on the most special Jewish day of the week? By eliminating the possibility of creative Shabbat programs — Shabbat dinners for seniors in the auditorium, storytelling for young families in the nursery school, Torah study in the Beit Midrash, guided meditation in the contemplation room, a cappella singing for a teen group -- would we be true to our mission?

Then there was the thorny question of the fitness center, pool, gym and art studios. In keeping with our pluralistic mandate, we were not in a position to legislate Shabbat observance for the community. If an individual believed that exercising was an appropriate activity on (or a way to celebrate) Shabbat, why would we want to prevent that? On the other hand, being an institution that is committed to Jewish values and Jewish life means being sensitive to a living, dynamic tradition. How could we hold all of these seemingly competing values?

Creating Communication

For ten years, the JCC has maintained a monthly meeting with the neighborhood rabbis. Sometimes there were issues to be discussed, like the rising cost of funerals, where it was clear that there was power in numbers and an advantage to coali-

tion building. Sometimes we just had lunch and shmoozed. Many of the rabbis on the Upper West Side (there are about fourteen senior rabbis) attended these meetings. The group included four Orthodox rabbis, two Reconstructionist rabbis, two Reform rabbis, and six Conservative rabbis, many of whom didn't know one another before the formation of this group. As a result of these meetings, synagogues partnered for learning and other kinds of programs, and the community as a whole has come together to commemorate or celebrate or learn together. It was therefore quite natural to bring the question of Shabbat opening to this group for a conversation.

The previously established communication channels, coupled with a high level of understanding and commitment to the mission of the JCC, led to a general feeling that Shabbat afternoon programming might in fact enhance Jewish life in Manhattan. There was also a strong feeling that the JCC not be opened during Shabbat morning while the main synagogue services were going on. The rabbis felt that running competing Shabbat programs (even though they weren't services *per se*) would not be helpful to their own efforts to strengthen synagogue life in general and Shabbat morning services in particular.

Public and Private Activities

The JCC staff and lay leaders continued to wrestle with the issues. How could we create an atmosphere that was warm and welcoming of Shabbat without dictating practice? Ultimately, the executive committee determined that the JCC would be closed until 1 p.m. on Shabbat afternoon. No organized programming that violated Jewish law would be held in the public spaces of the JCC. In other words, we would not hold an aerobics class with music in the fitness center. If an individual wanted to work out in the fitness center, he or she could do so. If a person wanted to go swimming, he or she could do so. We would not offer a swimming class on Saturday afternoon. Similarly, if someone wanted to use the darkroom, it would be available, but we would not run a photography class.

We would run programs that were in keeping with the spirit of Shabbat that could be enjoyed by the entire community, including storytelling, Jewish learning, meditation, singing and communal meals for constituency groups. Music would not be played in the building during Shabbat. The café and the Judaica store would be closed.

We went back to community members and the rabbis for more feedback on these proposals. The policy was tweaked again. More questions arose. They have not all been fully answered but will continue to be addressed as they are presented. It is clear to everyone that the process will continue well into the opening of the building because it is impossible to anticipate every pos-

sible scenario. Nevertheless, while specific policies may change, what remains constant is our ongoing commitment to the community as a whole and to the values and traditions that nurture us.

Building Bridges

But that is not the end of the story. It occurred to us midway through this process that while the building was clearly going to be closed on Shabbat morning, there was the possibility to enable other community partners outside of the Jewish community to make use of our facility. Why couldn't we invite agencies that worked with inner city children to use our building on Shabbat morning?

We went again to the executive committee for a sense of the possibilities and were told to see who was interested. A lay person was asked to partner with me on this issue and we began our research. Ultimately, we found three impressive organizations that work with homeless children and inner city teens in a variety of ways. For each of these organizations, the possibility of using our facility — its gym, pool, photography and ceramics studios, dance studios and more — gave them the chance to expand their programs in a very special way. It gave the JCC a way to be the true community center we had always hoped and expected it to be, and it created new partnerships with organizations we can work with in a significant way.

Building Support

From a process standpoint, it was now time to go to the rabbis because while these proposals did not represent a major change in our policy (the JCC was still officially closed on Shabbat morning) they did represent a major new direction. The rabbis were very supportive, while raising important issues that we needed to consider, particularly about how we communicated this concept to the larger community. I spoke with several rabbis individually to explain what we were trying to do so as to encourage a strong sense of support from them. The policy was then brought to the board of the JCC where it was presented by the lay committee chair. It was enthusiastically endorsed.

There is no magic formula to successful communal decision making and there is no single right path to follow. But the ingredients are the same regardless of what policy needs to be set. A strong leader who has a proven track record for listening and respecting diverse viewpoints is an essential starting point. In the case of the JCC in Manhattan, its executive director not only has this record but is also very Jewishly knowledgeable, which was also helpful. A solid foundation of communication between the key parties affected by a given policy is crucial in moving forward. Key to this is building and maintaining relationships from the beginning, dealing with smaller issues and building trust. Finally, keeping

the vision and mission of the institution in full view at all times insures that any given decision is ultimately in the best interests of the community.

While the decision-making process described here reflects the discussion between what many see as a "secular" agency (a JCC) and "religious" synagogues, the principles, policies and procedures could easily be applied to other situations. Especially in settings where negotiating is critical (for example, a Hillel on a smaller campus where multiple subgroups are not feasible), the suggestions about how to shape a policy that is principled as well as pluralistic may well serve the decison-making process.

Judaism as Transformational Practice

SHEILA PELTZ WEINBERG

Recently I have noticed that the questions people ask me have changed. It used to be "How did you decide you wanted to be a rabbi?" (I don't know if male rabbis get asked that question with the frequency and curiosity that females do. I would guess not.) Nowadays, people are curious to know how I got interested in meditation. They ask, "Why do you meditate and how is it Jewish?" My exposure to meditation has definitely strengthened my life as a Jew and as a rabbi. It has given me new eyes with which to see my own heritage and my fellow Jews. I will divide my remarks into three sections: the first I call the "agony and the ecstasy."

The Agony and the Ecstasy

There's the famous opening of Woody Allen's film *Annie Hall* when he tells an old Catskills joke. Two elderly Jewish ladies are ordering food at a hotel and one turns to the other: "You know Rose, the food at this hotel is really awful." And Rose turns to Sadie with a nod. "Yes, and such small portions." Then the film's narrator reminds us that this joke is indeed a metaphor for life, filled with difficulties and over before we know it.

Our confrontation with the reality of life often leads us to a spiritual path or practice. Even in our relatively peaceful and affluent corner of the world we are never too far from pain, failure, disappointment, violence, disease and the loss of loved ones. If it's not our lives, it is our neighbors' and sisters'. If we need a reminder, there is the news, the daily cascade of disasters, human and nature made. Sometimes we become aware of how our own expectations, demands, fears and prejudices make the ordinary circumstances of our lives into cruel prisons.

Once a young man asked me if I thought there was any other entry into a spiritual life besides suffering. I really needed to pause and reflect. Of course, there is the possibility that awe and wonder will arise spontaneously when we contemplate creation.

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It is also true that falling in love, or having a child, are spiritual gateways. But, in my experience, it is most often our pain, our sense of helplessness, and our need for relief that drives us to seek pathways to Spirit.

Often we have to get to the end of our rope with other palliatives. Compulsive behaviors that promise succor eventually backfire. We come to realize the bitter fruit of projecting our distress onto a near or far enemy. As James Baldwin put it: "I imagine one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense that once hate is gone, they will be forced to deal with their own pain."[1] The interest in spirituality in our present culture is emerging from a deep, empty place of pain and loneliness that is not filled by spending more, blaming more or controlling more.

Suffering and Searching

When we practice mindfulness we expand our understanding of the causes of suffering and the end of suffering. When we tell the truth about what is, when we sit in the presence of our pain, fear, confusion, and despair without flinching, without pushing or pulling, we are tapping into a true power — the power of presence, awareness, truth, love — call it what you will. The Baal Shem Tov inquired why night preceded day in the story of creation. Why does it say, *Vayehi Erev* — there was evening and then *Vayehi Voker* — then there was morning — each and every day? He understood this order to reflect the truth that it is our very capacity to be with the darkness that allows us to awaken to the light of the Divine.

Indeed what is the paradigmatic story of the Jewish people? Exile and redemption. And exile precedes redemption. Slavery in Egypt, serving Pharaoh, precedes liberation and becoming servants of God. We are drawn to a life of spiritual practice through our enslavement and oppression. We crack open and cry out and we are answered. Life does not change. We don't even change. We still get hungry and thirsty all the time. But we are sustained. We are held. We see more clearly and trust more deeply. We have more freedom and yet our choices are more obvious. We know we are responsible for remaining alert, for treating each other and ourselves with care and respect while we accept the givens of life that cannot be changed.

So our agony is a goad and a guide along the soul's journey. What about our ecstasy? Many of us are drawn to various spiritual practices because we want to get high without drugs. We want to dissolve the borders of separation and feel "*Alles iz Got*," "All is God." We would like to see the bush still burning. We want to experience every taste, smell, color; every blade of grass redolent with sparks of holiness. We suspect that we are half-asleep. A heightened awareness beckons us. This desire also works to confuse us. Many people expect that after a brief practice of meditation they

will achieve an ecstatic state and are very frustrated and disappointed when this does not occur.

Ecstasy

Jack Kornfield has a new book called *After the Ecstasy the Laundry.* In it he narrates the experiences of spiritual teachers and practitioners from a wide variety of traditions. Yes, we can awaken to states of greater and greater clarity. We can even know a sense of merger with the universe, intense soul stirring closeness to God, rapture and devotion. These can be enormously liberating experiences that change our hearts and lives. Kornfield's evidence indicates, however, that we don't stay there. We come back and the whites and the darks are waiting, or the spin cycle is about to begin.

Our people knew ecstasy as well. They sang *Mi Kamokha* at the sea. They danced and wept and saw the hand of God. Yet, immediately afterwards the Torah relates two stories about thirst and one about hunger. In the Torah, the manna is introduced as a test of patience and faith. Will the people trust that there will be enough? Will they so revere God's generosity to treat each other with the same virtue?

For us the manna appears when we see miracles in the ordinary exchanges in family and work. How much of our daily struggles entail bewailing our unmet needs? How spacious is the mind in the face of its own bitterness, trauma and lust? How can we cultivate a trusting heart? These are the challenges of mindfulness and all our spiritual practices.

Right after the ecstasy of Sinai, the people are instructed to build an earthen altar and then an altar of unhewn stones. The ground beneath us is where we walk, not in the ecstatic terrain of Sinai or the Sea. The high moments invigorate us. They are the gift of a gracious God. But we need the simple earthen altars of regular spiritual practice. In the words of the morning blessings, we recognize the task of spiritual practice is to open our eyes, to free us from our obsessions, to keep us from falling into confusion and when we do to lift us up. It is to touch us with beauty and to strengthen our courage and our faith. It is to remind us of how miraculously our needs are being met as our steps are guided along our life's path day to day.

Letting Go

The second learning from mindfulness and from life I call "letting go." When we actually sit down in the middle of our lives we physically must let go of our busyness and of fixing things. When we go on a retreat we let go of our routines, our escape routes of talking, reading and writing. We let go of any other distractions so that we can see more clearly the habits of mind that serve as our particular jailers. Frequently, they are the predictable: resentments, judgments, fears and childhood

wounds, stories that go nowhere but toward self pity. We long to let go of our self centeredness, our hypersensitivity, our self hatred, our fear of people, our sense of being separate, of being less than, not worthy, lonely, and isolated. We want to feel closer and more connected to ourselves, to each other and to God. We want to feel closer to our own lives, more comfortable in our own skins.

The book of *VaYikra* (Leviticus) is dedicated to the *korbanot*, the ancient rituals of letting go that we call sacrifice — from the root K-R-V, to be close. The *korbanot* — the letting go — that brings us *karov*, close. Life passes by at such a high speed it is hard to get a close look. When we are on a jet plane all we see are colors and vague shapes. In a car, train or bus, life still passes in a blur. When we ride a bicycle or walk we can notice the dogs, the birds and even the flowers. When we sit, we approach stillness. Everything becomes close, as close as the next breath, sound, sensation, or thought. Everything is close enough to know and to touch. When we let go of the whizzing speed at which we move, we come closer to life.

Joanna Macy, a renowned activist and spiritual teacher writes in her memoir *Widening Circles* about a time in her life when anguish and self-contempt overwhelmed her. She imagined a fierce dark figure looming over her, pointing its mocking finger at her. Then she remembered to breathe, to watch the breath and sensations. She describes the paradoxical process of letting go that occurs in mindfulness. She writes:

> Gradually a shift occurred. Sensations replaced that looming mental figure. Simple, almost clinical curiosity arose, free of judgment and interpretation. "Oh, what is this feeling really like? Is this pain in my throat like a rock inside or a rope tightened around it? Is the weight in my heart more like being crushed by a weight or like being ripped apart?"
>
> The sheer act of sustaining attention seemed to work like a solvent — like pouring turpentine on a pair of garden shears jammed with rust. It loosened up the life inside me. It freed me a little from the old mocking voices because they were not the sensations happening now; they were only ideas. Right now there was simply hurting, not some separate thing causing hurt or being hurt. Or being a victim or an endless failure. Just pain. And the pain, when seen in its own right, changed. It changed into just one more interesting thing that was going on.[2]

In the language of Leviticus we might imagine the rust on the garden shears as the smoke rising on the altar, taking with it the residue of shame and guilt.

Balancing Styles

Two more stories of letting go: Last

fall I was teaching a course at the synagogue in Amherst with my husband Maynard. The subject was the "Torah of Money." We had never taught anything together. He is Professor of Sociology with a special interest in social class, economic justice and labor. We were inspired by my daughter Abby's similar course at the 2000 Havurah Institute, and after a protracted fund-raising campaign at my synagogue, I felt it was important to study the intersection of Jewish sources, our values and synagogue policies.

As we prepared to teach, I experienced what I had (in theory) known before. My husband and I had vastly different styles. I am the kind of person that loves order. I throw out things easily or at least put them neatly away in unobtrusive places. I don't like clutter. Maynard's style is quite different. He works surrounded by piles — of newspapers, notes, file folders, magazines and books. He likes to have many times as much material available than he will ever need. I like to focus on the essentials. It was daunting to sit down together and prepare.

I noticed Maynard rifling through his piles. I also noticed that judgment arose in my mind. When I sat with that judgment (without judging it) something happened. It changed to a feeling of compassion. I saw how much he struggled with the need to have all that information, all those references. I saw the burden of his habit. I shared my insight with him and he was touched by my empathy.

But more remarkably I felt my own discomfort. I recognized that I too suffered from my rigid style and tendency to judge the other as wrong and my own way as superior. I suffered from feelings of aversion and anxiety when my carefully constructed "order" was disturbed. As we sat together we moved from two people polarized by judgment to two people ready to loosen our grip on our particular habits and work together. We understood that his collecting and my managing were our unique responses to fear. We're not going to change places. But clear attention led to letting go of being right, to tolerance and a kinder collaboration.

Untying Knots

The second story concerns a young mother suffering from cancer who came to see me after Yom Kippur. She wanted to share that something remarkable had occurred on *Kol Nidre.* During the course of her treatment she had begun to meditate. It was something she had always feared and resisted. She imagined that when one sat in formal meditation, the idea was to have a perfectly blank mind. This, she realized, she could never do and the thought of it frightened her.

When she did start to sit, she began to observe her thoughts and notice the stories she repeatedly told herself. One story had a very old feel to it. It had something to do with the idea that her illness was a punishment. She couldn't really get healthy,

because if she did, she would still be guilty. The crime was unknown, but she somehow felt more authentic being sick than being well. Meanwhile she was aware that she desperately wanted to get better, to live her life and care for her children whom she adored. She wondered how to let go of that story, if indeed that was possible.

On *Kol Nidre* she heard me compare the releasing of our vows to the untying of knots. I asked the congregation to imagine and feel the constricting knots that kept them from being fully alive. Suddenly she imagined the loosening of her story. She saw it untie. She felt it in her body. It was a moment of deep release — a moment of forgiveness for herself and a moment of hope for the future.

Letting Go of Certainty

Living mindfully also means letting go of certainty. Each time we open ourselves to the present moment, we cannot be sure what we will find. As long as we remain stuck in the past, it is controllable. As long as we are fantasizing the future, we can write the script. Ellen Langer, the first female tenured professor of psychology at Harvard, is an expert on applying mindfulness to all aspects of life, including learning. She spoke these words in a recent interview:

> If I learn something with a certainty, that closes my mind to alternative ways of understanding, then all it has to do is change slightly and I am caught off guard. When you think you know something, you're not present; and if it was important to be there, you'll suffer the consequences. . . . When you're uncertain. You stay tuned in. . . . When people are being mindless, in some sense they're sealed in unlived lives.[3]

Our tradition urges us against this choice. Beginning with Avram's journey "to the land that I will show you," God is urging Avram to leave behind the idea that all is fixed and certain. He must let go of his security and identity along with the cultural familiarity of his birthplace. Then he incorporates into his own name the letter *heh* — the letter of breath, awareness, and infinity. He becomes Avraham.

We, too, as followers of Avraham, are encouraged to leave the automatic and comfortable habits of our minds. We are implored to look closely and to see how our fixed beliefs cause suffering, to see the infinity of awareness and to see eternity in every moment.

Where You Are

The following interpretation, attributed to the Baal Shem Tov, sounds like mindfulness instructions. He is commenting on six words in Genesis 13:14: "*u're'eh min hamakom asher atah sham. . . .* " — "look from the place where you are . . ." The Baal Shem Tov says:

> A person is always stuck in thought. Where one's thoughts are, there one is. A person can stand in the synagogue to pray. But his thoughts will fly to the ends of the earth and follow after his business so that it seems as if he is really at business instead of in synagogue. The verse says "look" so that you should look with spiritual vision, the eyesight of the soul, "from the place where you are" and don't allow your thoughts to fly to other places and don't become distracted and scattered in your thoughts.[4]

The Besht is reminding us to gather our attention to this moment — to let go of the thoughts that inevitably proliferate and distract us. And anyone who has tried to do this knows that this is not easy. Our thoughts scatter and we gather them together again and again and again. It is an ongoing returning, a continuous *teshuvah*.

Jewish Resources

In order to live fully, one must let go. Judaism has multiple symbols and practices that echo the letting go we learn through awakened attention. We are urged to let go of bread (like the manna, the substance of security and survival) at the two poles of the year, in the form of *ḥametz* before Pesach and as the crumbs of *tashlikh* in the midst of the Days of Awe. We sweep our puffed up self-importance out of the corners of the house with the fluffy yeasty slices. Letting go of the stale and fermented accumulation of lifeless habit opens us to embrace our freedom. The bread of our petulance and willfulness is cast into the sea six months later. It signals our readiness to move from judgment to compassion and from defiance to reliance upon the Source of Life.

Shabbat is our principle practice of letting go. Shabbat is mindfulness. Shabbat is the present. It is spacious time — a time for attention to every detail, a time of heightened receptivity and trust. A clear heart is our birthright. On Shabbat the candles illuminate all with a holy glow. On Shabbat we are bidden: *uri uri,* awake, awake! Every soul is the beloved friend called to delight in the words of *L'cha Dodi.* Shabbat is our retreat time when we give each other and ourselves permission to be who we are. We create a supportive atmosphere so that we can let go of our protective armor, our posturing, our accomplishments, and our ability to control and manipulate our world. If we are blessed, we may meet the face of Shabbat peering out from behind our own eyes.

Shabbat and *Havdalah*

The *Sefat Emet* writes about Shabbat as follows:

> My grandfather taught in the words of Rabbi Isaac Luria that the Sabbath is called a field. Scripture refers to this when it

says: "Come my beloved, let us go out into the field" (Song of Songs 7: 13). This world is a wilderness, one where there is no sign of God's providence.

On the Sabbath it is called "field," ready to be seeded. Then the power of inwardness, the divine life-point within it, is aroused, and it receives its seed.[5]

Perhaps the power of mindfulness is akin to the promise of Shabbat — it turns the wilderness of our lives, the raw, bumpiness of distraction, into a field, ready to be sown with awareness and Divine love.

I would like to mention one last "letting go" in our tradition — *havdalah*. This is the transition from the ecstasy to the laundry and it is accomplished with delicacy and grace. Retreats, conferences, vacations, great periods of insight and bliss do always end. We suffer greatly when we refuse to let go of the wonderful moments. Anyone who has meditated can recall a time when they had a particularly pleasurable experience and almost immediately started to strategize how to get it to stay. Holding on to sweetness is its own tyranny and keeps us as stuck as any other delusion. How wonderfully wise to light the braided candle, smell the musky cloves and taste the thick Shabbat wine — and then move on to the next moment of awakened attention.

Seed and Fruit

The third learning I call the "seed and the fruit." One can think of mindfulness as a spiritual practice that trains the heart and the mind. As Jews we are familiar with this concept. When we give *tzedakah* we are acting in a generous and loving way. We also intend that by giving *tzedakah* we will grow in generosity. The fruit is in the seed.

When we sit and pay attention to the breath as it rises and falls, to the passing sounds, or the sensations and thoughts that pass through our awareness, we are inclining the mind and the heart toward certain qualities and understandings. When we are mindful it is our intention to be with what is happening as simply as possible, without pushing away what is unpleasant or running after what is pleasant. We investigate the nature of phenomenon as they change. We use our own lives as our laboratory. Each time we remember our intention to be present, the inner muscle of awareness is strengthened.

Our rabbis, mystics and poets, whose words move us in the liturgy of Jewish prayer also sought to cultivate the fields of consciousness. Indeed, one notices a remarkable similarity between the words of the daily *siddur* and the insights that emerge from practicing awakened attention. When we pray, or sit in stillness or engage in any moment of life with awakened attention, we integrate into our very selves certain truths of life. When we do this, our lives change as

well. Let us briefly explore three seeds that are planted in the soil of our minds to ripen in the fruit of wise and compassionate living. We will note that these seeds are also central to Jewish prayer.

Intense Awareness

A friend of mine told me that he was having breakfast one morning at a meditation retreat. After a few days of settling down, his attention was very bright. As he looked at his plate a prayer of gratitude spontaneously arose in his mind. The words were traditional. But on that morning they leapt from his mind. How wondrous it is to be provided with nourishment! The very existence of the bread and the bowl of oatmeal seemed a direct product of the divine flow of abundance.

We often do an exercise on retreat of asking everyone to select three raisins from a bowl that is passed around. The instructions are to connect fully with the raisins — to observe their shape, color, and texture, to feel the sensations in the body evoked by the raisins, to notice the thoughts in the mind. Then gradually to take one raisin and lift it to the mouth and place it inside. Roll it around for a while between the tongue and the cheeks. Just notice. Then, finally, bite into the raisin with the teeth and chew and swallow. Just keep noticing the myriad sensations and thoughts evoked by eating a raisin. Usually we are amazed at the subtlety of each phenomenon we encounter in this life when we give it enough attention. This amazement easily translates to gratitude and blessing.

A story is told about a Hasid who visits his rebbe. After several initial conversations the student says: "I have practiced for many years and have learned much wisdom and understanding but I feel I need to learn more about grace in my life. Is there a special teaching for that quality?" The rebbe peered at the Hasid and her eyes danced. She was amused at the question. "You are also a teacher of Judaism and spirituality. You have students who love and revere you. You have a beautiful family and healthy children. Now you are here with your rebbe, enjoying her company and friendship and you ask where is the grace?" The rebbe laughed out loud. "You are swimming in grace!"

Grace and Gratitude

Grace and gratitude derive from the same Latin root — *gratis*. The Jewish day begins with gratitude acknowledging the free gift of Divine blessing and bounty. From the opening of *Modeh Ani Lefanekha,* "I give thanks before You," through the Halleluyah of Psalm 150, the intention of our words is to awaken us to the grace, the *ḥen* and *ḥesed*, in which we are swimming, like birds flying in the air. The words cultivate an insight and an attitude of blessing that emerges naturally when we are still enough, clear enough, awake enough

just to be with each moment of life. Indeed the capacity to open in a calm and balanced way to whatever enters our lives is itself a seed and a fruit of gratitude. My teacher's teacher told her once, "Pray for grace and then act as if you already have it. Because you do."

Impermanence is another profound insight experienced directly in mindfulness practice and contained in Jewish liturgy. God, we say, lights up the world in the morning and God, we say, brings on the evening. These prayers remind us of the daily rhythms and the passage of time. Our new moons and festivals tap us into the larger cycles of our year. Everyone knows that things change. We all know that time is passing and nothing remains the same. We know that we are not in charge of all of this. Still we have a tendency to act as if this were not true. The desire for certainty is so great in the human mind that we often imagine that we have all the time in the world. This tendency encourages us to fall asleep, to allow ourselves to get distracted and take things for granted.

When we practice mindfulness we see how our minds play tricks on us. We actually can see the sky changing color or the space between this breath and that one. We see clouds pass over the sky and obscure the sun one moment and then reveal the sun the next. We become aware of the ebb and flow in our own energy, how our spirits rise and fall from moment to moment, stimulus to stimulus. We're feeling buoyant and hopeful one moment and irritated the next or vice versa.

Seeing Impermanence

This direct seeing of impermanence helps our minds become more spacious. We are less fearful that this unpleasant moment will last forever. We are less complacent knowing this moment of bliss will surely end so we try not to miss it while it is here. We take our moods less seriously. The insight of impermanence conditions the mind to be more present to this moment, fragile and fleeting as it is — like the grass that grows in the morning, like the wheat chaff that blows in the wind, like the shadow that passes.

This need not be a depressing realization. In fact it can be enormously sustaining and uplifting. We are relieved of the suffering of pushing and pulling the weightlessness of time. If everything that is born dies, how infinitely precious each moment of presence is. How sweet the taste and the sound that will never appear again! Impermanence seeds the consciousness that births blessing. And what do we bless? What does endure? What is eternal? This leads us to the third theme of practice and Jewish prayer.

The Place of Prayer

I often find that Jews are confused about the meaning of *Shema Yisrael.* They know it is an incredibly important prayer but it doesn't make sense

to them. Somewhere in Sunday school they remember being taught that it means our God is better than the God of other faiths. They think: "We Jews know there is only one God and everyone else (from ancient pagans to modern believers in the trinity) hasn't understood that superior idea yet." I don't think that is what *Shema Yisrael Adonai Elohaynu Adonai Eḥad* means.

Martin Luther King, Jr. sometimes used the term "inescapable network of mutuality" instead of the word God. I think this is closer to what we are trying to hear when we chant *Shema Yisrael*: "Listen Up Israel!" It is an affirmation of the essential unity of all that lives. In a moment of clarity we can see the web that links everything with everything else. In a moment of spacious mind, what the Jewish mystics call *moḥin de gadlut,* the pattern of connection and wholeness is revealed. The container is so vast; it reaches to the ends of time and space. The container of the ever dancing light and dark is whole and unified and everlasting — *ḥayei olam,* life of all worlds. It is also as close as this in breath, this out breath, this step.

In mindfulness practice we listen for the one, the *eḥad* — just this one breath, just this one step, just this one raisin. And along the way we sense that all is interrelated. I begin to understand that nothing is outside the circle. There is no "away." This has powerful implications. Alexander Solzhinitzyn expresses it in these words:

> If only there were evil people out there insidiously committing evil deeds and it was only necessary to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being, and who among us is willing to destroy a piece of our own heart?[6]

There is only one heart. As we practice listening, the intention is to open that heart. This is the birthplace of compassion and the fertile ground where seeds of wisdom and peace can bloom and bear fruit.

The Personal and Social Paths

So we have come full circle to a more inclusive Judaism sustained by a mindfulness practice that is really an expansion of the words of the siddur. The Jewish path is both personal and social. We seek the transformation of the heart and the society — *tikkun nefesh* and *tikkun olam.* Each can serve as a means to the other. In practice our intention fires our action and our action is the fruit of our intention. Abraham Joshua Heschel articulates the connection between all spiritual work and social transformation:

> The survival of mankind is in the balance. One wave of hatred, callousness, or contempt may bring in its wake the destruction of all mankind. Vicious deeds are but an aftermath of what is conceived in the hearts and minds of man.

> It is from the inner life of man and from the articulation of evil thoughts that evil actions then arise.[7]

In the same essay Heschel describes the practice of mindfulness as deeply harmonious with a Jewish spiritual life:

> It is this awareness of ever living under the watchful eye of God that leads the pious [person] to see hints of God in the various things he encounters in his daily work, so that many a simple event can be accepted by him both for what it is and also as a gentle hint or kindly reminder of things divine. In this mindfulness she eats, and she drinks, works and plays, talks and thinks, for piety is a life compatible with God's presence.[8]

I am still looking for radical amazement and radical politics. I am quite sure that the way of connection and presence, the practice of mindfulness is the field where each of them can flourish.

The Truly Important

I close with a story. I recently spoke with a rabbi of a large congregation. Like me, he was attracted to the silence of a mindfulness retreat. This year he managed to make time for two retreats. While he lamented to me that he is not sitting in formal practice on a regular basis and, in fact, true to form, he feels guilty because of that, he has definitely noticed the impact of more awakened attention in his life.

He shared with me something he noticed not long ago. The words "important message" are printed on the message pad in his office. In fact each "important message" is written on a pad that immediately produces its own carbon copy "important message." As he sat at his desk, facing the forest of paper, he realized that not all of these messages are truly "important messages." In fact, more significantly, he understood that the greatest challenge of his life is to have the clarity and understanding to determine which messages were really important and which just said "important message."

May we all awaken to know which are the truly important messages. May our letting go ground us in this precious, fleeting moment, and may our sense of the "one inescapable network of mutuality" guide us in service and in love.

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1. Cited in Jack Kornfield, *After the Ecstasy the Laundry* (Bantam Books, New York 2000), 196.
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3. Interview with Ellen Langer in the *Boston Globe Magazine*, December 17, 2000.
4. *Ituray Torah, Lech Lecha*, 98.
5. As translated by Arthur Green, *The Language of Truth* (Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia 1999), 46.
6. Cited in Kornfield, *op.cit.*, 32.
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8. *Ibid.*, 311.

Truth Telling and Meaning Making in Eulogies (sic) — Not for Clergy Only[1]

MARGARET MOERS WENIG

Ten minutes before the funeral was scheduled to begin, a woman I have never met approached me, "Rabbi, may I speak with you, alone?" She turned out to be the deceased's adult daughter who was absent from the family meeting the night before at which I gathered information for the eulogy. "Rabbi, I just want you to know: my father abused me." I don't remember what happened next. I don't remember whether I tempered the praise for the deceased, as loving father, that I had composed late into the night. I remember only that this experience changed forever the way I think about eulogies.

Did this man abuse his daughter? Her testimony alone does not convict him. (Parents and teachers have been falsely accused.) In this setting, a rabbi is surely not equipped to serve as judge.[2] Yet the daughter's comment reminded me that the words I had prepared to describe her father were words of praise alone. In all likelihood this woman's father, like most human beings, was a complicated person with strengths and weaknesses, merits and faults, righteous deeds to his credit and sins on his record as well. Yet the family had not offered me information about his failings, even "off the record," and I had not asked.

Feelings from False Eulogies

During that funeral, I knew that at least one person was thinking to herself, "The rabbi's words are not the whole truth," or perhaps worse: "This eulogy is a sham. This funeral

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is a sham. Judaism is a sham."

Many of us have heard eulogies that did not accurately reflect what we knew of the deceased. We were told, "He died of pneumonia," when most of us knew it was AIDS. . . . His partner of fifteen years was not mentioned nor his extraordinary contributions to the gay community. . . . The wife and children of his second marriage were mentioned but his first wife and children were not. . . . Her admirably high standards were lauded, but not her disdain for those who didn't live up to them. . . . Rarely have I heard mention of physical or emotional abuse or financial misdeeds, rarely a mention of a valiant struggle to keep mental illness at bay or to remain sober.

I once left a funeral feeling particularly inspired until I learned, a few days later, what had been left out. Then I felt manipulated, like an employer who learns, only after hiring a new staff member, that omitted from her resume were those jobs from which she had been fired.

In contrast to the tendency to leave out the deceased's dark side, a eulogy for a man whose illness caused his family a great deal of anguish began this way:

> The job of a eulogy is to praise a person for the life he has led. In the service of praise, however, one cannot lie. For if the eulogy does not ring true, the praise will sound hollow. And if Mark could hear it, he would see through the pretense. He abhorred a sham. There was much praiseworthy in the life of Mark Rosenfeld but there was much pain there too. It is impossible to speak the praise without speaking of the pain.[3]

Speaking solely words of praise at a funeral serves no one — neither the deceased nor the mourners. Jewish tradition wisely leads us on a different path.

The *Hesped* in Jewish Tradition

Judaism considers it a *mitzvah* to give a "funeral oration," a *hesped*. A *hesped*, however, should not be confused with a "eulogy." To eulogize, from the Greek, means "to praise." The Hebrew verb, *l'haspid*, in contrast, means "to cause or to enable to weep."

> When a father dies and a daughter mourns, she may be mourning for the father whom she has lost or for the father she never had. She may be mourning for a relationship that could have been but wasn't or for one that was, yet ended long before her father's death. (Or she may be "weeping from the loss, with this death, of a wonderful man, funny, loving . . . whose presence she will sorely miss/cannot imagine living without.")

The *Shulḥan Arukh*, a primary code of Jewish law, describes the commandment to give a funeral oration as follows: "The *mitzvah* is: to raise

his voice to say [about the deceased] things which would break the heart in order to increase weeping *and* to recount his praise." Praise is only one goal of the *hesped*, not its sole purpose, and false praise is expressly prohibited in the Talmud:

> As it is taught in a *baraita*, just as they exact punishment from the dead [about whom false praise has been spoken], so too do they exact punishment from the funeral orators [who speak the false praise] and from those who answer [Amen].[4]

This warning concludes a passage in which a man is rebuked for calling another man "modest" without sufficient evidence. It serves as the basis for the *halakha* spelled out in the *Shulḥan Arukh*:

> It is a great mitzvah to deliver a funeral oration (*l'haspid*) as is appropriate (*k'raui*). The *mitzvah* is: to raise his voice to say about [the deceased] things which would break the heart in order to increase weeping and to recount his praise. However, it is forbidden to exaggerate his praise excessively (*haflig b'shivḥo yoter mi-day*). Rather, recall his good qualities, and add to them a bit (*umosifin bahem ketzat*), just don't (*raq shelo*) exaggerate (*yaflig*). If he had no good qualities at all, don't attribute any to him. About the wise or pious — recall their wisdom and piety. Anyone who attributes [good qualities] to one who had no [good qualities] at all or who exaggerates excessively (*mosif l'haflig yoter miday*) what the deceased actually possessed brings evil upon himself and upon the deceased.[5]

L'haflig b'shivḥo is usually translated as to "exaggerate praise" or "unduly flatter." *L'haflig yoter miday* or *mosif l'haflig yoter miday* is usually translated as "to exaggerate excessively."[6] That is: The one who gives the funeral oration is prohibited from "exaggerating excessively" praise for the deceased.

The verb *l'haflig* is more nuanced, however, than "exaggerate" conveys. The root P-L-G means "to divide." From this root come expressions such as: *l'haflig da'ato min* — "to divert/distract his attention from" — and *hifligo b'devarim* — "to reply evasively." *Peleg, p'lag* or *palga* as nouns mean "part" or "half." *Raq shelo yaflig*, then, prohibits not only attributing to the deceased more good deeds than he actually performed, or exaggerating those he did perform but it also prohibits praising the deceased through half truths, or by diverting attention from his faults.

Inviting Controversy

Why does *yaflig b'shivḥo* (telling half truths in the service of praise) bring evil upon the speaker and upon the deceased? Exaggeration or half-truths undermine the credibility of

the speaker and may provoke the mourners (who know what has been left out) to counter the exaggeration, aloud or in their heads. The rabbis worried that whenever a speaker uttered praise about another person, the hearers would inevitably supply the other side of the story, either out of a craving for truth or out of jealousy. And so the rabbis cautioned: One should never speak well of his fellow [in this case, a fellow who is still living], for by praising him, one brings evil upon him [i.e. causes others to speak ill of him.][7] It is preferable, therefore, when one is giving a funeral oration, and praise is appropriate, to include mention of the faults of the deceased, *l'khathilah* (from the outset), rather than omit the faults and provoke the listeners to counter with them.

Moreover, according to the Talmud, telling half-truths in the service of praise may cause Heaven, incensed by the discrepancy between the praise spoken and the praise deserved, to visit more severe punishment on the deceased than he actually deserved. For this extra punishment the speaker is liable, and for uttering falsehoods or half-truths he is punished.[8]

If we utter half truths in a funeral oration, whom do we think we are fooling?

> . . .We are not so arrogant and stiff-necked as to say before You, . . . we are perfect and have not sinned; rather we do confess: we have gone astray, we have sinned, we have transgressed.
>
> What can we say before You, who dwell on high? What shall we plead before You, enthroned beyond the stars? Are not all things known to You, both the mysteries of eternity and the dark secrets of all that live? You search the inmost chambers of the heart, and probe the deep recesses of the soul. Nothing is concealed from Your sight.[9]

Concealing the faults of a parent, a teacher or a hero is not the way of Torah. The Torah recounts King David's victories and his crimes, Moses' patience and angry outbursts, Noah's obedience and drunkenness, Sarah's generosity and jealousy. Is the parent or congregant for whom we write a *hesped* more righteous than they?

The Purpose of a *Hesped*

Though the purpose of the *hesped* is to evoke weeping, the *hesped* is, curiously, not for the sake of the mourners. The *hesped* may serve as emotional catharsis for the mourners' grief, but that is not its primary purpose. The *hesped* may provide some comfort to the mourners (although the Mishnah warns us against attempting to comfort mourners while their dead still lie before them).[10] While a *hesped* may profoundly affect the mourners, the *Bavli* claims: *Hespeda yikarei d'shihva hu.* The *hesped* is recited for the sake of the dead (lit. sleeping).[11]

Of what benefit is the *hesped* to

the deceased? Some believe that "The deceased knows and hears his praises as in a dream, and knows everything that is said about him until the grave is filled with earth and he returns to the dust."[12] Imagine how relieved the deceased might feel were he to know that, even though we recall his failings, we nonetheless mourn his death. Some believe that through our words, including our recitation of Mourner's Kaddish, we can sway God to have mercy on the deceased,[13] just as, through our deeds, we can add to the *zekhut*, the merit of the deceased. Many would agree that a *hesped*, if truthful and compassionate, can sway the living to have mercy on the deceased and to remember her "for blessing."[14]

The writer of the *hesped* does not recall the faults of the deceased in order to judge the deceased. On the contrary: the writer of the *hesped* recalls the failings of the deceased as an advocate, speaking in defense of the deceased before God and before the court of public opinion. The advocate does her job best not by covering up the sins of the deceased but by showing compassion for the deceased, warts and all. If we want God to have mercy on the deceased, we must show mercy. And if the mourners, through their tears, say "Amen" to the *hesped's* compassionate portrait, then all those voices are added to the deceased's defense.

About Beethoven, Franz Grillparzer offered this compassionate defense:

> He was an artist but also a human being. A human being in the world's fullest meaning. Because he shut himself off from the world, they called him hostile, and because he avoided emotion, unfeeling. Oh, he who knows himself to be hard does not flee! It is precisely the excess of emotion that shuns emotion. When he fled the world, it was because in the depths of his loving heart he found no weapon to resist it . . . [15]

Let it be said of anyone preparing funeral orations "she respected all her people by searching for some sense in them, searching for truth, searching to the end and then suspending judgment."[16]

Limits of "Truth Telling"[17]

Only God knows the whole truth about a person's life. Mere mortals are limited by subjective human perspective. While human truth cannot approximate the truth which God knows, the mitzvah to give a *hesped shelo yaflig*, a *hesped* which does not speak half truths, imposes upon us a responsibility to offer as full a picture of the deceased as is humanly possible. Were the funeral a *bet din* (a court), the testimony of one witness alone would be insufficient, and the testimony of immediate family members would be inadmissable altogether. While a *hesped* is the opposite of an indictment, we can learn something from these laws about

witnesses: One family member, even a spouse or partner, does not know the whole human truth about the deceased, nor does an adult child.

> My grandmother and grandfather attended the funeral of a cousin. The rabbi had gathered information for the *hesped* only from the deceased's son. So inaccurate and incomplete were the rabbi's words that, in the middle of the *hesped*, my grandmother stood up, shouted "False" then sat down.[18]

Siblings, childhood friends, coworkers, colleagues (even if the deceased retired twenty years earlier), nephews, nieces, students, neighbors, lifelong and recent friends add much-needed pieces to the story. Long-distance phone calls to elderly siblings of the deceased, colleagues, childhood friends, who may not be well enough to attend the funeral, are well worth the hours and the expense. They dependably provide information and insights heretofore unknown even to the immediate mourners. The limits of subjective human perspective are transcended somewhat as more and more perspectives are included.[19]

Our attempts at truth telling are also limited also by other *mitzvot* that impinge on the commandment to give a *hesped shelo yaflig*, a *hesped* which does not speak half truths. As we search for a truthful way to recall the deceased, we must remember not to err in the opposite direction, e.g. to malign him — even if our information is accurate. As Jews we are instructed: "Honor your father and your mother."[20] "Let your student's honor be as dear to you as your own, the honor you show to your *chaver* like the respect [you feel or show] for your teacher, the respect [you feel or show] for your teacher like the awe [you feel or show] for Heaven."[21] "One who learns from his fellow a single chapter, or a single *halakha*, or a single verse, or a single word or even a single letter must behave towards him with honor."[22]

Moreover, we are warned: "Whosoever makes derogatory remarks about deceased scholars is cast into *Gehinom*,"[23] and "A person who publically shames his neighbor is like someone who has shed blood."[24]

Furthermore, the prohibition against *lashon hara* (literally, "an evil tongue," figuratively, "gossip"), as taught to us by the Hofetz Hayim in his *Shemirat Halashon* (Guarding the Tongue), rules out the spreading of lies which would damage a person's reputation as well as speaking about actual misdeeds, if spreading such information lowers the status of the person about whom it is said.

Balancing Positives and Negatives

These positive and negative commandments would prohibit someone from mentioning faults of the deceased which might bring shame upon the mourners or the deceased. Adultery, for example, unless it is already public knowledge, may have to

be alluded to rather than mentioned explicitly to spare the widow or widower shame. If the culture of a particular family is that "No one may say a word against Papa," then the funeral is not the time or place to challenge that culture. And if a family member requests that certain details be kept "off the record" or asks to preview the *hesped* and censor portions of it (as happened to me only once in 16 years), his or her request must be respected.[25]

Honoring our parents and teachers, and avoiding *lashon hara* does not, however, preclude speaking of their sins. How can we discern when a *hesped* would cross the line from honor to dishonor, from advocacy on behalf of the deceased as a flawed human being to *lashon hara* which is prohibited? The best indication lies in the speaker's intent. Were a speaker to recalls the faults of the deceased out of bitterness or revenge, to satisfy a prurient interest in unseemly details or to shock mourners with sensational revelations, that would be *lashon hara.*

If, on the other hand, the reason the speaker mentions the sins is to show compassion, grant forgiveness or praise the person for doing *teshuvah*, that is not *lashon hara.* And if the *hesped* evokes compassion, forgiveness or praise from others who otherwise might have harbored anger against the deceased, then I, for one, would call such speech a *hesped shel emet* (literally, a *hesped* of truth). I coin the phrase *hesped shel emet* in order to call to mind the traditional term: *ḥesed shel emet* (true piety or true loyal love) which is the expression our tradition uses to describe a deed of loving kindness which can never be repaid, specifically washing and/or burying the dead. I believe that giving a *hesped shel emet* is a *ḥesed shel emet.*

Practical Examples

How do we create a *hesped shel emet?* It is not our job to psychoanalyze the deceased, to identify his motivations, the root causes of her behaviors or personality traits. We cannot know for sure what to attribute to nature, what to nurture, what to genetics, what to early trauma, what to free choice. But we may give the deceased the benefit of the doubt, as the opening of this eulogy endeavored to do:

> We do not choose our parents. They may be good parents, they may be very limited as parents. Yet they are our parents, and the desire to love and be loved by them holds us tight in its grip. Deborah's father was unable to be a good father. Perhaps he tried.

Another *hesped* described a father this way:

> Jack, like most of us, had his strengths and his weaknesses: He could be difficult and demanding. He had delusions of grandeur. He over-committed

himself. Sometimes he made promises he did not fulfill. He ate compulsively. He suffered disappointments, frustrations, and depressions. He could say all the wrong things in the heat of anger — but the next minute he'd want to apologize, not quite knowing how to do it. For at his core, Jack Kushner was one of the kindest, most generous men one might ever meet.

In a *hesped shel emet* we can show that a person's failing do not erase his merits, as this *hesped* attempted to show:

> The way a life ends is not always indicative of the ways it was lived. When a person has suffered a debilitating disease, especially a mentally debilitating disease, when a person has suffered losses personal or financial, it is sometimes hard to recall a time when his life was not defined by those losses. "Grow old along with me, the best is yet to be, the last of life for which the first was made," said Robert Browning. The last years of Bernard's life, however, were not the best. Yet good years did fill much of his life. . . .
>
> Bernard married and had two sons. But his marriage to Ellen did not last and the great tragedy, or mistake, of his life was that his relationship with Jim and Robert did not last either. What went wrong there, between father and sons, depends upon whom you ask. Was money really the root issue or merely a symptom of a deeper problem? "It broke Bernard's heart," Anna (Bernard's mother) used to observe. It certainly broke hers. . . .

Therein followed four pages chronicling his life, his rebound as a child from the loss of a leg, his excellence in school, dental practice, second marriage, love of sailing and leadership in marine education, his relationship with his mother and his financial downfall. The eulogy closed with this attempt at summation:

> Bernard failed as a father. Failed to provide security for his widow. But he was a good step-father, a loving and cheerful uncle and a model son. Three out of five is as good as many of us achieve.
>
> The last years of Bernard's life, the demise of his practice, the end of his relationship with his sons were not the best that life can give to a man and probably reveal Bernard's own faults. But those endings do not define all that was Bernard's life. . . . I for one will always remember Bernard with much love as he showered much love upon me and upon my brother . . .Goodbye Uncle Bernie, Goodbye Dr. Klein. Goodbye Bernard. May his memory be a blessing.

In a *hesped shel emet* we can show that people's weaknesses may be the

flip side of their strengths. The one who is truly "present," "in the moment," flexible and spontaneous may find it hard to make plans in advance or stick to them. Strengths and weaknesses sometimes come in a package. We rarely get one without the other.

> Someone once asked Sam, "Why does the sun always shine on your side of the street?" He answered, "Because I don't like to walk in the rain." Samuel Lowe believed that he wasn't meant to be unhappy. This was his weakness as well as his strength. He hated funerals, couldn't visit people in the hospital, avoided open conflict at all cost and was deaf to tales of unhappiness (even his children's). But it was also his great strength. For Sam not only sought sunshine for himself, he also brought it to everyone with whom he came in contact. . . .

In a *hesped shel emet* we may recall that for every failing there was a virtue, as Thomas Jefferson said of George Washington:

> His temper was naturally high toned; but reflection and resolution had obtained a firm and habitual ascendancy over it. If ever, however, it broke its bonds, he was most tremendous in his wrath. In his expenses he was honorable, but exact; liberal in contributions to whatever promised utility; but frowning and unyielding on all visionary projects and all unworthy calls on his charity. His heart was not warm in its affections; but he exactly calculated every man's value, and gave him a solid esteem proportioned to it. . . . Although in the circle of his friends, where he might be unreserved with safety, he took a free share in conversation, his colloquial talents were not above mediocrity, possessing neither copiousness of ideas, nor fluency of words. In public, when called on for a sudden opinion, he was unready, short, and embarrassed. Yet he wrote readily, rather diffusely, in an easy and correct style.[26]

In ways such as these a *hesped shel emet* may speak in defense of the deceased. While the primary purpose of a hesped is to arouse human and divine compassion for the deceased, the living may also benefit.

Lessons for the Living

While the primary purpose of a *hesped shel emet* is for the sake of the dead, the living may also benefit. A *hesped shel emet* may remind the living that, during our lifetimes, our deeds are recorded, in our own hand, in *Sefer Hazikhronot* (the Book of Memories),[27] for God and for all to see. Whether our sins are acknowledged or not, those we have hurt are not likely to forget. "The first step for all is to learn to the dregs our own

ignoble fallibility."[28] In my household, when one of us does something wrong, we tease each other with, "I'm going to put that in your *hesped.*" Underneath the affectionate threat lies the question, as a valuable reminder, "Is this the way you would like to be remembered?"

A *hesped shel emet* may reveal to us a flaw in our culture, our values or priorities. As the son of a cantor said in a *hesped* for his father:

> My father was a complex man. I don't think I ever really knew him. He had two jobs which drove him to work harder than anyone should have. The Temple job was the most demanding as far as expending spiritual and physical energy. Whenever he was home, there was nothing left of him. He gave everything to the congregation and very little to his family. I say this not out of anger — although I felt plenty of that — but out of a profound sense of sorrow for me, him, and the rest of my family. Nourishing others seems a dangerous game if you allow yourself to starve in the process.

Or as Nicholas Biddle suggested as a preface to dwelling on the late life poverty of Thomas Jefferson: "This is an unwelcome theme, but the history of Jefferson's life were imperfect without it, and perhaps his country, which so often profited by his successes, may yet learn something from his misfortunes."[29]

A *hesped shel emet* may serve to inspire us through the example of one who repented of his sins and changed his ways. In contrast, when late-life virtues are cited without reference to the early-life failings they replaced,an opportunity has been lost to show that *teshuvah* is possible.

> At the memorial service for my mother, in D.C., she was praised for the wisdom, humor, grace, strength and compassion she bestowed generously on the other women in her breast cancer support group and in the national organization. My sisters and I didn't fully recognize the wom-an so eulogized. This was not my experience of her when I lived at home. Since I had not benefitted from her late-life compassion, hearing about it did not comfort me.

Had that *hesped* instead traced the deceased's journey from coldness to compassion, the daughters might have accepted, as a gift, the example of their mother's transformation, no small gift indeed. "You know that hadn't occurred to me," said one of the daughters when this was pointed out to her years after the memorial service. "That *is* a comfort."

Assisting the Living

Listening to a *hesped shel emet* about someone else's difficult mother, father, sibling or spouse may help others, whose difficult relative is yet

living, accept that person's faults with a measure of compassion. One person, attending a memorial service for a woman whose schizophrenia was frankly acknowledged in the service, wrote, years later:

> I attended the service at a time when I was struggling to keep from fracturing a relationship with a very close relative whose mental health was at the core of the problem between us. I remember very little in specific about the liturgy but I remember clearly feeling a physical relief from the anger I felt at this person. I remember finally understanding, after years of distress and conflict, that the fault lay neither with this person nor with me. That understanding transformed this relationship for me. Although the same issues still exist, things have never gotten so bad again.

Another congregant put it this way:

> The frank acknowledgment, by her children, before and after my grandmother's death, of her shortcomings as a mother, detoxified the relationship. The message was clear: conflict within families happens, it's not necessarily crippling or fatal, and some love can still survive. By being honest, Doris Bader's children learned not to repeat her patterns, and became extraordinarily loving, generous, patient parents. And the grandchildren were able to have much less conflicted, more straightforwardly loving relationships with Doris than her children had had.[32]

A *hesped shel emet* may serve to free us from the stranglehold of a deceased parent's sins, or, if not free us, then loosen that hold by some small measure. The alternative, remaining imprisoned by a parent's sin, exacts a high price, as Kate Wenner discovered about her father's imprisonment in the legacy of his mother's sin:

> Before [my father's] illness, he always kept us at arm's length. He was quick to anger if we challenged him, intolerant of scrutiny of any kind. And then, only weeks before I lost him forever, I learned why. . . . He revealed to my brother, sister and me the shameful secret he had kept buried since childhood: when he was 14, his mother and sister had deliberately set fire to their dry goods shop to collect insurance money. It was late at night, and the couple who lived in the apartment above the store came running out from the flames, screaming and carrying their children in their arms. They could have easily been killed. . . . "I'm tired of living with shame, [said my father], I've held on to it all these years. I'm exhausted from trying to cover it up, driving and driving myself."[33]

Imagine how different this man's life might have been, if at the time of his mother's death, a rabbi preparing a *hesped shel emet* had asked him, "And did your mother have any weaknesses, any sins?" A lifetime of living in shame and hiding, a lifetime of wasting energy to cover-up, might have been averted by a *hesped shel emet.*

From Honest Word to Righteous Deeds

Ultimately a *hesped shel emet* may even lead from honest words to righteous deeds. Mourners may be inspired to do *tzedakah* not only in memory of the deceased but also, if we are honest about their sins, on behalf of the deceased — to compensate, so to speak, for the deceased's failings. The text of the *Yizkor* prayer we find in an Orthodox *siddur* contains a phrase which many liberal *siddurim* have left out: "May God remember the soul of my beloved (name) who has gone to Eternity. Because I pledge *tzedakah* on his/her behalf (*tzedakah b'ado/b'adah*), with this merit, may his/her soul be bound up in the bond of eternal life . . ."

After the death of a woman who was less than generous in contributions to her synagogue during her lifetime, her son and husband gave *tzedakah* generously from the inheritance she had left them — making up, within several months, for the deceased's decades of parsimony. Following a *hesped shel emet* for his mother, that father might have tried to find and compensate the family burned out of their home by the fire his mother set, or failing to find them, he might have been moved to help some other family made homeless by fire. Imagine the long-range implications of such an act on generations of both families.

On a purely personal note, giving a *hesped shel emet* may show others how we, ourselves, might wish to be remembered. Maimonides derives the rabbinic commandment to offer a *hesped* from "love thy neighbor as thyself."[34] Treat others as you wish to be treated. I, for one, hope that my partner and children, parents and teachers, friends, colleagues, congregants and students will warn me of my sins while I am alive, so that I have an opportunity to do *teshuvah* before my death. If, however, when I die, I have failed to do *teshuvah* for all of my sins, I hope that my family and friends, colleagues, and students will confess my sins aloud, with compassion, with humor, with love, and do *tzedakah*, not only in my honor but also, *b'adi,* for my sake.

Reaching middle age, I already feel that "we are always saying farewell in this world, always standing at the edge of loss attempting to retrieve some memory, some human meaning . . ."[35] After both celebrating and bewailing the brilliant and tragic life of a man who died too young, this *hesped* concluded with words to the father (a devout student of Mordecai Kaplan):

Judah, I know you think it is ridiculous to pray to God for rain as if God could choose, at any given point, to send or to withhold it, but I think you would not mind my quoting from the prayer for rain, for you have a deep respect for tradition, especially if its supernaturalism can be reinterpreted. In the prayer we ask God that rain may come *livrakha v'lo liklalah*, as a blessing not as a curse. Judah, you would say: it is not God who renders the rain a blessing or a curse, it is up to us. Many things life brings hold the potential for both blessing and curse. So too did Mark's life and even his death. It is up to us, *zikhrono livrakha, livrakha v'lo liklalah,* to make Mark's memory a blessing.[36]

Appendix:

Together, my brother Michael and I wrote a *hesped* for our father, Jerome Wenig. The opening represents our attempts to speak with love about his sins:

> Our father once described a lawyer he had just met as a "tough, interesting, cigar-smoking, old bastard — a likeable son of a bitch – my kind of guy." That was the kind of guy Dad appreciated, that was the kind of guy he was himself: a tough, interesting, (formerly) cigar-smoking old bastard, a likeable son of a bitch.
>
> I don't usually use such language at funerals, but if you knew Jerry, you knew he couldn't speak for five minutes without using foul language. He cursed. He gambled. He told off-color jokes. He served his children liquor before they were of age. He teased his wife incessantly. He never kept records of the checks he wrote. He never paid his own bills. He never made a bed or ran a load of laundry. He spent large sums of money on a whim.
>
> Our father was no saint . . . and yet, he expected to be treated like a king. He was served coffee in bed every morning. He demanded affection and attention from his children. He stood on the bow of our boat singing the "Volga Boat Song" while we pushed it out of the mud. He sometimes hummed Handel's "Hail The Conquering Hero" when he walked into a room as if he could hear an orchestra announcing his arrival. If we hesitated to fulfill his request for an American cheese sandwich and a glass of iced coffee, he reminded us, "I made ya, I can unmake ya." He sometimes signed his letters "God."
>
> And he got away with every bit of it. His wife put up with him for over forty years. Mike and I worshiped him. His friends adored him. Colleagues, employees, and students were fiercely loyal to him and would do anything for him. He was

impish. He would assume that youngest child look of innocence. He grinned from ear to ear. When Jerry held court, it was to make people laugh, laugh 'till our bellies ached (or, if we were eating, 'till food exploded from our nostrils.)

As much as Jerry demanded attention he also lavished it. He would talk to you for hours wanting to know everything about your life, your work, your ideas, and what you do for fun. He'd engage you in heated argument (playing devil's advocate, of course). The smarter he thought you were the harder he would argue. He made everyone he came in contact with feel important.

He was a tough, interesting, cigar-smoking old bastard. A loveable son of a bitch.

Then, after pages outlining his family background, his education, his practice and teaching of labor law, his *pro bono* work, his work as a mediator, his innovative approach to collective bargaining, his affection for his children and grandchildren, the lessons he taught us through his words and his deeds, my brother and I concluded:

> The night before his second heart attack, Dad was listening to Pagliacci. As he felt the heart attack coming on, he later reported, he recited the last line to himself, "*La commedia e finita.*"
>
> But the comedy wasn't finished with the second heart attack. Even in the hospital he made people laugh. When, a few weeks ago, an emergency room doctor offered to bring Dad some lunch saying, "It must be difficult, Mr. Wenig, keeping to your renal diet. How do you do it?" Dad answered, "I lie."
>
> The comedy wasn't over with the second heart attack, Dad, and it's not over with the third. In the last two days, as we have reread your letters and retold your stories, amidst our tears, we have been laughing. You were a tough, interesting old bastard and we love you very much.

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1. I am grateful to Dr. Lawrence A. Hoffman for this subtitle. I borrowed it from the title of his book, *Art of Public Prayer:Not For Clergy Only.* I use it here because clergy are not the only ones to prepare eulogies. It is not uncommon for family members or for colleagues to speak at a funeral or for a congregation to entrust one of its own members to prepare eulogies in the rabbi's absence. It is from Dr. Hoffman, also, that I have learned that while a prior era in Jewish thought represented a search for truth, our era is absorbed in a search for meaning. I call my endeavor "truth telling and meaning making" to convey that while, on the surface, it appears to be a search for truth, it is actuallymeaning I am after.
2. "Judge not alone, for none may judge alone save One." *Pirkei Avot* 4:8.
3. From a *hesped* given by MMW. All subsequent unattributed quotations are from "funeral orations" given by the author. Names have been changed for the

purpose of this article, unless the family requested that I use the deceased's real name.
4. BT *Berakhot* 62a.
5. *Yoreh Deah* 344:1.
6. Rabbi Chaim Binyamin Goldberg, *Mourning in Halacha: The Laws and Customs of the Year of Mourning,* translated by Shlomo Fox-Ashrei, edited by Rabbi Meir Zlotowitz (Mesorah Publications Ltd., 1991), 111-112.
7. BT *Baba Batra* 164b.
8. BT *Berakhot* 62a.
9. From the High Holiday *Machzor, Gates of Repentance* (New York, Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1978), 269-270.
10. *Pirkei Avot* 4:18
11. BT *Sanhedrin* 46b-47a.
12. *Mourning in Halacha, op. cit.*, 111. See also BT *Shabbat* 153a.
13. By reciting *Kaddish* for a parent, the child redeems the parent's soul from *Gehinnom* (*Midrash Tanhuma, Parshat Noah).* "On that basis it would be logical to recite *Kaddish* during the entire Twelve Months, since the punishment of the wicked in *Gehinnom* lasts for twelve months. However, one does not wish to assume that one's parent was wicked; therefore, the custom is to recite *Kaddish* for only eleven months. . . . If one knows for certain that one's parent is among those who are punished for Twelve Months in *Gehinnom* — for example, if they did not observe the Sabbath — one is obligated to recite *Kaddish* for the full Twelve Months." *Mourning in Halacha,* 351-352.
14. "From the funeral oration over a man it may be known whether eternal life is his or not." BT *Shabbat* 153a.
15. Phyllis Theroux, editor and commentator, *The Book of Eulogies: A Collection of Memorial Tributes, Poetry, Essays, and Letters of Condolence* (Scribner, 1997), 26. My thanks to Beth Am member George Robinson for giving this book to me, for encouraging my "truth telling" and for assuming that responsibility himself in my absence.
16. Said by Thomas Merton of Flannery O'Connor. *The Book of Eulogies, ibid.,* 41.
17. From Dr. Eugene Borowitz I learned to stake out a clear position and then spell out its limits.
18. Elizabeth Loris Ritter about her grandmother, Dorothy Silver.
19. In an e-mail message to me, October 29, 2000, Dr. Ernest Rubinstein commented, "Including more perspectives on a person's life wouldn't so much come closer to the whole truth, as simply multiply half truths, some of which would conflict with each other." I agree. Nonetheless, I suspect that multiple half truths, especially if they conflict with one another, would be less likely to be mistaken for the whole truth than the one-sided truth representing a single person's perspective.
20. Exodus 20:12.
21. *Pirkei Avot* 4:12
22. *Pirkei Avot* 6:3.
23. BT *Berachot* 19a.
24. BT *Bava Metzia* 58b-59a.
25. I would add to the limits of truth telling: One may not betray a professional confidence or a confidence shared in the context of a friendship.
26. *The Book of Eulogies, op. cit.,* 72.
27. God "opens the Book of Memories, and from it[s pages] is read — upon it, the signature of every earthling." From the poem *Unetane Tokef* in the Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur *Musaf Amidah.*
28. Robert Louis Stevenson in his eulogy for his childhood friend James Ferrie, *The Book of Eulogies, ibid.,* 281.
29. *Ibid.*, 74.
30. Elizabeth Lorris Ritter, October 2000.
31. I am aware that the Babylonian Talmud, *Bava Metzia* 58 teaches, "If a man is a penitent one must not say to him, 'Remember your former deeds.'" I believe in its context the implication is that: You must not *taunt* him with the words: Remember your former deeds. If, however, the intention is to *praise* rather than to taunt, I would say the prohibition does not apply.
32. Dr. Jane Weiss, e-mail to the author, October 2000.
33. Kate Wenner, "After the Fire," *New York Times Magazine,* October 8, 2000, 124.

34. *Mishneh Torah, Sefer Shoftim* 4:1.
35. Said by Adlai Stevenson in a eulogy for Eleanor Roosevelt, quoted in *The Book of Eulogies, op. cit.,* 103-104.
36. "A *hesped* is to a life what a good piece of literary criticism is to a (flawed?) novel or story. In some ways, I picture the *hesped* as the first public act of launching the deceased's memory out into the world, now that the deceased him/herself is no longer there." Dr. Ernest Rubinstein, e-mail to the author, October 29, 2000.

Healing, Health and Holiness

Illness and Healing in the Jewish Tradition; Writings from the Bible to Today
David L. Freeman, M.D. and Judith Z. Abrams, editors
(Philadelphia, Jewish Publication Society, 1999), 291 pages

REVIEWED BY MARGARET HOLUB

Different souls seek different comforts. This, I suppose, is the rationale for any anthology, especially one about approaches to illness and health. But a book — even an anthology — has a soul of its own as well. On the one hand, each piece in *Illness and Healing in the Jewish Tradition* has its own voice. Selections argue with as well as complement each other. In fact, the lively internal arguments of this anthology are one of its great pleasures. On the other hand, all the many pieces, originating from sources as disparate as the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Jewish Science movement, create something distinct from, if not necessarily greater than, the sum of its parts.

Two Kinds Of Consolation

So first, the soul of the book: we are told by the editors that these sources have been selected to be of service to people dealing with illness. Many, if not all, of the selections were apparently first gathered "to be inspiring, empowering and provocative to people who have been ill, their loved ones and caregivers" in the context of a healing service called *Refuat Hanefesh*, held monthly at Temple Israel in Boston. They now appear in anthology form to the same end. The matter of inspiring, empowering and provoking is a complicated one. What actually comforts when one is in the presence of illness?

I would suggest that there are two different fundamental approaches to textual consolation. There are those people who are comforted by — who are "inspired, empowered and provoked" by — teachings from a position of confidence, attestations from those who have already survived, direction from people who have managed, in crisis, to find a footing. Not that an author of such direction would necessarily suggest that the same solution will work for every

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situation. But the message is: there are solutions, whether faith or friendship or, as Dr. Fred Rosner advocates at charming length, chicken soup. Such a reader is consoled by the affirmation of King David, whose words of faith in Psalm 103 (one of the anthology's selections) state "He redeems your life from the Pit, surrounds you with steadfast mercy."

The other sort of consolation is of a more paradoxical nature. There are those who need and crave the depths, companionship in the breach, intensity commensurate with one's own experience of suffering. For such a reader, it is not the solution that comforts, but the full voicing of difficulty. This reader would more likely respond to Psalm 6, also quoted, when the psalmist cries out: "I am weary with groaning; every night I drench my bed, I melt my couch with tears. My eyes are wasted with vexation . . ." In fact, for such a reader the very positing of a solution, a strategy, a set of tools for change — at least until very late in the conversation — might be experienced as shallowness of compassion, as trivializing the experience of suffering.

Healing Via Mars and Venus

I am reminded of the pop psychology dilemma of the "Mars and Venus" relationship, in which the Mars member of a couple tries to offer help in a crisis and is perceived as uncaring and controlling, while the Venus member says, "Oh, yes, I understand completely" and is perceived as doing nothing to help the problem.

Illness and Healing in the Jewish Tradition is a Mars kind of book. It is positive, uplifting, confident. This energetic tone is both the strength and weakness of this rich anthology. I can well imagine people who will be moved and encouraged by each selection and others who will find many of the pieces too pat, not deep enough for satisfaction. For one book, even an anthology with as rich a variety of sources as this one, to please and move both kinds of readers is probably impossible.

The Voice Of Job

The impossibility of satisfying both sorts of soul-craving is illustrated by the presentation of Job. Dr. Freeman and Rabbi Abrams excerpt passages from Job, beginning with the terrible collaborative investigation between the Lord and the Adversary to see what it takes to break a decent soul. Job's dreadful cries of anguish are certainly represented here at length: "He set me up as His target . . ." And God's reply is cited extensively enough to get the point: "Gird your loins like a man . . . would you impugn My justice?" The selection finishes with Job's concession speech: "I will ask, and You will inform me. I had heard You with my ears, but now I see You with my eyes; Therefore I recant and relent, being but dust and ashes."

While the words are all from scripture, the shape of the narrative is the editors'. And as the story is presented

here, the message is that Job, after a sympathetic but ultimately feeble cry of indignation, reaffirms God's overwhelming authority and withdraws his protest. And the moral of the story — the "solution," if you will — is that we who are suffering may find solace in doing likewise.

Two Types of Consolation

Consider this quite different interpretation of Job's theophany, from a short essay called "Befriending the Desert Owl" by Shamu Fenyvesi (in *Ecology and the Jewish Spirit: Where Nature and the Sacred Meet*, Ellen Bernstein, Editor, Vermont, Jewish Lights Publishing 1998, p.30):

> Gaining the perspective of the vulture, Job saw that his life, that indeed the entire drama of human society was no longer center stage . . . Instead of clinging to the ideal of pastoral peace, he learned to accept predation, suffering and death, a world he could not comprehend but must love. Job found solace in a joyful embrace of the wildness of the world.

At the risk of overstating this polarity, we might equate one kind of consolation with "the ideal of pastoral peace" and the contrasting form with "a joyful embrace of the wildness of the world." In our anthology's presentation, Job pulls himself back from his wild outcries and returns to some kind of pastoral — in both senses of the word — peace, or at least stasis. This not an anthology about embracing the wild.

Touching Soul And Heart

Many of the selections are simply beautiful to read. Many that are beautiful also inspire the soul. Others may be clumsier of language but still touch the heart. It is a delight to see words from many eras anthologized together in a way that makes the ancients seem as fully embodied as any contemporary writer. Some of the talmudic passages, reflecting, I am sure, Rabbi Abrams' great affection for this literature, are especially vivid (and some very funny), as are some of the pieces from other historical periods. We read the account of Gluckel of Hameln as she tries to run ahead of the plague, sending her infant daughter ahead of her with a maid in disguise. When Gluckel and her family are successfully reunited, she writes that "we needs must weep for joy and everyone wanted to eat the child alive!" Who could not rejoice along with her and feel five hundred years evaporate in that half-sentence?

A fascinating, and unexpected, aspect to this anthology is a historical overview of therapies used by Jewish physicians and healers in different eras. We find an account from the Apocrypha of an exorcism, excerpts from talmudic and later herbal formularies, a brief mention of the tradition of a sick person changing or adding a name, several discussions of

issues related to amulets, and a longer account of the variety of healing modalities used by a sixteenth-century physician. We see doctors half a millennium ago adjuring their patients to exercise, to eat less, to avoid stress.

Merging Medical Science With Religion

With all the diversity of treatments described here, there is a unifying point: Jewish physicians in every era have managed to integrate the most contemporary medical knowledge with Jewish spiritual truths, creating an especially effective, or at least meaningful, arsenal of approaches to disease. Far from science and faith opposing each other, for Jews trying to treat illness they mesh quite elegantly. Why else would we be told that the king of France insisted so ardently on a Jewish physician, even to the point of firing a doctor who turned out to be a converso?

There is also a fine set of selections having to do with the healing quality of community and friendship. *Bikkur ḥolim* (visiting the sick) is treated from the perspective of *halakha*, from that of a recipient and of visitors. Rabbi Joseph Ozarowski makes the case for visitors offering spontaneous prayers of healing and presents some models for how these prayers might be articulated.

It is good to see this particular point elaborated, though I am aware of other rabbis and lay participants in the contemporary Jewish healing movement who have taken the art of personal prayer somewhat further than Rabbi Ozarowski's examples suggest.

And one more treat here is the beautiful book itself and especially its lovely cover, a pleasure to look at, to hold and to pass on to your friends.

Difficult Texts

A troubling aspect of this anthology is a kind of editorial disappearance during some difficult textual moments. So, for example, an editorial introduction to biblical selections on the laws of *tumah* and *taharah* (ritual purity) notes:

> Four physical conditions are invariably marks of ritual "uncleanness." These are vaginal bleeding, discharge after childbirth, penile discharge and *tsara'at,* a set of skin blemishes as characterized in Leviticus.

Other than commenting that "these particular rituals are strange to us moderns," there is no mention of any of the enormous contemporary discomfort with associating menstruation with ritual uncleanness. Such passages do not need to be exhaustively critiqued or justified in a collection like this, but it seems oddly distancing on the editors' part to refrain from any response at all, as these texts will undoubtedly disturb many contemporary readers. The lack of comment here is especially notable because of the care with which their introductory notes frame each piece

in the book.

Troubling Moments

A small but troubling moment in another piece also calls out for editorial presence. Rabbi James Rudin tells the story of visiting his friend Rabbi Herschel Jaffe in the hospital right before Rabbi Jaffe was to have his spleen removed as part of treatment for leukemia. The affection between the two rabbis is obvious and moving, as is the depth of feeling in Rabbi Rudin as he sees his friend looking so fragile. It is a surprise, then, that when Rabbi Jaffe begins — apparently quite eloquently and without hesitation — to speak of his effort to find meaning in his illness, his friend becomes uncomfortable, cuts him off mid-reflection and leaves the hospital.

Any of us can certainly imagine having the same response to a sick friend. I am sure I have done it myself. But as a reader I need some editorial intervention here. I need to be told that this article is descriptive, not prescriptive, that the reason the editors chose this piece is to teach about the emotional difficulty of a hospital visit — not to teach us to leave when our friends start saying something emotionally deep. Framed in this way it would have been a lovely teaching piece.

Another such "ouch" that cries for editorial footnote — or perhaps just for deletion — is Dr. Fred Rosner's assertion that the need for patients' rights to Jewish observance while in the hospital are "either minimal or nonexistent for Reform or assimilated Jews who are less concerned with ritual and practice than with pure religious identification."

Trusting The Physician?

Far more puzzling, for an anthology published in this era of unprecedented conflict between patients and the health care establishment, is its nearly unquestioning veneration of the physician. From the non-canonical *Wisdom of Ben Sira* we read the admonition, "Make friends with the physician, for he is essential to you; him also God has established in his profession." Several eloquent oaths to be sworn (and presumably upheld) by physicians appear in the section called "The Jewish Healer." From the oath supplied by Asaph, we read: "You shall not harden your heart against the poor and needy but heal them . . ." Maimonides is quoted as praying:

> Inspire me with love for my art and for Thy creatures. Do not allow thirst for profit, ambition for renown and admiration to interfere with my profession, for these are the enemies of truth and love for mankind and they can lead astray in the great task of attending to the welfare of Thy creatures.

The one selection which speaks in contrast to all of this is a piece of doggerel from the sixteenth century which makes fun of the avarice of

doctors in strikingly contemporary terms. Clearly missing from this collection is any further source of spiritual consolation for the sick person who feels betrayed by a physician or a medical establishment which may seem to have anything but the patient's sacred worth in mind.

Never-Ending Hunger for Health

One last puzzlement — and this one is truly more puzzling than disturbing — is the presence of a section entitled "The Sacredness of Health." The editors' introduction to the book concludes:

> Perhaps the most fundamental commonalities [of all Jewish approaches to illness and health] are a search for God, a reverence for life, a belief in the sacredness of health, and a life-defining conviction that illness is an evil to be banished.

Even many of the sources in this book see illness as something different than "an evil to be banished." Rabbi Sidney Greenberg counsels acceptance of "the dark thread" which can "contribute its share of beauty to the whole." Leslie What, a new mother and breast cancer survivor, contemplates the resonance between the *kedushah* of her son's *brit milah* and her own mastectomy. Eric J. Cassell begins an article on transcendence by saying, "People are able to enlarge themselves in response to damage, so that rather than being reduced by injury, they may indeed grow."

Certainly good health is to be desired. It is something to try to maintain, even to pray for. But sacred? So much of the good thinking of our secular culture, and of movements within Judaism that attend to the spiritual issues of illness, are teaching us to be less fearful of illness, to see it as instructive, a chance for spiritual refinement, a situation which allows us to experience love and community in new ways. Not that illness is sacred either; but it seems that theologians like Rabbi Nancy Flam, who teaches that illness and death are expressions of the divine *middat hadin,* the natural and inevitable consequence of structural limitation, offer a more useful conception of illness than it being "an evil." What might have been more apt, both to the contents of the section and to contemporary understanding, would have been a chapter heading like "The Never-Ending Hunger for Health."

Complex Questions

A deliciously bracing antidote to this enmity with illness is Rabbi William Cutter's piece called "Death and Its Turning." Here he admires Henry James' "elegant greeting" of death as "the distinguished thing" and the poet Zelda's honorific "*Mar Hamavet,*" which Cutter translates as "Mr. Death." Illness, Cutter claims, even sometimes leads to good writ-

ing such as we find in this book! He too points to the paradox: "What turns towards us is death; what turns away from us may be bitterness."

Illness, like consolation, is a complex thing, and *Illness and Health in the Jewish Tradition* may actually do us a service by occasionally "making us sick" even while it otherwise inspires and comforts. With this challenging, problematic, vexing collection, Dr. Freeman and Rabbi Abrams have succeeded in raising intensely personal and complicated questions even when they seem to be offering good, clean answers. This is a book to read aloud and argue about with yourself.

To Guard the Earth

Torah of the Earth: Exploring 4,000 Years of Ecology in Jewish Thought
Arthur Waskow, editor
(Vermont, Jewish Lights Publishing, 2000)
Vol. I, xiv + 242 pages, Vol. II, xvi + 311 pages

REVIEWED BY BERNIE FISCHLOWITZ-ROBERTS

A number of things struck me in reading this two-volume anthology about Judaism and the environment. One bright note is the number of well-known Jewish thinkers who are concerned about the environment and finding ways to protect it. While consciousness is certainly greater than at any point in the past, the issue is not on the agendas of many Jewish organizations, and a vast amount of education is needed to make the Jewish community aware of the extent of global environmental problems and required changes. This anthology has the potential to bring about some of that much-needed education of the Jewish community.

The challenges humanity faces with the present global environmental crisis are numerous and difficult, pointed out clearly and cogently in numerous pieces in the "Zionism and Eco-Judaism" sections (which constitute the second volume of the anthology). These essays include Alon Tal's and David Brooks' discussions of the state of Israel's environment, two pieces on opportunities for cooperation between Israelis and Palestinians on environmental issues of concern to both peoples, and Ellen Bernstein's discussion of the problem of suburban sprawl in Pennsylvania.

Traditional Sources

In the first volume, which covers the periods of biblical Israel and rabbinic Judaism, the reader finds different perspectives on the extent to which Jewish texts indicate a concern for the environment, and how central those concerns were in the lives of various thinkers. As is often the case in anthologies, especially one of this breadth and depth, there is some inevitable repetition in texts selected. Nonetheless, readers will benefit from seeing differing perspectives on the same texts. This collection makes clear the importance that Jewish scholars and thinkers have placed upon humanity's interactions with the natural world.

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One running theme picked up by many of the authors was the centrality and importance of Shabbat and the *sh'mitah* (jubilee) year. I am now much more aware of the power of observing Shabbat — and the cessation of commercial and most technological activities — as a way to demonstrate the necessity of giving the planet a rest from the onslaught of consumption, pollution and ecological degradation that occur constantly and whose pace has quickened substantially since the Industrial Revolution.

As an example, Arthur Waskow notes that, in addition to renewing the earth, observing the *sh'mitah* year can renew human communities, too:

> Stop work for even just one day, and for that day hierarchy dissolves: no boss, no employee. Stop work for an entire year, and the institutions of society, normally so useful, periodically dissolve. People are freed up, the imagination is freed up, the Breathing-Spirit of the world blows where it likes.

Yet the point is made that merely observing Shabbat does not excuse destructive behavior on the other six days of the week, and indeed compels us to change our everyday behavior to bring it more in line with Shabbat.

Rights and Responsibilities

A central issue this anthology examines is the balance between individual rights and communal responsibilities — perhaps the central issue in humanity's relationship with this planet. A number of essays made clear the Jewish textual bases for restrictions on individual property rights in the service of communal needs, especially social and environmental ones.

Waskow cites Meir Tamari, a modern scholar, who states that

> over and above the economic considerations involved in ecological cost-benefit analysis, there is a moral element involved. . . . In the Torah scheme of things, the Jew is educated to understand that the public has rights in his property, and therefore his own property rights are necessarily and consistently limited.

Similarly, Michael Lerner reminds readers that Jewish law

> has retained its strong commitment to the notion that moral claims of the community supersede any property rights. When private property rights are used in a selfish way, the rabbis believed, they would almost certainly lead to the destruction of the community.

As, for example, the Congress considers Administration proposals for controversial tax cuts, these concerns for community are particularly timely and relevant. Living in a society which embraces individualism often

at the expense of concern for community, the reader is reminded of why more of a community focus is essential to solving our environmental and social problems.

Noticing Nature

In addition to the relations between individuals and the community, humanity's attitudes toward the natural world — and how those attitudes were shaped — are also examined in some detail. Fred Dobb makes an important point, stating that the rabbis understood miracles "not as the suspension of the natural order, but as that natural order itself." As news reports remind us on a regular basis, human-induced climate change has profoundly affected this planet's natural orders, and it is possible that our political system will only realize the seriousness of our environmental problems when our daily lives are so disrupted that life as we know it becomes impossible This suggests the important role that motivated Jews — and all people who respect the life of this planet — can play, bringing the wisdom of prior generations of scholars and making those lessons relevant to our times.

Everett Gendler's essay "On the Judaism of Nature" raises some profound points. He contends that our alienation from nature and "astonishing indifference to natural surroundings" came about partially as a reaction to Biblical assaults against nature cults. He discusses ways that Jewish rituals can reconnect with natural cycles and reverse decades of alienation from the natural world.

Arthur Green makes a powerful case for vegetarianism as a desirable modern day kashrut. Drawing on the *mitzvah* of *tsa'ar ba'aley hayyim* (compassion for, or prevention of cruelty to, animals) as well as environmental concern over excessive resource use, he asserts that those values, in addition to the Jewish tradition of abhorring violence, makes vegetarianism a natural choice.

While I found Green's suggestion of vegetarianism to be on solid ground, consistency to principles of compassion to animals and protecting the environment mandate, in my view, abstention from consuming dairy products and eggs as well. Egg-laying hens and dairy cows suffer to an even greater extent than animals raised for their flesh, and end up being killed at a fraction of their normal lifespan. Since Jewish tradition dictates that causing unnecessary suffering is unethical, and there is no need for animal products in the human diet, I suggest Green might have gone one step further in prescribing an explicitly vegan eco-kashrut.

From Attention to Protection

At a compassionate living workshop I recently attended, the conference leader used an outdoor activity to bring home to us the beauty of our natural surroundings that are often ignored (or not appreciated fully) in the course of our daily lives and routines. One person would close his or

her eyes, and his/her partner would lead that person on an eyes-closed silent walk, pausing at various spots to look at, smell, touch, or otherwise interact with natural objects the partner thought were particularly notable. Having one's eyes closed for a long period of time, and then suddenly opening them to see a budding plant, feel a tree trunk, smell a flower, or listen to chirping birds, causes one to realize the unmistakable beauty of our natural surroundings — and it makes it much more difficult to take it for granted again. This activity was designed to cause us to fall in love with the earth and thus become more involved in protecting it.

In a similar vein *Torah of the Earth* provides both the intellectual, historical, and spiritual justification for an increased level of concern — and more importantly, action — to preserve and protect God's creation.

Holy Speech, Holy Words

I. A Vocabulary of Spirituality

These Are The Words: A Vocabulary of Jewish Spiritual Life
by Arthur Green
(Vermont, Jewish Lights Publishing, 1999), 271 pages

REVIEWED BY MICHAEL M. COHEN

Rabbi Louis Finkelstein once made an important point when he said that when we pray we talk to God, but when we study God talks to us. In recent years there has been an explosion of books in English about Judaism. There is now no longer the excuse that a lack of Hebrew and/or Yiddish limits what one can read and learn about Judaism. These books are interesting, well written, contemporary, meaningful, engaging and are geared to Jewish adults to raise their level of Jewish knowledge. One of the books of this category is *These Are The Words: A Vocabulary of Jewish Spiritual Life* by Rabbi Arthur Green.

A Basic Vocabulary

Green, known primarily for his scholarly articles and books on Hasidism and Jewish mysticism, has written a book for a wide audience. This is a book that appeals to readers with little or no knowledge of Judaism, as well as those who consider themselves to be Jewishly literate. What separates this book from other lexicons on Judaism is its spiritual angle, often reflected in Kabalistic and hasidic points of reference. As Green writes in the Introduction, he has put together a list of 149 words needed for "an educated Jewish spiritual seeker," the "basic vocabulary of the Jewish spiritual life."

Writing in his usual direct and pithy style, Green explains and conveys much information in short but revealing entries. If the reader reads only the first sentence of each entry she or he will learn something interesting. But it is well worth reading all that is there. The entries contain a definition, some history about the term, a bit of etymology, and then

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an explanation of why the term is important to know.

The vocabulary chosen by Green is divided into eight sections: God and Worlds Above; Torah: Text and Process; Religious Practice; Spiritual Life; Community, Life with Others; Holy Places; and Holy Times. Green's ear for the environmental message within Judaism is found throughout this book. In his entry on *Beriah* (Creation), Green reminds us that classical Hebrew contains no word for nature. As Green writes, "Nature would imply a world separate from God, governed by its own internal rules. Neither the Bible nor the early rabbis had such a concept. The world and all that it contains is divine Creation."

Spiritual Opportunities

Near the end of his Introduction, Green invites the reader to enter into a conversation with what he has taught and even to "take issue with my (often neo-hasidic) understanding of the tradition or some of my own idiosyncratic interpretations of Judaism." He writes, "This book intentionally has lots of blank space, some of it in or adjacent to each entry. I urge you to write in this book. Use the blank spaces to add your own interpretation." Such an invitation is refreshing to hear when it comes to religion.

However, anyone wishing to explore and further check Green's explanation of the words he has chosen as the "basic vocabulary of the Jewish spiritual life" will find no notes. Green, for example, provides a valuable treasure chest of information such as the notion that one of God's names, *Shaddai*, is related to the rabbinic understanding "that the world is connected to *dai*, enough, meaning that God offers sufficient sustenance to all in need." However there is no reference to rabbinic lore where the reader can further explore this concept. By not providing notes Green has shown the reader the door, has let the reader peek through the window, but has forgotten to tell the reader where the key is.

Beyond Boundaries

Though an ordained Conservative rabbi and former President of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, Green has never forgotten his roots in the early years of the havurah movement as a founder of Havurat Shalom in Boston some thirty years ago. For years he has favored a post-denominational Judaism, which comes out in his entry on *Kehillah* (Community). There he writes, "In a time when the unity of the Jewish people seems threatened, perhaps we should reconsider some sort of unified *kehillah* system. For payment of a nominal fee one could be a member of the Jewish community. Thus membership might entitle one to receive community bulletins and invitations to community-wide events." Reconstructionists will recognize in Green's suggestion a contemporary restatement of proposals first ad-

vanced by Mordecai Kaplan in the 1930s.

While totally grounded in Judaism, Green is also not afraid to look outside of Judaism and find spiritual examples. Writing about Abraham in his section on *Mitzvah,* Green explains,

> A process of deep self-examination allowed him to discover all the commandments within his own soul. This teaching may be expanded to mean that men and woman of exceptional piety, throughout the world, are able to live in such deep harmony with themselves and with nature that Gods will becomes clear to them. Religions are attempts to create entire societies that live out the principles seen first by these exceptional individuals.

Green is not afraid to look for ways to contribute to and strengthen Judaism in ways that have not always been thought of as mainstream. Not that long ago Kabbalah and Hasidism were considered by many to be superstitious fossils from our past. As the twentieth century closed that attitude began to change. The change went hand in hand with the need for deeper forms of spiritual expression which Jews began seeking. Green was one of the first to point out that path, and he continues to do so. We see this in his influence on the *siddur* and *maḥzor* of the *Kol HaNeshamah* liturgy series. With the very readable and informative *These Are The Words,* Green continues to teach us as we search with him.

II. The Inner Life of the Spirit

The Language of Truth: The Torah Commentary of the Sefat Emet, Rabbi Yehudah Leib Alter of Ger
translated and interpreted by Arthur Green,
Hebrew texts prepared by Shai Gluskin
(Philadelphia, Jewish Publication Society, 1998), lviii + 427 pages

Reviewed by Howard Cohen

Through storytelling, innovative readings of biblical text and original insights into the human psyche, hasidic masters have been igniting spiritual fires within the hearts of generations of Jews. Unfortunately, until recently, accessing these texts required advanced Hebrew

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skills as well as an ability to understand the nuanced ways many words and phrases were used by these sophisticated theologians. Moreover, it was also important to know something of the author's philosophy and theology, which was not necessarily readily ascertainable given the unsystematic way their ideas were often recorded. Even with all of the necessary skills and background, being able to relate these teachings to one's own life often remained an elusive task.

A Hasidic Master

With these challenges in mind, I enthusiastically recommend Arthur Green's *The Language of Truth: The Torah Commentary of the Sefat Emet,* (Rabbi Yehudah Leib Alter of Ger). Green, a renowned expert on Hasidism, is the Philip W. Lown Professor of Jewish Thought at Brandeis University. For *The Language of Truth* Green has carefully translated selections from Rabbi Yehudah Leib's weekly Torah commentaries and illuminated these with his own explanations and reflections on those selections.

Leib was an extraordinary hasidic teacher of the late 19th and early 20th century. He had the good fortune to receive intensive education from his grandfather Rabbi Isaac Meir, himself a distinguished hasidic leader with a large following. In part due to his grandfather's mentoring, a few years after Meir's death his followers attached themselves to Yehudah and thus he inherited the title and status of the Gerer Rebbe. In this capacity he functioned as the unofficial head of Polish Hasidism. Much of his teaching legacy has been collected into what is known as the *Sefat Emet.* It is this text that Green has devoted more than a quarter of a century of his professional life to teaching, quoting and occasionally translating.

Focus On Inwardness

Green's translations of and commentaries on selections of the works of the *Sefat Emet* reflect his passionate interest in this crowning literary achievement of Polish Hasidism. Green was alerted to the importance of the teachings of Yehuda Leib when his teacher, another great hasidic master, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, recommended it to him. Heschel helped identify for Green that Leib's focus on inwardness and spirituality had the potential to be a powerful guide to the modern Jewish seeker as he or she grappled for inner spiritual meaning. Heschel was correct. The Torah insights found in the *Sefat Emet* resonate remarkably with the contemporary proclivity toward embracing the immanent nature of the divine.

For example, commenting on *parshat Toledot*:

> [M]y grandfather and teacher used to say this about the wells the patriarchs dug. Everywhere there is a hidden point of God.

> We only have to remove the external covering in order to reveal that innermost point, which is called a well of living waters.

Today, a hundred years after Leib lived, we indeed tend to be inwardly orientated on our spiritual journeying. Heschel was right to have directed Green to Leib's writings. Encountering authentic Jewish sources that affirm searching inward to reveal God's presence has proven to be invaluable to countless contemporary Jews struggling to remain connected to Judaism. In this regard, I can offer personal testimony: Rabbi Green introduced me to the teachings of Rabbi Leib. It has had a tremendous impact on me personally and professionally in my role as a pulpit rabbi.

Defining the Context

The unabridged *Sefat Emet* is comprised of five large volumes. It includes commentary on the weekly Torah reading as well as on the holidays. Like many hasidic anthologies the theology in the *Sefat Emet* is not presented in a systematic fashion. In this regard, Green's introduction is particularly useful. His breadth and depth of knowledge of other hasidic scholars, special understanding of the *Sefat Emet,* ability to illuminate the subtleties between such ideas as panentheism, pantheism and acosmicism as well as his clarity in writing style are indispensable aids to parsing Yehudah Leib's ideas.

In addition to synthesizing the theology of Leib, Green also highlights the nuanced ways certain critical phrases are used. An example is the word *nekudat,* an important key to his theology. The word literally means "point," but in the context of the *Sefat Emet* it refers to an innermost point, or the truest point of existence. Green's translations carefully draw out the importance of a word that might otherwise be overlooked. Besides being extremely useful for understanding the commentaries in the *Sefat Emet,* the introduction is also replete with wonderful hasidic teachings from other sources. It stands alone as worthwhile reading.

Making the Text Accessible

The heart of the *Sefat Emet* is the short Torah commentaries. These are organized based on the traditional weekly selection. Green's translation is not exhaustive. The only insight he offers into which selections were chosen is that he thought they "would most readily speak to the contemporary seeker." While collections of Torah commentary invariably contain selections which fail to resonate with every reader, Green's choices speak broadly as well as deeply and should reach many.

In addition to lucid translations, Green has also provided other invaluable text aids. At the end of each selection Green boldly attempts to interpret for the contemporary reader. In general these additional remarks are worthwhile. Occasionally I found

them more meaningful than the text he is interpreting.

Green also included the original Hebrew text of all the selections. These are included at the end of the book. They were edited by Rabbi Shai Gluskin, who carefully inserted the full language of the many abbreviations that students of hasidic text find bewildering, as well as including the full Torah citations wherever a verse is mentioned. Green's translations, commentaries, inclusion of the Hebrew text, extensive footnotes, introduction and index at the end of the book all contribute to make this a valuable scholarly tool.

Elements of Chauvinism

One problem with the *Sefat Emet* is that while at times it seems to be wonderfully universal and inclusive, it contains a decidedly chauvinistic element. To Green's credit, he points out this tendency. He acknowledges this as "probably the greatest barrier between the *Sefat Emet* and the contemporary reader; no apology should be made for it." When Leib is properly placed historically, as Green does, no apology is necessary. Leib was writing and teaching under very different circumstances. It is not hard to read deeper into the writings and discover insights that transcend the particularistic language in which they were written.

Green's translation and commentary of the *Sefat Emet* is a valuable addition to any Jewish library. While neither Rabbi Yehuda Leib's nor Green's own commentary will prove satisfactory all of the time, neither will they disappoint very often.

Religion, Rights and Social Justice

Voices of the Religious Left
Rebecca Alpert, editor
(Philadelphia,Temple University Press 2000), 304 pages

REVIEWED BY BURT SIEGEL

In *Voices Of The Religious Left,* Rabbi Rebecca Alpert has taken on the formidable challenge of drawing from the writings of a widely disparate group of theologians and social activists whose commonality is the belief that religious thought and expression can be both a lens and an engine for human rights and social justice. As in many anthologies, not all of the selections contained here will speak to all readers, but there is plenty in *Voices of the Religious Left* to stimulate, challenge and engage.

Range of Voices

The range of contributors in this anthology reflects Buddhist, Native American, Islamic, Roman Catholic and Jewish thought. Todd Salzman's brief but disturbing discussion of the little acknowledged role of the Catholic church in creating the ethnic tensions that led to the genocide of Catholic Hutus by Catholic Tutsi in Rwanda should at the very least provoke the conscience of the Catholic church.

Lawrence Bush and Jeff Dekro writing on "Jews, Money and Responsibility" make a very compelling argument that traditional Jewish precepts about *tzedakah* can and should motivate Jews to use wealth as an agent for social change. They point out, for instance, that almost one out of every six *mitzvot* deal with economic issues, and that most of these concern the need to use capital justly.

Laila Al-Marayti takes on the false assumption that the traditional role of Muslim woman as little more than the bearers and nurturers of children is Koranic-based, rather than cultural. Helen Tworkov (a Buddhist who describes herself as the child of "Jewish liberal parents") wrestles with the "ambivalence, confusion, and conflict" that many Buddhists (as well

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as no doubt many others) feel when the consider abortion as a moral rather than political issue.

The Complexity of the Left

Interestingly, what is commonly thought of as the most liberal branches of mainstream denominations are not represented; there are no essays, for example, by Unitarians, Quakers, or by representatives of Reform Judaism. This is an unfortunate omission in that it is likely that those that speak for the subgroupings of their faiths have had greater influence on the mainstream than many of those who are included in this collection. There is, however, the inclusion of a position paper on "Poverty, Women, and Reproduction" from Catholics for A Free Choice that calls for the hardly radical (but unusual, coming from a self-proclaimed Catholic group) proposition that "quality sexual education and family planning [be made] accessible and available to everyone."

In a very insightful introduction and in fact one of the most thoughtful entries, Alpert acknowledges this omission and explains it as a consequence of her desire to "emphasize the complexity of the religious left." But just the opposite effect may result: one might derive the false impression that progressive thought only exists on the margins of America's religions.

Alpert in fact notes that it has been the Roman Catholic Church — a church often considered to be conservative by any standard — that has often taken the lead on progressive issues such as opposition to the death penalty and the amelioration of poverty in America and abroad. It might also have been noted that some African American clergy who hold progressive social positions in terms of, for example, economic policies have often taken conservative positions on other social issues; for example, opposing gay and lesbian rights as well as the right of reproductive choice.

Criteria for Inclusion

In some ways, the selection of sources for this anthology attempts to create a commonality of left-wing religious thought beyond where it may in fact exist, and perhaps implies a commonality of conservative voices that similarly may be more diverse and complex. Thus essays by Southern Baptists, for example, who espouse "left" positions on church-state separation, or Orthodox Jews, for example, who favor the exchange of land for peace and coexistence with the Palestinians might have added an interesting alternative perspective from unlikely sources.

Any anthology will almost of necessity yield questions about criteria for selection. Certainly among the more controversial pieces is one by Mumia Abu-Jamal, who, biblical references notwithstanding, does not appear to be what would normally be meant by "a religious thinker." Contemporary topics are sometimes represented by dated entries, such as

Arthur Waskow's 1988 essay "Pesach and the Palestinians." And while James Evans' twenty-year-old reflection "Apartheid As Idolatry" makes for interesting reading, it hardly addresses the more currently pressing and far more complex and contemporary question of third world nationalism as "idolatry."

While *Voices of the Religious Left* might not hit the mark every time, those looking for an explication of the compassionate underpinnings of faith will find ample sources of reflection. In a time when religion is all too often used to justify regressive and repressive politics it is essential that those who can envision a truly just society not hide their light under the proverbial basket. *Voices of the Religious Left* shines light into many dark corners; a light that for much of the recent past has been wielded largely by the religious right. Rebecca Alpert reminds us that the voices of the religious left remain very much part of the cultural conversation as we enter the twenty-first century.