

On Halakha

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To begin I want to note that when Janet asked me to address the issue of halakha in my rabbinic development, at first my heart sank. I have generally thought of myself as primarily an aggadic Jew and rabbi... very confident and passionate about Torah text, especially narrative, but very ambivalent and confused regarding Torah-based behavior. Only when Janet explained that inner struggle is the essential subject matter of this panel, did I become enthusiastic about the task.

For those of you who knew me in Rabbinic school, I hasten to add that I think I have made some progress in this area during the past ten years. For one thing, I have always been haunted by the rabbis' comparison of aggada to wine and halakha to bread,...God forbid that I should become an aggadaholic! Accordingly, I have worked hard to strike a balance in my life between the aggadic--the intoxicating/inspiring dimension of Torah, on the one hand, and the halakhic--the nourishing, sustaining dimension on the other. Furthermore, the two tasks of leading a community and raising a Jewish family, I have learnt, do force one finally to take a stand even where one feels tremendous ambivalence.

I associate the term halakha not with Orthodoxy, but with "discipline." Of course the Orthodox community refers to itself as "the halakhic community;" but I think that responsible Judaism must be halakhic that is, it must address the question, "How shall we structure our life?" To me, halakhic life essentially means a disciplined life, a conscious and structured life... and as such I admire it, and aspire to it. But I experience it as an ideal that is very far removed from the actuality of my life. This is my ideal: prayer three times daily; one hour daily study of traditional text; every week a twenty-five hour Shabbat, without driving, spent with friends and family; donating 10% of our family income to tzedakah; visiting at least once a week with friends who are sick; going out on a weekly date with my wife; spending at least an hour daily with my small children; calling or writing once a week to my parents and siblings; being a shomer adamah by riding my bike to work and taking the bus around town, and by eating only organically grown produce; being a meivi shalom between Blacks and Jews and between Israelis and Palestinians; flossing my teeth regularly; exercising; getting enough sleep... These are a few of the halakhot of my life, and I frankly I feel myself falling short.

As for Rabbi Tarfon's famous lo alecha ham'lacha ligmor...I know that. But couldn't I do better if... I managed my time better? Or was less lazy, or less self-absorbed, or less afraid? In short, if I were more disciplined.. if my life were more rhythmic, more halakhic... then, I imagine, I fantasize, that I might experience less of a gaping chasm between my ideal life and my real existence.

A great religious question for me, then, has been me'ayin yavo ezri "Whence cometh my help? Where will I find the strength...the self-discipline, the will-power?" I know, more or less, what I would like my life to look like, but how do I get from here to there? I don't feel that I have the answer. But I would like to discuss two sources of strength that I have...from time to time...found helpful in living closer to my own halakhic ideal.

The first may sound overly pious, but I'll mention it anyway. It strikes me that I am stronger, and more disciplined and most effective when I am serving God. .by which I mean the author of life, truth, love, justice, and freedom. And I most often become pathetic.. .weak-willed, lazy and fearful..., when I am in some subtle or not subtle way promoting my I have found over and over again, that in my deepest self, I am much more motivated to serve God than I am to serve myself.

So if I'm studying, for example, with the intention of improving my own text abilities, or worse, with the aim of publishing an article or book, or of competing with my colleagues . .then my concentration eventually fails and my commitment evaporates. Sooner or later, it just starts feeling unimportant, compared to feeding the hungry or clothing the naked...., which in my case usually means giving my kids breakfast and getting them out of their pj's. But on the other hand when I study Torah as the word of God with the intent of listening to the voice from Sinai; then my commitment is very strong. Then the kids can fix their breakfast. The same dynamic occurs with Shabbat, davening, gemilut hasadim, creating peace and pursuing justice. When it is truly l'shem shamayim I do...sometimes, not always... discover an inner strength that actually surprises me! When, on the other hand, my primary motive is somehow enhancing my own stature, then I cannot sustain a commitment. But it is immensely difficult, at least for me, maintaining this sense of life as service to God.

The second powerful force in my life which given me strength to live with increased constancy is one I have only found recently, and that is a true community. Sixteen months ago, my wife and I realized that we desperately needed a minyan, a weekly Shabbat morning gathering, for real prayer and study, to which we could bring our kids, ...a communal context for our family. We sent out a letter, and held a meeting, and got very lucky. Now, the Isla Vista minyan has become for me individually and for my family, the single greatest source of rhythm and regularity in our lives.

Some members drop in and out, but there are twenty or twenty-five people that we see every Shabbat. . .even throughout the summer, every Shabbat. And the group is evolving, in an idiosyncratic but thoughtful process, a halakha of communal practice. At monthly meetings we discuss how to observe the d whether to experiment with mechitsa how to involve the elderly Jews in the Retirement Home next door, what and how to teach the children, . . .Together with these friends, in this little kehilla I really am finding powerful support for my own personal commitments. Well, maybe not all of them. This group is much stronger on eating than on exercising, so I will have to look elsewhere for help with my personal halakha of physical health.

The Isla Vista minyan has made me very conscious that halakha originates in community; halakha is our communal behavior. Our Jewish ancestors, I am increasingly certain, did not observe the mitzvot because they were given by God at Sinai, nor, I'm sure, because the rabbi told them to; but because their family and neighbors were doing it. This is obvious, isn't it? In my own personal life, at least, it has been just about impossible to sustain over the years any practice that is not shared with people around me. During the past year I have been feeling unbelievably fortunate to have found a group of people that I love who are, in some form, observing the mitzvot together. If I hadn't found them, I am not sure how long I could have gone on living Jewishly with just my wife and children for companions.

I should say a word here about my work with Hillel, and to what extent halakha is a relevant category for our student community. If you are at all aware of developments in the Hillel world nationally, you may know that the model being promoted by our national office is of each Hillel unit as a sort of Jewish Community Center on campus, with the Hillel staff supporting and assisting dozens of large and small student interest groups and communities. The Hillel director in this model, quite clearly, need not be a rabbi.

One of the benefits of living and working in Santa Barbara is that I am far enough removed from all the centers of power that I can continue to pursue my own vision of my work undisturbed. The fact is that I subscribe to most of the new national Hillel vision. But I do see one of the very most important pieces of my work being the creation of a model worship community at Hillel on Friday nights. The style is highly participatory; very informal; extremely user friendly, and short. Because we are serving both Reform and Conservative students, it is almost all in Hebrew, but with complete transliteration, and almost entirely sung. And we market it intensively--lots of flyers and posters around campus we offer a free meal. This fall approximately one hundred students were coming every week.

Now here comes my confession: in my relationship with this Friday night gathering, I am very much like an Orthodox rabbi. I usually do not lead the service. I may give a short dvar Torah. I stay fairly low profile, but when it comes to questions of practice,... If I consider it something important, I lay down the law. I believe that the service works ..that it provides an authentic and meaningful encounter with Judaism and with Shabbat for a wide range of college students. And I believe that it works because I have worked for ten years to fine tune all of its components.

So now I am faced with the following dilemma: one of my very best student leaders has announced that his primary goal for this coming quarter is to rewrite the Friday night sid-dur! I'm glad that he's investing himself in the service, and I want to nurture his interest in liturgy...but not if it puts our communal worship at risk. I'm open to your suggestions.

One of the recurring questions arising for our minyan, and also for the Hillel student community, is "How do we fit into the broader Jewish world?" This, I think, is the other side of halakha- a community develops a pattern of religious behavior, but then how does that behavior connect the members of the community to the much larger circle of the Jewish people?

Ten years out of HUC, I find myself unexcited about denominational affiliation. The thoughtful, seeking Jews that I know are clear that they need to draw upon both traditionalist and modernist Jewish wisdom for constructing a viable Jewish future. I personally have been profoundly influenced by both traditionalist and modernist teachers, and draw equally upon both in creating my own Jewish life, and in guiding my community. A living, breathing Torah, I think, can only emerge from a living breathing Jewish soul...whether that be the soul of an individual, a family, or a true community. Living Torah can never issue forth from a committee.

How, then, do I and my family and our community fit into the broader Jewish world?

I have been thinking a lot lately about a particular metaphor for Jewish practice, that I think captures my own understanding of the different possibilities within the Jewish world, and of how my own practice and my communities fit in. The metaphor is song... in all its different forms. When I look around the Jewish world, I see some of our people singing very simple folksongs. Others of our people are singing extremely complex, virtuosic arias. Either type of song, clearly, may be sung with supreme feeling, grace and beauty. And it is just as possible for either type to be sung with no feeling whatever.

The difference between the folksong and the aria is that anyone can learn to sing the folksong, in a short time, and can quickly derive great satisfaction from the experience. The aria, on the other hand, takes a lifetime of training and practice to be able to perform. In between these two extremes, of course, are forms of song that cannot be learnt instantly, but which with some dedication can be learned over the course of some months or a year.

The Judaism I grew up with back in Rochester, New York, was a simple folksong. It had few words, and an uncomplicated melody, but my parents and the teachers at our Temple Sunday school sang it with heart, and with scrupulous honesty, and without embarrassment. I am full of gratitude for that gift.

Now, fifteen years since beginning rabbinic school, I have become aware of the more complex, elaborate forms of Jewish practice. Some of them I have learned, and have tried... often unsuccessfully... to incorporate into my life. A complete Shabbat. The full Jewish festival calendar. Davening shacharit, mincha and maariv. Learning Midrash and commentaries. Adhering to a sacred dietary discipline. Commitments to bikur kholim, hakhnasat orchim and so forth. I am trying to sing a much more complicated Jewish song than my parents did.. .and perhaps am singing it with much less grace and beauty than they sang...and continue to sing.. .that simple folksong. But after a person learns the easy songs, they do crave the challenge of something more difficult. That is where I am personally--caught between a childhood of simple, touching Judaism and a vision of a wonderfully complex and demanding ideal.

As a rabbi, I draw not so much upon my rabbinic training as upon my childhood. I teach the simple folksong, and try to insist that it be done the way I remember it. ..perhaps with a few notes changed, and a hint of some new possibilities.., but above all, with honesty, and humor, and with love.