

Letting Go of Our Rigidities
Daniel Freedman's Senior Sermon
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I was not supposed to be here today speaking before you. When it came time to fill out my campus preference form, I did not select Los Angeles. Although I appreciated aspects of Los Angeles and New York, I ultimately wanted to be on the Cincinnati campus. Every rabbi, Jewish professional, and HUC student I knew told me that of all the stateside campuses, Cincinnati is the “mothership.” In my head, I created my own construct about HUC. If I wanted to receive the best education, I had to be in Cincinnati. This construct worked well for me.....

Until it didn't.

That's when I met Liora, who would be going to Los Angeles. (Pause) I decided to request a transfer which HUC ultimately granted. Dr. Michael Marmur informed me that by switching to Los Angeles, I would be giving up some opportunities and gaining others.

When I arrived in Los Angeles, I was fairly unhappy. Every class I took in the windowless rooms, each traffic jam I got stuck in, I remember thinking, “If I were in Cincinnati, everything would be better.”

While I had a very good reason to go to LA, I could not rid myself of an inflexible construct that I created in my mind: Cincinnati is the best campus, which must mean that Los Angeles and New York are inferior. This construct overpowered reality and left me with no space to grow.

Parshat Re'eh seems to set up a similar expectation for the Israelites entering Canaan. According to the beginning of the *Parsha*, there is only ONE way to follow God. The portion is

rich with specific instructions and states nothing should be added or subtracted to them. One verse, however, Deuteronomy 12:28, appears to be set apart from the stringency of all the others.

שָׁמַר וְשָׁמַעְתָּ אֵת כָּל־הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר אֲנֹכִי מְצַוְנֶךָ לַמַּעַן יֵטֵב לָךְ וּלְבִנְיֶיךָ אַחֲרֶיךָ עַד־עוֹלָם כִּי תַעֲשֶׂה הַטּוֹב וְהַיָּשָׁר
בְּעֵינֵי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ:

“Be careful to obey ALL these commandments that I command upon you; thus it will go well with you and with your descendants after you forever, for you will be doing what is good and right in the sight of Adonai your God.” The first part of the verse, “Obey all these commandments,” resembles the semantics of the rest of the portion in its rigidity. The second half, however, uses different language than the other verses by adding “for you will be doing *ha’tov v’ha’yashar*, the good and the right. When the second half of the verse appeared earlier in Deuteronomy, Rashi asks why the words *ha’tov* and *ha’yashar*, are needed in the verse. Would they not apply to ALL the commandments? Rashi suggests that the addition provides a way of acting beyond the strict demands of the law, a third option, which is neither following the law exactly or rejecting it. Nachmanides agrees with Rashi and adds the second part of the verse connotes what God did not specifically command because it would have been impossible for the Torah to mention everyone’s conduct in every place and type of engagement. Perhaps the Torah is acknowledging there is sometimes a need to let go of the perceived polarities, the idea that whatever is not explicitly written by a law is opposite or opposed to God’s will. If we do not, we risk missing potential good that can help us to become better people and communities.

A sugya in Bava Metzia¹ illustrates the potential danger of being too binary with regard to law. Mishnah Bava Metzia 2:11 says that if someone finds both an object that they have lost and also one lost by their father or their teacher, their own takes precedence. In support of the Mishnah's rule, Rav Yehuda in the name of Rav cites a verse from Re'eh, Deuteronomy 15:4, which says: "There shall be no needy among you"² The rabbis of the Gemara read the verse as a command, indicating that it is incumbent upon each individual to ensure that they themselves will not become needy. Therefore, one's own property takes precedence over the property of another person. However, Rav also says one does damage when they only observe the law in this way. Although that is the *halakha*, anyone who ALWAYS prioritizes their own property when their fellow's need is greater will ultimately become needy themselves. Rashi calls the situation a matter of *lifnim mishurat ha'din*, going beyond the letter of the law. You need to recognize what is good and right, even when it means that you are not strictly following the law exactly as you might expect from its written form.

For those who construe Jewish law or *halakhah* as a polarity, the task of understanding the good and right beyond the letter of the law becomes a challenge. For these people, the meaning of law is ONLY what is written on the page and must be observed exactly as stated. Eliezer Berkovits, a 20th century Orthodox rabbi and theologian, argues that construing *halakhah* in such a way is flawed. He says, "Halakhah is the bridge over which the Torah moves from the written word into the living deed. Normally there is a confrontation between the text, which is set, and life, which is forever in motion."³ This bridge is the human attempt to apply

¹ Bavli Talmud Bava Metzia 33a

² Deuteronomy 15:4

³ Berkovits, *Not In Heave*, 1-2.

Torah to the human condition, which he adds, “takes into consideration human nature and its needs, human character and its problems...the Jew and the Jewish people in their unique historical reality”.⁴ Berkovits recognizes that viewing law as a polarity prevents a person from taking all of these important factors into consideration. By moving past a polar understanding of law, we grow from our increased ability to use Torah to better understand and live by what is good and right in our present reality.

I began to notice the ways holding onto rigid polarities limited my own potential growth during clinical pastoral education two years ago. After a few weeks, I told my supervisor how frustrated I was. “I feel as if I’m not being instructed how to do my visits properly.” She asked me, “What does a good visit look like?” I did not know, but, I assumed there must be some ideal way for a visit to happen. On the whiteboard, she drew two different images. One was a straight line with two points; the other, a curvy line with many different points on it. She said that the first represented what I expected chaplaincy (and life) to be like, while the second, represented chaplaincy (and life) in reality. She said, “I cannot tell you how to make a good visit. Didactics can teach you techniques, but you have to figure out how to apply the learning in each situation.” In the weeks that followed this interaction, I tried to follow my supervisor’s advice, to let go of the notion that there was ONE ideal way to be a chaplain. Walking into rooms, I became less nervous about whether I was going to be the model chaplain and instead put more focus on being present in the reality of my experience. I learned to listen in a way that enabled me to understand the spiritual needs of each patient individually and as a result provide better spiritual care. My growth as a chaplain depended on my ability understand the

⁴ Berkovits, *Not In Heaven*, 73.

ever-changing reality of my patients' experiences rather than adhering to a general model of what I expected a chaplain to be.

Holding onto rigid polarities not only limits the growth of individuals but also the Jewish community as a whole. One such example is intermarriage. This concept affects the entire Jewish community but has become particularly fraught in the conservative movement where rabbis are not allowed to perform them at all. In a recent eJewish Philanthropy article, a vocal Conservative rabbi, Michael Knopf, expresses his belief that the Conservative movement needs to stop holding on so tightly to the polarity which indicates intermarriage can ONLY be negative. He argues that the assertion intermarriages destroy Judaism conflicts with the way they impact the Jewish community in actuality. Social science research shows a Jewish wedding ceremony may strengthen an interfaith couple's Jewish identity and ties. Knopf cites a recent study that suggests when Jewish organizations and institutions reach out to and include intermarried families in Jewish life, they become as likely as in-married families to remain Jewishly attached. When these couples are rejected, though, they tend to leave the Jewish community all together.⁵ At the least, the research suggests we as a Jewish community need to be aware of any and all polarities that we have constructed and what opportunities for growth they may be hiding from us.

Freeing ourselves from rigid polarities proves difficult but necessary if we want to be able to create space for growth. The verse from Deuteronomy 12:28 which I shared earlier features two verbs, *s'hmor* and *shama*. Both words are used throughout the *Parsha* to

⁵ <https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/renewing-our-vows-a-new-approach-to-intermarriage/>

mean listen or obey. The kind of listening that the *parsha* seems to be encouraging, though, is a listening for obedience to the polarities which have been laid out in the text. To free ourselves from this rigidity, we must also listen for an understanding of complexities in the people and environments around us. Instead of trying to understand the world according to our own polar expectations, we need to open ourselves to new ideas and new questions.

When I arrived here at this campus, I did the opposite. I closed myself off to anything about Los Angeles or this campus that did not fit into my polar expectations of rabbinical school. I missed out on opportunities for learning, growth, and even enjoyment...until I began to open myself up.

In Los Angeles, I have been able to learn about nonprofit management and LA's vast array of Jewish nonprofits, to spend a year studying Jewish education, to take an elective at Zeigler and experience West Coast Judaism. All of these opportunities opened up to me because I chose to be a student here. From all of these benefits which were originally hidden, I have been able to grow personally and professionally. May we all recognize that what is good and right in life does not always fit neatly into rigid polarities as we might expect. In order to find it, we should strive to listen for understanding in each specific moment we find ourselves in, so we can grow as individuals and as a community.