

Tradition and Change
Rabbi David Lerner
Yom Kippur Kol Nidrei 5768

Shabbat Shalom and *g'mar hatimah tovah* - May we all be sealed for a new year of health and peace, joy and fulfillment.

A Hasidic Story:

Beryl and Moshe, two old friends, were disciples of the same rebbe. Each of them moved away from the village of their youth. After many years apart, they finally reunited for a special Shabbes at Beryl's home.

Beryl look Moshe up and down thinking: "My fur hat and Shabbes clothes are exactly the kind our teacher used to wear, but Moshe's clothes are another style entirely and his cap is made of cloth."

At Friday night dinner, Beryl notices that his guest has different *niggunim*/melodies for his prayers and even says the *kiddush* standing in a posture different from the one their rebbe used. Finally at the end of Shabbes, it becomes clear that even for *havdalah*, Moshe has picked up different customs and no longer practices what they had been taught.

No longer able to contain himself, Beryl turns to Moshe accusing him of having veered from the path they had followed in their youth. But Moshe, who had noticed just as intently Beryl's behaviors, replies in a surprising manner: "Clearly, I have been more faithful to our teacher's ways than you."

"But that's ridiculous," blurts out the host, "I dress like our rebbe and I pray exactly like our rebbe and I have kept every custom and ritual that we learned from him."

Moshe answers, "Yes, but you have forgotten that our rebbe was once a student who broke off from his teacher and developed his own customs. I, too have done that."

* * *

This is a story about students and teachers, but even more powerfully, about the limits of change. What is authentic practice? What is traditional Judaism? What is not?

Last Spring, I asked my tenth grade Prozdor class how did they know if a new practice was authentic. One student replied simply, "It just feels Jewish." Contrasting our manner of davening with that another shul, he continued, "There's nothing wrong with how they pray, it just doesn't speak to me as much."

This is a topic I struggle with as a Jew and as a rabbi. What makes something traditional and when and how should we make changes? What does the tradition of *halakhah*/Jewish law teach us? And when must the *halakhah* evolve?

That has been one of the hallmarks of Conservative Judaism. *Tradition and Change*, my wife's rabbi, Mordecai Waxman, *zikhrono livrakhah*, called it in his eponymous book. On one foot, his phrase means that we must be open to revising and updating our tradition, but do so thoughtfully, judiciously and slowly. With not enough change, our tradition becomes stale and irrelevant; but too much change renders it foreign and disconnected from its roots.

All groups change and every Jewish denomination is undergoing evolution – whether they admit it or not. In Modern Orthodoxy, women now study Talmud and hold Women's Prayer Groups. This summer, I read an article about a leadership convention of the Reform Movement's summer camps. When it came time to daven *Ma'ariv*, the leader took out guitar and conducted a musical service that has long been the norm in Reform circles. However, many of the younger participants were no longer attracted to this modern service and simply wanted to daven traditionally; two hundred of them walked out to form their own minyanim. Sometimes change is too fast or sometimes it loses its appeal.

It is a delicate balancing act that Conservative Judaism attempts. What should be changed? What are the limits of change?

In my opening story, Moshe who changed the tradition is seen as the ideal – he has innovated and in doing so followed his teacher's model. But of course, it goes without saying, that he still *davens*, keeps Shabbat and recites *havdalah*. That he maintains all those traditions is taken for granted. For me, that is central – one can change, but the core must remain the same.

While there are many issues involving tradition and change in *halakhah* with which our community struggles – from Shabbat observance to which prayers we will recite and how – last year, we explored one major issue: homosexuality and *halakhah*. For a number of years, our shul has been a welcoming one that has been open to gays and lesbians who want to join our community. But we had not explored the issue of Jewish commitment ceremonies until this year.

Would we, Temple Emunah, be open to them and would our clergy officiate at them?

* * *

I am proud that we approached this topic thoughtfully and invited the participation of the community in this important decision. I have spoken about it,

sent emails to you, and held study sessions. We hosted Rabbi Steve Greenberg, an openly gay Orthodox rabbi, for a powerful Shabbat, learned with Rabbi Avram Reisner, one of the rabbis who authored a *teshuvah*, a religious responsum, in favor of changing the traditional ban on gay relations and studied with Rabbi Joel Roth, who wrote the *teshuvah* to maintain the status quo.

More importantly, we have shared with each other. Many of you spoke out in support of changing the traditional perspective and some of you have expressed your discomfort with that. It should be noted that some of those who are opposed to this change told me that they do not feel comfortable openly sharing their opinions on this issue. They do not want to be accused of being homophobic or intolerant. Some were afraid they'd be shunned for their honest feelings. This in itself is something we need to think about and to redouble our efforts to ensure that all members of our community feel safe enough to voice their opinions.

Many of you have shared with me. Over 100 of you took the time to compose emails to me, write letters, call or set up appointments to discuss this matter. You have told me of the pain experienced by gay members in your families who felt excluded by the Jewish community. And I cannot thank you enough for bringing me into your lives and into your thought processes.

* * *

A number of years ago, I felt clear about where I was on this issue. While I had great sympathy for my friends, acquaintances and others who were both Jewish and gay and supported their civil rights, it was clear to me that Jewish law's perspective had to be what it was.

That said, I was open to exploring the issue anew and hearing your stories. This year was pivotal: the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Conservative Movement passed a *teshuvah*, a rabbinic responsum that allowed for change in this issue and our learning as a community was enlightening.

In the days after the Law Committee's vote in December, I called an old friend from college and rabbinical school – he voted for both the *teshuvah* that called for change and the *teshuvah* that upheld the status quo.

He explained to me that he believed in the validity of the *teshuvah* that allowed for gays and lesbians to celebrate a commitment to one another in a Jewish religious ceremony. And, at the same time, he felt that there should still be room for those who felt that was not within their understanding of the tradition.

While at first I felt his position made no sense – how could he vote for this monumental change and uphold the age-old prohibitions, I began to realize its

sagacity and saw it as a reflection of our reality. This is a diverse movement made up of communities that are evolving in different ways and at different paces. He was acknowledging and respecting the fact that a Jew in Toronto may feel differently than a Jew in San Francisco. They may be singing some different melodies, but it's still *havdalah*.

While for thousands of years, Judaism has been uncomfortable with certain gay and lesbian behaviors, new understandings require change. It is increasingly clear that while one's sexual orientation is complex, biology plays a large part. Thus, for those who are attracted solely to members of the same sex, there is no alternative. The tradition must make room for them.

* * *

My position has evolved as I have studied, listened and learned with you over the course of this year. As your rabbi, I have determined that Temple Emunah should be open to gay commitment ceremonies and celebrating the lives of two Jews, be they men or women, who want to build a Jewish home in an exclusive, committed relationship.

* * *

I know that not everyone is comfortable with this; I hope that those of you who are not in favor of this policy will nonetheless continue the conversation and your engagement with our community.

This process of halakhic change has been challenging for the Conservative Movement and an intense one for me, but it has also been an incredibly meaningful journey that reflects a deep desire to understand how to apply God's Torah to our world. Whenever we have difficult choices – those that are between two competing positive values, we struggle. Here we have maintaining our tradition and the value of recognizing that every human being, regardless of their sexual orientation, needs to be seen as created in God's image and thus, of ultimate worth.

As we studied homosexuality this year, our shul was also awarded a grant to promote awareness of *halakhah* in our congregation. These funds helped us bring in Rabbi Reisner and Rabbi Roth and will be utilized in the coming year to study other issues of Jewish law in our community. It is my hope that beyond any changes we may make, the process of study and growth will be an enriching one. At the same time, we hope to truly deepen our commitment to *halakhah*, opening up the beauty and richness of our tradition so that we can add to our spiritual practice.

In addition, we will continue to find more opportunities to discuss *halakhah* and explore other religious issues in our community. While sometimes we may

opt for a lenient opinion, in other places, we may choose a strict one. These ideas and their resolution do not follow any simple right/left characterization. At times we may even move in what seems like opposite directions.

My general approach is to study and encounter our heritage, finding opportunities for more traditional practices – adding prayers and strengthening our religious observances, while at the same time, being more creative, modern and inclusive.

We must develop this type of evolving *halakhah*. That's how we engage with our Torah and make it truly an *etz h'ayyim* – a living tree, one that grows and adds another ring each year and each generation. I look forward to continuing our journey together and know that even though we may sing new melodies, even wear different clothes or change some customs, we are still singing *havdalah* – the Moshes and the Beryls, the Shaynas and Tovas raising our voices together.

* * *

Normally, on this evening we think of ourselves as clay being shaped by a potter and in just a minute we will sing *Ki Hinei KaHomer* – the *piyyut*, the prayer, that says just that. But there is another line in our liturgy from Psalm 90 which flips this image and understands that we also have the power to be the potters shaping our world. As the text states: “*Va'yehi noam Adonai Eloheinu aleynu u'ma'aseh yadeinu konenah aleynu* – may Adonai our God show us compassion and firmly establish the work of hands.

May this day of introspection bring us new insights and understandings about our tradition, strengthening the work of our hands. Amen.

Shabbat Shalom and *g'mar hatimah tovah*.