

Commitment, not Choice

RH AM Sermon 5783

In the autumn of 1885, a group of distinguished rabbis gathered in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania to change Judaism forever. The principles they drew up over the subsequent four days we now refer to as the Pittsburgh Platform— a radical attempt to bring Judaism into harmony with modern life. It states, in part, that all such Jewish:

... "laws as regulate diet, priestly purity, and dress originated in ages and under the influence of ideas entirely foreign to our present mental and spiritual state ... their observance in our days is apt rather to obstruct than to further modern spiritual elevation."

Among the Platform's authors were Reform Judaism's founding fathers: Isaac Mayer Wise and Kaufman Kohler. They had come from Germany, where after centuries of marginalization, the **European Enlightenment** had liberated Jews from the dark corners of the ghetto, offering us a seat at society's table. The opportunity to be both German AND Jewish was still new and exhilarating. More than that - it was a total revolution, unequaled in over 3000 years of Jewish History. To that end, those founding rabbis envisioned a Judaism that was compatible with American ideals. How could Jews ever be accepted in America if we couldn't share a meal with our neighbors or; if our worship relied on foreign incantations and arcane rituals? We wanted to belong, and to thrive. The Pittsburgh Platform expressed a vision consistent with that aspiration.

Other cultural forces coalesced to make Reform Judaism utterly dominant. Before enlightenment came the **Scientific Revolution**: an appeal to reason. Now there were new sophisticated ways to measure and observe the world around us, and to understand our own history. Reform taught that one need not choose between Judaism and science. (Nevermind that Maimonides had also said this 700 years earlier). This was a Judaism of intellectual honesty triumphing over superstition and outdated custom. How modern!

In the United States, especially, these intellectual undercurrents dovetailed with a strong emphasis on the individual: rights, liberty, and self-sufficiency. We all learned about them in school: Emerson, Thoreau. Patrick Henry's famous "Give me liberty or give me death!"

The focus with individual rights is of course one of America's gifts to the world, and the new brand of American Reform Judaism adopted it enthusiastically. No longer would Jews be bound by the arcane customs of our ancestors. Rather, it was up to each individual to search out what from Judaism was relevant to them. What could be more American? Hence, the Pittsburgh Platform:

...today we accept as binding only [the] moral laws [of Judaism], and maintain only such ceremonies as elevate and sanctify our lives...

Thus was born the concept of **informed choice**. In other words, first we learn the tradition, and then we decide what to do with it. Separating women from men in prayer? That outdated notion doesn't fit with our egalitarian paradigm. What about keeping Kosher — practices that always helped Jews stay connected to each other, but distinct from others? Well, that was a problem for the founders! We wanted to be MORE American, not less!

What a liberating, modern Judaism. It helped our ancestors find their place in society. The American Reform Movement was a runaway success. We built over 900 congregations in North America. Reform became the largest movement of them all.

For well over 100 years, American Reform Judaism worked. But it's not really working anymore. There are many reasons for this, but here's the main one: its founding vision is no longer visionary. For most of us, the bootstrapping immigrant story is far in the rearview mirror. We are comfortable now; we are fully American! In this sense, Reform Judaism is now a victim of its own success. But a lot has changed since 1885. It's possible that in gaining freedom and comfort, we've lost some important things, too. And as Rabbis Isaac Mayer Wise and Kaufman Kohler knew so well, if Judaism is going to remain relevant, it has to change..//

So let's talk about choice. All of you made the choice to be here today. Perhaps it was automatic. Perhaps someone else who loves you made this choice for you. I say this with appreciation. I'm glad that something or someone drew you to connect with your people and feel the power of your roots. Maybe it's even been a bit more enjoyable than you feared.

Yet, we are the minority. According to the Pew Research Center, only about one in three American Jews are actively connected to a synagogue.¹ Take a look around. For every person on either side of you, there are two or three other Jews out there somewhere on the Shoreline. If you include their partners and children, it becomes quite a large community that *could* exist, but doesn't yet.

And it's not just us— this is a broader American trend. About 20 years ago, the eminent sociologist Robert Putnam published a book called *Bowling Alone*. That evocative title conveys the main point: it used to be that Americans would gather in bowling alleys to bowl in leagues. The bowling alleys still exist, but most everyone bowls in small groups or all by themselves. The bonds of our civic infrastructure are breaking down. Rotaries, VFWs, and

¹ <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/05/11/jewish-americans-in-2020/>

religious communities of every domination are increasingly supplanted by a culture of temporary, opt-in, fee-for-service providers.

And oh, the convenience! Our lives are full of more apps, options, and immediacy than ever. With a few presses of the thumb, I can summon a car, or dinner, or pharmacy items, or even a handle of vodka. I don't even have to phone a friend; or interact with another human being at all.

But what do we give up in a world of endless individual choice; of instant gratification? Well, as the research indicates, quite a lot.//

Does more choice make us happier? If Elaine can choose between two boxes of breakfast cereal, and Jerry gets his choice among 20, who has more freedom? If Jerry winds up less satisfied; more anxious that he might have made the wrong choice, well, it's not him. In his book called *The Paradox of Choice: Why More is Less*² psychologist Barry Schwartz explains that the more options we're given, we're less satisfied with whatever option we choose.

Drawing on social science research such as this, the cultural critic Mark Manson points out three other reasons that abundant choice tends to enslave, rather than liberate us:³

1. **We become increasingly fragile.** As we acclimate to constant comfort and pleasure, we lose patience. We can become entitled.
2. **We become prone to low-level addictive behaviors.** We compulsively check our phone, our email, our social media feeds. We constantly encounter other people's perfectly curated social media lives, and we can't keep up, though many of us try. We become addicted and miserable.
3. This constant rush of dopamine and comfort **limits our ability to tolerate and confront negative emotions.** We become, as Mark Manson says, "prisoners of our own indulgences."

Have you noticed how the ease of ordering that widget online, or how the absence of friction standing between you and binging an entire season of that Netflix show, might be rewiring your brain and changing your habits?

Manson argues that the "only true form of freedom, the only ethical form of freedom, is through self-limitation. It is not the privilege of choosing everything you want in your life, but rather choosing what you will *give up* in your life...diversions come and go. Pleasure

² New York: Ecco, 2004

³ *Everything is F*cked: A Book about Hope*. Harper: 2019, p. 205

never lasts. Variety loses its meaning. But you will always be able to choose what you are willing to sacrifice.”⁴

The rabbis of the Mishnah ask: איזהו אשיר? השמח בחלקו Who is rich? One who is content with what they have.⁵ In Judaism, the important thing is to cultivate an attitude of joy and abundance, immaterial of the circumstances.. The rabbis were really on to something, because more is not always better.

So, when individual choice was part of a new story of Jewish freedom, it made sense to celebrate it. But choice is no longer an innovation, it’s an assumption. And endless choice does not liberate us — quite the contrary. So I’d like to suggest three things we need instead: **relationships, service, and action**. These aren’t new ideas. In fact, they, too, date back 2000 years to the *mishnah*,⁶ in which Simon the Righteous declares that the entire world stands on three things: Torah, *Avodah*, and *G’millut Chasadim*. Torah, service, and action.

First, Torah. Our Torah is the deepest Jewish symbol of **relationship**. It represents the covenant between us and God — a sacred agreement that imbues our lives with purpose. It’s no coincidence we use the same word, covenant, for the marriage agreement, or for a child’s welcome into the Jewish people. From this we learn that **relationship precedes choice**. It’s like that classic story about Goldberg and Schwartz, who are walking to synagogue. They are stopped along the way by someone who asks them where they are going. They respond that they are both on their way to synagogue.

The man is confused: “Goldberg, I know why you go to synagogue. You believe in God. But Schwartz, you don’t believe in God, why are you going?”

Schwartz responds,

“Goldberg goes to synagogue to talk to God, and I go to synagogue to talk to Goldberg.”

Our **choices are only as meaningful as the relationships they serve**. We shouldn’t be so quick to dismiss Schwartz, despite his self-deprecating response. Both he and Goldberg are making a commitment — one which gives meaning to both of their lives.

The second principle is *avodah*, **Service**. I think we all know it instinctively, but what we give is much more valuable than what we get. Nobody will recite somebody’s brilliant DoorDash orders at their funeral. No, we’ll be remembered for what we give — and what

⁴ P. 206

⁵ *Pirkei Avot*, ch. 4

⁶ *Pirkei Avot*, 1.2

we give up— for that which we believe in. Plus, isn't it so much more fulfilling to help others?

In building a society of endless choice, we may have accidentally discarded the most valuable freedom of all: not the freedom to choose our pleasure, **but the freedom to choose our pain**. *What we give up through our commitments* gives shape and purpose to life in a way that pursuing our pleasures never can.

Like going to the gym, real life requires time, discipline, and a little soreness. That's how we grow.

Recently, I was speaking with one of our members who helped a fellow congregant organize *shiva* after a loved one passed away. She told me that she was moved to see that so many friends from TBT came to shiva to express their care, and that she and the bereaved had become closer in the intervening months. These small gifts of presence and love really aren't small at all.

Finally, our third ingredient: **Action**. The Schwartz joke is self-aware of the Christian context in which it originates — a context that says, what we *believe* matters more than what we *do*. Judaism is exactly the opposite. Judaism has always been much more interested in action — helping the poor, celebrating the holidays, teaching our children. There are very few lists of Jewish dogma, and the most famous one, written by Maimonides, he composed primarily to make his critics leave him alone. It's extremely Jewish to approach spiritual dilemmas experientially. Come to a Friday night Service say *mi shebeirach* for a loved one. Bring bagels to our men's spirituality group. Share a poem at our women's *Rosh Chodesh* gathering. Attend a community interfaith gathering against hate. Break bread with new old or new friends at one of our Shabbat Dinners.

Our community needs every voice to help realize the vibrant Judaism we need to build together.

This has been a challenging period for our congregation, as we rebuild.

Some of us feel further from Jewish life than we ever have.

And truly, it will take all of us to build the Jewish future.

I care deeply about that future, and I care deeply about you.. I am interested to know how we can be the best TBT we can be, for you. To that end, I'm delighted to announce **our Community Conversations. These conversations are a project of the TBT Design Team**, a small group of dedicated people, who are hosting small group meetings about where life has taken us in the last few years, and how we as TBT might meaningfully respond to these realities. I would love for every family at TBT to take place in one of these

listening sessions over the coming year. When you receive an invitation, please say yes. If you're interested in participating in a small group conversation, you can also let me know directly.

This is an exhilarating time for me as your rabbi, and an incredible opportunity for TBT. We are working to define who we are for a generation to come. We need you to make this happen: your passion, your insight, your unique gifts. No less than at its founding, the Judaism of today requires an honest look at where we are, and a vision of where we might be. That takes all of us. Won't you help shape that vision? Together, I am certain that we will make this an especially sweet and meaningful New Year.

Shanah Tovah.