

Reform Judaism: In 1000 Words

Halachah and Progressive Integrity



Context

As Reform Jews, we are sometimes accused of an approach to Jewish life that – in the eyes of some - lacks integrity in its relationship with halachic (Jewish legal) literature. There is no question that an emphasis on personal autonomy does raise challenges: how do we make choices, how do we privilege some mitzvot over others; how do we do so as communities of shared values and practice?

*In this essay, **Rabbi Shulamit Ambalu** explores the nature of Progressive Jewish Integrity and our relationship with halachah.*

Content

Finding the language to describe the conversation

It is difficult to describe the conversations that Progressive Judaism has, because first of all we need to define the language we need to use. In this essay I will talk about what and who I think we are in our relationship with halachah. About how it shapes us, and we shape it, and how being Progressive Jews means we do this from a place of autonomy and freedom. It is difficult to find and form these words because they are full of meanings that were put there long ago by someone else, but to have this conversation at all we must begin by knowing what they mean.

It is also difficult because I think that these tough questions get to the very root of who we are. We are a culture, but not just a culture. A people but not only a people. I think that being Jewish or Jewish being, is the living out of what I can only think of as Jewish forms. You might think of these as mitzvot, but we don't necessarily view or feel them as commandments. Most of these are actions, behaviours, prayers or blessings; I want to avoid the word 'ritual' here, I do not think of them as 'empty' but many people do. These forms are the way Jewish action erupts into the present: they are for example making and celebrating Shabbat, eating matzah, the seder, our own forms of kashrut, the ways we welcome our infants, or marry, or bury our dead. They are also, at a deepest sense sometimes how we think (such as gathering our thoughts before reciting the sh'ma) and they shape the sense of who we are. Even our concept of 'Who is a Jew' didn't spring straight from the Hebrew bible, but comes down to us today through the astonishing and innovative form-changing capacity of the classical rabbis.

Indeed, none of the Judaism we have today, no matter what our denomination, comes straight from the Bible. It was these rabbinic ancestors who, adapting to crisis and the threat to their culture that came out of their historical reality, gave us the Talmuds, the law codes, and the responsa, all of which are a matrix of law and story. Not dry words dead on a page, but a living process, that continues to this very day. It has taken me a long time to find the words to say this, because so much writing and thinking about halachah comes from an Orthodox perspective, and Orthodoxy demands or at least expects that Jews be loyal to these forms, the mitzvot.

Progressive and Orthodox Judaism, differing integrities

I want to begin by describing how Progressive Judaism and Orthodoxy express two different particular integrities. But because these integrities are different, it is impossible and wrong to compare them. Beginning with Orthodoxy, we start with thinking about this word itself, which means 'the holding of a correct doctrine or belief'. I think that is not quite how what we call Orthodoxy today really works. First of all, being Jewish doesn't inherently require any doctrine or belief. Many, even Orthodox, Jews believe different things.

In the 19th century leading Modern Orthodox thinkers, alarmed by the impact of Reform Judaism, sought to set their people apart from any possible influence by insisting that since Torah was given at Sinai, its Divine origin demands total commitment to the mitzvot. That is a tricky stance to take, especially today, when we know so much about the complex and fascinating background to the Torah. I would suggest instead that the underlying integrity of Orthodoxy (but not individual Orthodox Jews) is in seeing every piece of halachah as essential, and every piece as having, in some way, an equal place. This means across the entire range of mitzvot: from those we might meet in everyday life (such as kashrut) to the observance of the festivals, from the conversion of the proselyte to immersion after a woman's menstrual period. From burial of the dead to the very latest halachic research on, for example, the moment of death and the donation of gametes. I imagine this kind of integrity as having an almost horizontal reach; it is about seeing integrity across what comes down to us today, and holding in place every piece. Since every piece is important, an Orthodox approach may accuse progressive Judaism of being selective, of 'picking and choosing'.

Progressive Jewish integrity compels us a Progressive movement as well as individual Progressive Jews to openly reach in to this unending inheritance, these uncountable forms, this matrix of teaching and story, and wrestle elements of it forth into the present. Unafraid to re-shape our prayers, to re-think festivals and the Jewish year, to grasp transforming acts such as conversion and marriage, and to transform them for the present. This is an act of choosing. When we are accused of 'picking and choosing' it is never meant as a compliment. But it should be, and we should celebrate this power to choose. We were gifted it by the early Reformers who grew out of the European enlightenment. And because we live in a culture shaped by the same enlightenment principles, our Judaism is also a quest to live a whole life. Here, integrity is about integration, the weaving together of Judaism and its demands into a liveable whole. Yet it was never about choosing for the sake of mere autonomy. From its earliest origins Progressive Judaism gave priority to ethics; in a conflict with tradition, the ethical choice will determine the direction. Ethics, of course, change. We see this today in a world where, unthinkable 15 years ago, same sex couples marry in our synagogues.

Progressive integrity, then, is about the freedom to choose what is right; 'tsedek tzedak tirdof - you shall surely pursue justice'. The repetition of the word tzedek here might imply that the righteous path is one that will always need new thinking and new action, because the just or right path was never eternally fixed. We should also celebrate this integrity in choosing because Progressive Judaism is modern, it speaks to the individual. This is hard. It is hard to be one autonomous, choosing person. But it is nevertheless truthful. We can be nothing else. This I believe gets to the heart of progressive Jewish integrity; it is the potential of truly being one Self. I believe we engage this potential most fully in a kehillah, a community. This is where we wrestle Judaism into a fuller engagement with the present. We are honest about this act of choosing. Our Progressive integrity demands this of us.

Re-thinking Klal Yisrael

Klal Yisrael means the entirety of the Jewish people. It is sometimes used by Jews to stop others (usually progressives) from taking bold steps, on the grounds that we might threaten Klal Yisrael's integrity. I want to suggest that we think of Klal Yisrael not as a simple fact of peoplehood, but as a dynamic description of all of us, subject to, grappling with and in turn also acting on the shaping forces of halachah. Each with our differing integrities. We are each of us shaped like stones that tumble in the currents of a halachic river. We leave tiny traces in our wake. We each tumble freely, and for the most part keep on moving. Or perhaps at times, like rock locked up in glaciers, which can only move as the ice advances, or fall away when the glacier calves and melts.

This view of differing integrities holds its own obvious problem. A Progressive commitment to the conscious act of choosing will always mean that we can honour the reality of pluralism. An Orthodox integrity based on acceptance of the whole may struggle to even accept this. It is a paradox. But then, Jews can live with contradictions. Judaism is built from them.

Contemplation

This article gives us permission to be proud. Previous generations of Reform Jews may have lived looking over their shoulders, worried about being judged, but this is no longer the case. Ours is a robust, intellectual approach, with its own integrity. How do we better communicate this to each other and the world?