

Our Obligation to the Future

Kol Nidre 5784

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When people ask if my father is also a rabbi, I know one thing: They don't know my dad! Like my mother, he was raised in a proud Jewish home, loyal to the Temple, but not observant. Consequently, my first childhood home had no *mezuzah* on the doorpost, and nobody I knew even considered fasting on Yom Kippur.

Leviticus tells us to “practice self-denial”ⁱ on Yom Kippur, and the sages interpret that to mean that adults must abstain from food, water, cosmetics, wearing leather, and engaging in sexual relations on this sacred day,ⁱⁱ provided that we can do so without compromising our health or wellbeing.ⁱⁱⁱ Many of us abide by some of these requirements. But why? Because God said so? Because of a community expectation? Because fasting facilitates our repentance? Because we want to prove—if to nobody else, to ourselves—that we can do it? For those with children and grandchildren watching, perhaps there's a desire to set an example for them. But an example of what, exactly?

In 1885, the early rabbis of American Reform Judaism recorded their view of our Jewish obligations in a document known as the Pittsburgh Platform. These rabbis were stalwart monotheists, but they were ambivalent about commandments. They saw Torah as a compelling guidebook for ancient Israel and for contemporary moral behavior, but they took a dim view of any ritual that did not move the modern mind and spirit.^{iv}

Those late 19th century American Reform rabbis have been accused of “throwing out the baby with the bath water.” They were wise not to require stringent ritual observance, but went overboard when they ruled them out. A century later, personal freedom would be central to the Reform rabbinate's 1976 platform: “Reform Jews are called upon to confront the claims of Jewish tradition, however differently perceived, and to exercise their individual autonomy, choosing and creating on the basis of commitment and knowledge.”^v

I endorse that statement from the 1970s, and I teach it as the most compelling articulation of contemporary Reform Judaism. Still, I wonder if “individual autonomy” can be the ultimate or only standard. Is each of us to make our Jewish decisions with only ourselves in mind?

My teacher, Dr. Elana Stein Hain,^{vi} points to a key phrase in the Torah portion we shall read tomorrow morning. Standing on the banks of the Jordan River, as the Children of Israel are about to enter the Promised Land, Moses reminds them that the Covenant is not only for them, but also “with those who are

not with here us this day.”^{vii} Our sages teach that the Torah refers to future generations, including converts,^{viii} to emphasize that the obligation of each generation that receives the Torah is to transmit it to the next.

Through her lens as a mother and feminist Jewish scholar, Professor Mara Benjamin notes that contemporary American parents know all about obligation to the next generation. She writes, “Raising a child demands ... subjection of self that confronts notions of individual freedom.” She describes “the Law of the Baby,” which limits the very notion of personal autonomy. That “law could not be fulfilled in abstract, but only in active, embodied, material actions: soothing, feeding, cleaning, comforting, distracting, smiling, and wiping. It became the law of the crying toddler who sought ... comfort, the law of her seeking out our, or my, face for approval and interest.”^{ix}

Not everybody is or will ever be a parent, but Benjamin’s words are a potent example of obligations that any of us may feel simultaneously to ourselves and to others. Many limit their personal autonomy out of devotion to their employers or employees, to their professions, or to an institution whose needs are their own—Congregation B’nai Israel, Jacobs Camp, or the Jewish Federation of Arkansas, for example. We would forsake our personal freedom to protect other people’s rights and to improve our city, state, or nation. We devote ourselves to the future of the Central Arkansas Jewish community, even if we don’t have descendants who will ever be part of it. Though our follow-through may be poor, we know that we are obligated to make sacrifices necessary to bequeath a healthy planet to the future.

In confessing our sins this evening, we proclaimed: *Al chet sh’chatanu l’fanecha b’frikat ol*, regretting “harm we have caused in Your world by losing self-control.” The translation is inexact. Though we **do** risk sin when we fail to control ourselves, the original text would more accurately be rendered as referring to wrongdoing by exerting **too much** control. In Hebrew, we are confessing the sin of “casting off the burden” of the *mitzvot*, the religious obligations we have inherited from those who stood with Moses astride the Jordan.

On Yom Kippur, we stand at the precipice of the Promised Land of a new year. In 5784, we can take on *mitzvot* that nourish our own souls—and just as importantly, the future—that baby crying out for food, the toddler, demanding a smile.

Let me suggest one.

After raising my sister and me with little ritual observance in our early childhood, my parents experienced something of a Jewish awakening. Shabbat candles were lit, at least periodically. And then, when I was in high school, my

mother came home with the shocking notion to build a Sukkah, the first I had ever seen at a home. With the fervor of a Christian child in December, I seized the task of finding every kind of fruit and vegetable, dangling each by string from the Sukkah's roof. We had fun and ate meals there. I wanted the same for Robert and Daniel, and I made it happen, in our own style. Rejoicing in the Sukkah, like feeding or cleaning a child, is, to quote Professor Benjamin, an “active, embodied, material action” that we can take to nurture the future.

Our Temple Sukkah is huge. There's room for everybody—not only for all the programs and services we will hold there, but even for constructing it, together with our Confirmation class, under the direction of Scott Jordan and our veteran builders, this Wednesday, at 6pm. Everyone is welcome to join in the fun—building, decorating, and rejoicing.

I don't celebrate in the Sukkah because God commanded it, or at least not **only** for that reason. I don't see it as an obligation to my ancestors; and it's no longer about my own sons, who will be far away, with Daniel organizing activities in a campus Sukkah where he will take most meals.

On Sukkot, we will connect with the natural world and with one another. We will invite guests and expand our concept of community. We will contemplate what that fragile hut can teach us about the precarious nature of some of our neighbors' homes and about impermanence of our own lives. And we will express gratitude for the bounty we celebrate.

Like generations of Jews across twenty centuries, we will cast our eyes up through the Sukkah's open roof, gazing upon sky, the moon, and the stars. We will link one generation to the next, even as we tie one plank of the Sukkah's roof to its side beams. We will construct a meaningful future for our congregation and community, for our Jewish people and for all the world. And we may do so with God's blessing.

Amen.

ⁱ Leviticus 16:29.

ⁱⁱ *Mishnah Yoma* 8:1.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Mishnah Yoma* 8:4-6.

^{iv} “Declaration of Principles,” also known as “The Pittsburgh Platform,” Central Conference of American Rabbis, Pittsburgh, 1885, <https://www.ccarnet.org/rabbinic-voice/platforms/article-declaration-principles/>.

^v “Reform Judaism: A Centenary Perspective,” Central Conference of American Rabbis, San Francisco, 1976, <https://www.ccarnet.org/rabbinic-voice/platforms/article-reform-judaism-centenary-perspective/>.

^{vi} Elana Stein Hain, “It's Not About You: Obligation and the Liberal Jew,” Rabbinic Torah Seminar, Shalom Hartman Institute, Jerusalem, July 5, 2023.

^{vii} Deuteronomy 29:14.

^{viii} *Tosefta Sotah* 7:3.4. Text provided by Dr. Elana Stein Hain. Also Babylonian Talmud, *Sh'vu'ot* 39a, *inter alia*.

^{ix} Mara Benjamin, *The Obligated Self: Maternal Subjectivity and Jewish Thought*, Indiana University Press, 2018, pp. 8, 13-14. Text Provided by Dr. Elana Stein Hain.