

Shabbat Naso 5786

May 23, 2026 7 Sivan

Responding to Ella Weinberg-Getz and Asher Hurewitz-Ravitch

Ella and Asher, thank you for two thought-provoking divrei Torah. Ella, you found that the Sotah ritual is not merely an archaic performance of misogynistic cruelty at which we can peer from a safe distance. Rather, it is a reminder that the endangerment of women by men's jealousy, violence, and power is both ancient and present. That even in a time of greater equality like our own, the subjugation of women persists, with periods of renewed fervor, and that the struggle for women's equality continues in our own generation. You have in your own family models of how the Reform Movement of Judaism has been and is an important force for redeeming the world in this regard.

Asher, you did something very different. You found, on the subject of the Nazirim's abstinence from wine, a Rabbinic debate that you understood to be about the value of structure and rules versus freedom. I want to come back to that. But first, as a debater yourself, you extolled the value of debate, and reflected on the importance of structure and rules in debate, so that we can argue in order to learn from one another, or at least that we can agree to disagree and live together in peace. Rabbinic Judaism excelled at this and has great wisdom to offer us, but the details of their prescriptions are for another sermon.

What I want to do today – briefly – is connect your message, Ella, and your message, Asher, as they relate to the project of Judaism itself, the question of structure, and the goal of the redemption of the world. Because I don't think we have the Judaism we need to meet this moment.

Given that we are in an era of human-driven mass extinction, given that we are playing with new technologies that are radically changing our perception of what it is to be human, given that we are growing together as a species across the globe through shared communication and economy, given that we are learning quickly, but have not yet learned how to live in ways that promote justice or peace, or that sustain life, we need help.

(Not to mention the current and ongoing challenges of authoritarianism, oligarchy, war, antisemitism, Israel/Palestine, and division among our people.)

Given that new technologies bring us about 1,000 times as much information per day as our ancestors received, given that we are left to our own devices, literally, to figure out how to navigate our relationship with that information and the mechanisms by which it is delivered,

given that staying focused on what matters most – knowing what matters most, prioritizing what matters most, and returning to what matters most in the midst of this torrent – is a feat few of us are able to consistently achieve, we need help.

There's a story about the Baal Shem Tov, that he would bathe every evening with his students in a nearby river. One time, on the way there, a rough-looking Cossack stepped into their path and demanded: "Who are you? What are you doing here?" The Baal Shem Tov explained that he and his students were going to bathe in the river. The Cossack said, "I won't let you pass unless you give me a gold coin." The Baal Shem Tov reached into his pack, gave the Cossack a gold coin and began to go on his way. Then suddenly, he returned to the Cossack and excitedly gave him an entire bag of gold coins. The Cossack was taken aback: was this some sort of joke? The Baal Shem Tov exclaimed: "I'm not giving you all these gold coins so you'll let us pass. I'm paying you in advance to return here every night in this spot and ask me: "Who are you? What are you doing here?"

In this chaotic time with very high stakes, it is hard to know and remember who we are and what we are doing here – how best to use the hours and energy of our finite lives, and how to individually or collectively structure our lives in accordance with those priorities while also meeting our needs – and our family's needs– for food, shelter, and love.

Judaism was designed to be the guidance that we need to live our individual and collective purpose – to be the entire, moment-by-moment structure of our daily lives. Judaism was designed to be the vehicle to get us from the world that is to the world that should be.

There are three main kinds of Judaism in the world right now:

- 1) Haredi or Ultra-Orthodox Judaism
- 2) Religious-Nationalist Judaism
- 3) Liberal/Secular Judaism

None of them are adequately meeting our needs or the needs of this moment. But the Judaisms we have are not the only Judaisms that are possible. A new Judaism is in formation right now.

The work of the Reform movement and other liberal movements of Judaism is only partially realized, and the more that we're aware of that, the more we can be consciously, actively involved in creating the Judaism we need. Originally, Torah and then Rabbinic Judaism were each ahead of their time, with wisdom and insights that were great leaps forward in the movement toward redemption – recognizing the inherent dignity of every human being, for example, standing against slavery and oppression, developing a system of debate (yes, debate, Asher) to adapt the law to changing realities. But by the modern era, traditional halakhic systems were no longer leading the way on human development toward the redemption of the world – on matters, for example, like the equality of women. And that's one of the reasons why it was so important that the Reform movement broke away from the halakhic system, freeing individual Jews to use our own conscience (and not Rabbinic authority) to decide how we relate the mitzvot of Judaism to the conditions of our world. That has led to an incredible flowering and diversity of Jewish life, and to trailblazing on questions of equality and justice – as you pointed to so beautifully, Ella, in your d'var Torah.

But something really important was lost along the way. By now, for most people, Judaism has become a side project. What had been an all-encompassing, communal and individual lived practice became a thing you do occasionally as a nod to your past and to your people, but not as a structure and guide for every moment of every day. In the words of Yitz Greenberg in his book *Triumph of Life*, “Most American Jews believed that the promise of classical Judaism's redemptive vision – the overcoming of poverty, hunger, oppression, discrimination, war, and sickness – were on track to be fulfilled by the dominant multicultural, liberal culture, in its universalist reading. Furthermore, the promises of quality of life, freedom, self-expression, and higher fulfillment also appeared more reachable through the general culture.” And so as our people assimilated, modern culture – including materialism and consumerism – were given primacy and normative authority, in our lives. But modern culture has no replacement for a 360 degree, ritual and ethical structure for how to live a good life in rapidly changing conditions. And we're left wanting.

As Rabbi Rachel Adler says in her book *Engendering Judaism*, “Modernity has punched holes in the thought and practice of Judaism, and its practitioners have had to improvise to stanch the resultant hemorrhage of Jewish meaning. ..The more seriously Jews think about their Judaisms, the more likely they are to find themselves wanting.” She continues, “Without a means through which the stories and the values of Judaism can be embodied in communal praxis, how are they to be sustained by experiences? Values and stories are empty and meaningless if we lack ways to act upon them. Without concrete, sensuous, substantial experiences that bind us to live out our Judaisms together, there is nothing real to engender.”

That is the unfinished work of the Reform movement and other liberal Judaisms. First we need an articulated, desired future to aim toward – that’s something that our New Futures Project here at CBE is working on. And I’m hoping our New Futures Project will be a model that is replicated everywhere. With that articulated, desired future in our sights, we need a lay-led, grassroots process of experimentation with ways of reinterpreting and adapting mitzvot and creating new ones, in accordance with individual and collective conscience, to develop a way of life that gets us from here to that desired future.

As Rachel Adler describes, “[The process must be] dynamic rather than static, visionary rather than conservative, open to the outside rather than closed, arising communally, cooperatively, covenantally, rather than being externally imposed and passively obeyed.”

This is how Yitz Greenberg describes it: “The covenantal criterion is this: every action in my life will not be done randomly, routinely, or unthinkingly. To live covenantally, I will locate every action in relation to how it will be done when the world reaches perfection and try to act at this ideal level. If this is not realistic, then I will shape my action to be the closest approximation of the ideal possible now.”

Imagine if communities all across the Jewish world were laboratories where we tried to do this, where we debated various approaches, and where we learned from our attempts. Imagine if each of us had the support of our communities in trying to restructure our lives in alignment with our ideals. Imagine if we could reinvent the halakhic system itself into a democratic, participatory, open field of voluntary commitment by which we collectively form a bridge between the world as it is and the world as it should be. CBE is going to be that place, and I hope others will too.

Ella, you gave us beautiful examples of what the Reform movement of Judaism has already accomplished. Asher, you reminded us of the value of structure and rules and debate. Together, you make the case for what is possible in this next evolution of covenant, of halakha, of the Reform movement, of Jewish life.

Yesterday was the holiday of Shavuot. For many Jews the holiday continues today. On Shavuot we celebrate Matan Torah, receiving Torah from G-d at Mount Sinai, that first moment of collective covenant. As we know, those tablets were shattered and new ones had to be carved by hand. Let us not be afraid to do the carving in our own day.

Shabbat Shalom.