

**Sermon:** Parshat Ki Tissa / Parshat Parah  
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Similar to our B'nai Israel tradition of an annual Mitzvah Day, my college fraternity had an annual day on which we would volunteer to give back. One particular year, the fraternity chose to partner with Habitat for Humanity, working to build an affordable home for a family in need. When I learned that it would take place on a Saturday, I had to inform my brothers that I would not be able to participate. Most of them were Jewish, albeit not particularly observant, and they understood my limitation—I was (and still am) *shomer Shabbat*, observant of the Sabbath, and unable to participate in this particular project on this particular day of the week. None of them questioned my decision not to participate; they understood the values which animated my observance of Shabbat. That is, all except for one good friend and fraternity brother, a non-Jew who had lived his entire life in Singapore before coming to the States as a student at Brandeis. He came to me and earnestly asked, “Mitchell, wouldn’t it be a mitzvah to build a home for someone who cannot afford one? Shouldn’t you be allowed to do that any day of the week?!” He was asking a great question, a sort of Talmudic question: When two *mitzvot* are seemingly in conflict with one another, does one take precedence over the other? Indeed, Judaism teaches us that we may hold many values, but sometimes one must take precedence over another. In some cases, the contest is cut and dry, and *halakha* has a straightforward answer, whereas other cases are more ambiguous. This particular case, can one build a home on Shabbat, has a straightforward answer: no. But in many other scenarios, the answer is not so simple. Judaism encourages us to challenge, question, and evaluate. In so doing, we recognize that there is beauty in the diversity of opinions. Throughout history and across the globe,

different Jewish communities have made different decisions about laws, customs, and the prioritization of values. How we prioritize values leads to diversity, but it can also lead to division. This week's *parsha* offers an example of competing values, and thereby sheds light upon the current state of affairs in the Jewish world.

Parshat Ki Tissa continues with the instructions for the *Mishkan* and its vessels, describing the recipe for making the anointing oil and the incense. At the conclusion of these instructions is a six-verse passage about the *mitzvah* to observe Shabbat.

וְשָׁמְרוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־הַשַּׁבָּת לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת־הַשַּׁבָּת לְדֹרֹתָם בְּרִית עוֹלָם:

The Israelite people shall keep the sabbath, observing the sabbath throughout the ages as a covenant for all time (Exodus 31:16).

What can we learn from the juxtaposition of these passages about the building of the Tabernacle and the observance of Shabbat? Rashi teaches that even though God emphasizes the importance of building the Tabernacle, with multiple *parshiyot* dedicated to the instructions and completion of the project, that work is not more important than observing Shabbat. Just as the *mitzvah* of observing Shabbat provides a pause between the instructions for and the building of the Tabernacle, so too we learn that when Shabbat arrives on Friday night, our work must be paused, and our attention is refocused on other matters. Jewish law established Shabbat as a day of rest, a day upon which we desist from creative labors, especially those that involve construction, even if the project at hand will benefit others. Six days a week you can build and create. On Saturday, we stop and God as the ultimate Builder and Creator. Both are significant values, but when they compete, one must take precedence. When these two particular values compete, Shabbat takes precedence. But this is not always the case.

Whenever a life is at risk, we are obligated (not just permitted) to do whatever we must to save that life, even if it means impinging upon the observance of Shabbat. We call that value *pikuah nefesh*—saving a life takes precedence over Shabbat. Independently, they are significant values in Judaism. And when they compete, one prevails.

But these examples are the easy ones because they are straightforward. Most would agree that Shabbat takes precedence over a building project that we could do on other days of the week, and all agree that saving a life takes precedence over Shabbat. But there are hundreds of other moments of competing values, and reasonable people can, have, and will disagree as to which value takes precedence in any given situation. Some of these disagreements are minor, whereas others have, especially in the last hundred years, led to significant divisions that brought about the establishment of the present-day denominations. The founders of early Reform Judaism chose to prioritize certain values over others, breaking with traditionalists in Europe and here in the United States. The Conservative movement came into existence when rabbinic leaders in the States disagreed with how some of their Reform colleagues chose to prioritize their values. It is true that some of their values were shared, but how to strike the balance between traditional norms and modernity was, and has been, a point of disagreement. But those disagreements are not cause for complete alienation or rebuke. We in America have managed to develop major denominations and movements that coexist and thrive, that transform and adapt, that even interact and, sometimes, argue and disagree. But no single denomination holds authority over all others, and the American Jewish community has come to not only respect, but in many ways celebrate, the diversity and pluralism of American Judaism.

Which brings me to recent events in Israel. On Monday, the High Court of Israel ruled that those who convert to Judaism *in Israel* under the auspices of the Reform and Masorti/Conservative Movements are eligible for citizenship under the Law of Return. More than thirty years ago, in 1988, the Court ruled that non-Orthodox conversions performed *outside* of Israel must be recognized for citizenship under the Law of Return, but only those performed outside of Israel. The Court's decision this week grants that same status to non-Orthodox conversions performed within Israel. This is a significant step towards making it a reality that the State of Israel be a homeland for *all* of the Jewish people. Now, the decision is limited in scope. It enables a very small group of people to become Israeli citizens, but it does not change who can be married or buried as a Jew in Israel—those matters are still under the control of the Israeli Chief Rabbinate. No Orthodox synagogue in Israel is required to offer an *aliyah* to these converts, nor must they recognize their Jewishness in any religious matter. The only thing that has changed is that these individuals who convert in Israel under the supervision of a Reform or Masorti/Conservative rabbi are now able to gain Israeli citizenship through the Law of Return. And it does this without impinging on the rights of the Orthodox to maintain the standards of their religious institutions. Reform and Masorti converts in Israel are now recognized as part of *klal Yisrael*, the community of Israel, and citizens of the State of Israel.

In America, most Jews from across the denominational spectrum come together on matters of Jewish import: Zionism, cultural celebrations, and community-based Jewish organizations, which often transcend the particulars of the complicated question “who is a Jew.” On that question and other matters of identity and practice, we operate within the spheres of our own denominational structure. And that has worked! For example, no Orthodox

synagogue here is required to recognize the Jewishness of someone who converts with a Reform or Conservative rabbi. But our synagogues and communities operate side-by-side, and even thrive. This is because we recognize that even when we prioritize our values differently, our most cherished values are shared. There is common ground, if we are willing to find it. I differ with my Orthodox and Reform colleagues on many religious matters. But that does not mean I completely disengage from being in relationship with them. Quite the contrary! We are brought together on that which we share, and in those interactions, we learn to respect difference and diversity. I sit with my Reform and Orthodox colleagues at AIPAC when we meet to support the Israel-US relationship, because Zionism is a shared value. I sit with them on the Washington Board of Rabbis, because *klal Yisrael*, the Jewish community is a shared value. The list goes on. There is much that we share, despite the differences in how we prioritize other values in Jewish life. The fact that some my Reform colleagues do not follow all of the same strictures of kashrut as me does not compel me to reject them as part of *klal Yisrael*. The fact that my Orthodox colleagues have not found a way to fully include women in Jewish ritual practices does not require that I reject them as part of *klal Yisrael*. We differ on those matters because we have chosen to prioritize some values over others, even when they are shared. The benefits of sticking together and finding common ground far outweigh the costs. Working together on shared values, while respecting the differences of opinion, is beneficial for us all. Unfortunately, this sentiment is not widely shared in Israel.

The ultra-Orthodox in Israel responded to the Court's ruling this week with vitriol and hate, despite the narrow scope of the ruling. One particularly vulgar ad compared those who convert with a Conservative or Reform rabbi to dogs with *tallitot* and *kippot*. Such

dehumanization of people created in the image of God goes beyond the pale of acceptable rhetoric. Unfortunately, seeing things like this did not surprise me in the least. This decision by the Israeli High Court, as well as other changes in Israeli society overall, reveal that there are cracks in the hegemony of the Ultra-Orthodox in Israel. The High Court's decision this week is another reminder to them that things are changing. Israeli society is embracing the idea of *klal Yisrael*, the greater community of Jews, and prioritizing it over the narrowminded understanding of Judaism embraced by the Israeli Chief Rabbinate. It should go without say that I care about Judaism and about Israel. I am a committed observant Jew and an unabashed Zionist. Israel and Judaism cannot be disentangled. If we value either one, and especially if we value both, then we must all be willing to sit down with those with whom we may disagree on other matters. This is the challenge that is now set before the opponents of this decision. If they care about Judaism, if they care about Israel, then they must be willing to sit down with the rest of us who likewise hold these as cherished values, even if we may disagree about how to observe Shabbat, how to keep kosher, and even how to effect conversion. If we can engage with one another on that which we share, then we all are poised to gain. Separately, as denominations, we must be confident in our convictions that our approaches to Judaism are meaningful, compelling, and authentic, and we must do that without delegitimizing the Judaism of the other. With courage and confidence, we can collaborate on shared values, even while respecting that we prioritize others differently. That has been, and I hope will continue to be, one of the hallmarks of Judaism and one of the aspirations of the State of Israel. May it truly be a home for us all. *Am Yisrael chai* and Shabbat shalom.