

*If* the New York Yankees keep their top spot in the American League, *then* they will go to the World Series. The first part of the statement, the hypothesis, leads into the second part of the statement, the conclusion. Also known as: if p then q.

Also known as conditional statements, if-then statements create order. *If this* happens, *then that* will happen. They seem to present an ironclad guarantee you can take to the bank.

If-then statements are not only found in deductive reasoning and geometry proofs but they also constitute the opening words of the Torah reading, Behukkotai, one of our two readings this morning.

*Eem behukkotai teileichu v'et mitzvotai tishmiru...*

*If* you follow My laws and faithfully observe My commandments, *then* I will grant your rains in their season, so that the earth shall yield its produce and trees of the field their fruit... I will grant peace in the land, and you shall lie down untroubled by anyone... (Leviticus 26:3-6).

And later,

*V'eem lo tishme'u li v'lo taasu et kol hamitzvot haeileh...*

*If* you do not obey Me and do not observe all of these commandments... *then* I will wreak misery upon you—consumption and fever, which cause the eyes to pine and the body to languish you shall sow your seed to no purpose, for your

enemies shall eat it. I will set My face against you: you shall be routed by your enemies, and your foes shall dominate you. You shall flee though none pursues (Leviticus 26:14-17).

These if-then statements form the heart of the Torah reading. Blessings come to those who follow God's laws, and curses for those who do not. The *Etz Hayim Commentary* suggests, "We can understand these verses as addressed to a still immature Israelite nation, not mature enough to do good for its own sake, capable of responding only to promises of reward and threats of punishment. Although these passages may be the word of God, they need not be God's last word on the subject" (*Etz Hayim*, 747).

The words of Leviticus reflect one moment in our history as a people. An early moment when we needed crystal clear if-then, with us or against us consequences for our behavior, much like we give to children. If you hurt your brother, then you will be punished. The blessings and curses are one way of understanding God's will. But they are not the last. We know from our experience that blessings come to people who do good and curses come to people who do bad. If only the world operated according to Leviticus, we wouldn't be left wondering how good people suffer, and how bad people catch a break.

The world as we know it is more complicated. If-then statements can be helpful in making the connection between the Yankees wins and their post-season chances, but not in dangling reward and punishment over people. The if-then statements of the Torah take us only so far in our growth as a people and our ability to face real challenge. I believe our Jewish world is facing a

period of seismic change, ranking up there with other transformational moments such as becoming a people through Exodus, receiving Torah at Sinai, and the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem. That last upheaval led to the radical innovations of rabbinic Judaism, the basis of our practice through synagogue worship instead of animal sacrifices, the proliferation of Jewish literature, and ongoing changes that have led to lifecycle moments such as these with Marissa, celebrating a Bat Mitzvah. The if-then, reward and punishment model may have worked for our ancestors in their infancy but needs retooling if the Jewish people are to continue.

I want to focus on two topics where the conventional wisdom of if-then wisdom falls flat. These topics are not meant to be comparisons to one another but rather their own examples of how we need more than if-then statements.

The first is intermarriage. The prevailing approach for the better half of the last century, in which rates of intermarriage in the American Jewish community skyrocketed, was to issue full-throated condemnation. *If* rabbis and other Jewish communal leaders condemn intermarriage, *then* Jewish people will stop falling in love with non-Jews. *If* I tell my child what to do, *then* she or he will do it. *If* my child ignores me, *then* he or she does not care about their Judaism. Much like the statements in Leviticus about reward for good people and punishment for bad, such if-then statements have not stopped intermarriage. 58% of Jews who married since 2005 married people who are not Jewish, 72% if you look outside the Orthodox Jewish community. These include a sizeable portion of the young adults and young families I meet who step foot eagerly into Makom or into Gan Shelanu who see their choice of a non-Jewish partner in no way incongruous with a serious commitment to Jewish life. In many cases

the non-Jewish partner is integral to the Jewish education of their children, when children are in the picture, and so learning can become a point of entry for all when taken seriously. Accompanied by exposure to and practice of rituals such as kashrut and Shabbat observance, these reinforce a sense of belonging to community.

*If* Conservative rabbis were to officiate at interfaith weddings, which is currently forbidden, what *then* is the *then*? What is the second part of the statement? I'm not sure we have an answer yet but I'll tell you where I am. I believe that love between two adults in an interfaith relationship is love. And love is holy. Full stop. I do believe, at the same time, my authority as a rabbi rests in marrying two Jews. I'm not comfortable using explicitly Jewish language of covenant under the huppah when one partner has made a choice not to embrace that covenant. In the name of wanting to be considered inclusive, those who officiate may run the risk of excluding the choices of the non-Jewish partner who has explicitly chosen another covenant or none at all. Nevertheless these couples are searching for ways to be seen and heard and embraced. Rabbis need to be at our creative best finding a path that has integrity for the real people in front of us and keeps fidelity to Jewish law.

In that spirit the chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, Arnie Eisen, began a think-tank conversation around the question of intermarriage in the Conservative movement. "The goal was not to set policy for the movement, but rather to think through and provide guidance on the issues involved." I've been invited to participate in a working group of about five Conservative rabbis and cantors across the country to begin exploring ritual for interfaith households.

The JTS working group, led by Rabbi Jan Uhrbach, will address the following questions:

- Outside the wedding ceremony, what rituals can we offer to an intermarrying couple who want to be part of Jewish community, and want Jewishly meaningful rituals to mark their marriage and life together?
- And what will those rituals look like?

The convening of this group is an acknowledgement that the Conservative movement must take into account new realities and not rest on past, often defensive formulations of if-then. An honest exploration of ritual will open previously closed conversations and help us see real people in our midst who want to build Jewish homes upon Jewish values. My position likely upsets those who are quick to pull out if-then statements on the right and on the left—but I am most comfortable walking the path imperfectly and know I need others to join me to discern these issues.

The second topic, where past if-then statements fall short, is Israel. *If* my child is exposed to Israel advocacy early on, *then* he or she will always connect to that advocacy. *If* our kids only knew, *then* they would advocate my way as well. *If* I keep giving them a hard time, *then* they will listen to me. But increasingly this is not so, if it ever was. Our kids grow up imbued with a love for Israel and a particular narrative of Israel advocacy, and some become disenfranchised. I'm thinking of one college student whose image of Israel was shattered when she couldn't reconcile what she had been taught with what she was presented at a more sophisticated level on campus. The fall from the pedestal was dramatic.

Rabbi Elliot Cosgrove, senior rabbi of the Park Avenue Synagogue in Manhattan, wrote about this challenge in the Jerusalem Post this week, in an article entitled *For the Sake of Zion*. He writes,

In the most basic terms, what is taking place is something called the ‘black and white fallacy’ - a you’re with us or against us approach whereby nuanced arguments are framed as either/or choices between extremes. ‘Either you support the policies of the Israeli government or you are a self-hating Jew.’ Or alternatively, ‘every settler in the West Bank is a human rights-abusing colonialist.’ No longer a place of robust debate, the American Jewish community has become an Orwellian series of mutually exclusive ‘amen corners’ that refuse to dignify the views held by others.

On Israel, we need to be in relationship with and learn from people of different perspectives. It’s easy to say, “I value diverse opinions” as an intellectual exercise. Who says they don’t? It’s much harder when you have to practice that and stay in relationship with someone who has a profoundly different viewpoint. When it’s easier to dismiss you and say I don’t need you in the conversation is precisely when I need you most. When we as American Jews repeat well-rehearsed sound bytes from organizations (on the right or left) and get stuck in groupthink, we don’t grow. When we run away from difficult conversations, we miss broadening our perspectives and making the Israel conversation rich, nuanced, and thoughtful. I am proud of the work of Adath’s Israel Committee, led by Heidi Schneider and Kim Gedan, who model openness to different points of view, and thank Heidi for her leadership at Yachad- our community-wide Hebrew High School—for her fine work with the Israel Leaders Fellowship. I trust that high school students working with

Heidi and the mentors in the program are better prepared to deal with these issues on campus.

If we're unabashedly in the camp of wanting young Jews to have a lifelong connection to Israel, which I am, we need to know the difference between honest critique and wholesale delegitimization of Israel. We must promote dialogue and shun narrow thinking. All sides are guilty. The loudest voices on the left shamefully interrupted the speech of renowned Israeli ethicist Moshe Halbertal at the University of Minnesota in the fall of 2015, impeding free speech and quashing the debate of ideas. The loudest voices on the right issued threats to a major Conservative synagogue in Detroit this month for hosting an Israeli musician because she has voiced opposition to the occupation and supports a two-state solution. Fearful of violence, the synagogue canceled the concert.

Rabbi Cosgrove observes from his experience in the pulpit and through his work in pro-Israel advocacy that nuance is needed, especially as we talk with young adults. He writes,

Yes, the leadership of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement consists of numerous haters of Israel, but as a recent ADL-Reuters study shows, its long tail includes bystanders, undecided and those whose love for Israel prompts them to openly protest the policies of the Israeli government. We do ourselves and more importantly our children a great disservice by lumping all progressives into one basket of anti-Zionist deplorables...

He goes on,

To put it another way if you tell a typical American Jewish college student there is only one way to be pro-Israel, and she or he must take some loyalty oath to that view or be labeled a boycott supporter or self-hating Jew, then what do you think that student will do? My hunch? That student will see a Jewish community willfully denying reality as they perceive it, choose universal values over particular ones and check out of the pro-Israel and Jewish conversation altogether.

Like Rabbi Cosgrove, I recognize the urgency of this conversation here. With the ease some Jews have aligning with Christian evangelicals on Israel, we must do as good a job, and frankly a better job, engaging our own highly educated Jewish children who grew up in our youth groups, camps and schools. Engagement doesn't mean agreement as we know working across faith lines in Christian or Muslim communities on a variety of issues. Engagement means at the very least looking at our Jewish brothers and sisters in the mirror, seeing their humanity, and seeking to understand before writing them off and further narrowing the pro-Israel community.

This summer, in partnership with the Jewish Community Relations Council, Adath will host a dinner for young adults to talk about their relationships with Israel. We are not going into this dinner hoping for consensus; quite the opposite. This is a chance for young adults who have a shared connection to Adath to be in respectful conversation, to be curious, and to learn from one another's differences. For JCRC head Steve Hunegs and myself, we want to be attuned to how Jewish professionals in our community can be aware of the nature of each person's relationship to Israel, how it shapes their Jewish identity, and their commitments of time and resources. We want strong relationships with one another to be at the core and let all else flow from there. The partnership of Greg Arenson, one of Adath's young adult lay leaders, has been vital to the success of this project.

In a world of sound bytes, Tweets, and nuance and fact-free conversations, it is easy to rely on the comfort of if-then statements. But they only take us so far. Where do these two examples, of intermarriage and Israel, point us? I think that commentary I read from *Etz Hayim* provides us direction both for these challenges and for the verses about blessing and curse, “We can understand these verses as addressed to a still immature Israelite nation, not mature enough to do good for its own sake, capable of responding only to promises of reward and threats of punishment. Although these passages may be the word of God, they need not be God’s last word on the subject.”

We have the potential, like our ancestors, to grow from immaturity to maturity, to step from the shackles of slavery in Egypt to the pinnacle of Mount Sinai to receive Torah. Like our ancestors, we have to be resourceful on the journey. We have to seek out nourishment in the wilderness and face the unknown, hear dissent as Moses did, cross the sea, and march. We have to be fluent with the nuances and comfortable with the paths less familiar to us. We have to keep walking and listening, as Moses did along the way, open to hearing another way to get the job done. We hope to hear God still speaking, surely in the Torah of our inherited texts, but also in the ways we recognize in our own hands and voices the choices to create blessing and curse. If I take anything from this Torah reading, it is knowing ever so humbly that blessing and curse rest in the choices we make— on how we choose in every moment to get defensive, reactive, and hunker down OR see the changes in front of us, much like our ancestors did, as moments for resilience, persistence, and creativity.

Let's admit it, it's scary. Aside from a Yankees win, there are few guarantees in life. Life's complicated path is filled with more both ands and fewer if-thens. We need to be capable of reacting not only to Divine reward and punishment, but also building as Divine partners. For the sake of our communities, for the sake of this country, and for the sake of Zion, I pray that we in this congregation be an example for how to walk into that place of curiosity. *If* we can do that, then surely—dare I say with certainty—*then* we will be a blessing. *If* we can do that, *then* we will merit our name, Adath Jeshurun, the gathering of the righteous.

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Behukkotai and Beyond If-Then: Reflections on Intermarriage and Israel  
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