Introduction to the Text Immersion

For this text immersion, I studied four chapters of Talmud Bavli: Berachot 7 and 9, and Nedarim 3 and 9. Berachot 7 examines *Birkat HaMazon*, the blessing after meals. Outside of camp settings, Reform Jews rarely recite this blessing, yet because a ritual involved with meals could easily be done by anyone anywhere, I see great potential for a creative adaptation of this ritual in the future. To prepare me to engage with the ritual, I wanted to spend time studying its core in rabbinic literature. My first essay focuses on a literary analysis of a *sugya* found in Berachot 47b-48a that addresses who counts when blessing.

Berachot 9 explores blessings of enjoyment, with a lengthy excursion into dream interpretation. I wanted to engage with rabbinic theology, and this chapter offers more opportunity than many others for gleaning insights about the meaning, not just the mechanics, of prayer. My second essay collects several teachings throughout the chapter and relates them to lessons for contemporary leaders.

Nedarim 3 and 9 present situations where vows can be annulled. My goal in studying Nedarim stems from my experience in congregation-based community organizing, where commitment and accountability are stressed. Rabbinic views on vows, the closest equivalent to the sort of voluntary commitments one might make today, reveal interesting shared concerns as well as critiques. My third essay investigates those critiques and shared concerns, and proposes an integration of text study and the community organizing cycle.

Talmudic Teachings
for Blessing, Leading, and Committing

Jay Asher LeVine

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Ordination

Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion
School of Rabbinic Studies
Los Angeles, California

Date: 2016
Advisor: Dvora Weisberg

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my text immersion advisor, mentor, and *havruta,* Dr. Dvora Weisberg. The stress of work never exceeded the joy of studying together.

I owe so much of my interest in intertwining text and community organizing to Rabbi Rachel Timoner and Rabbi Stephanie Kolin, who demonstrated in our conversations and in their work what it means to be both *rabbi* and *organizer*.

Table of Contents

Blessing and Belonging: Analysis of B. Berachot 47b-48a

Nothing brings people together like sharing a meal. Dietary peculiarities and regulations surrounding the meal ritual strengthen that bond for particular groups and become powerful ways of defining boundaries and identifying who counts. The rabbinic meal included various rituals, of which *birkat hamazon* (the blessing after a meal) is particularly significant, because, according to the Talmud, its origin derives directly from the Torah. All who eat are obligated to bless, but a special introduction called *zimmun*, or the invitation to bless, requires specific circumstances and specific people.

Bavli Berachot, chapter 7 addresses the questions of circumstance and people regarding the zimmun. One of the prerequisites for the recitation of *zimmun* is that at least three people eat a meal together. If ten or more are present, the *zimmun* formula includes the name of God (*eloheinu*). Biblical verses emphasizing praising God's greatness (*godel*) or exalting God (*gadlu*) serve as proof texts that numbers are required for this ritual.

Having established that a certain number of people must be present in order to do *zimmun*, the question arises of who counts. Mishnah 7:2 presents a short list of some of the categories of people excluded from the number required for *zimmun*.

Mishnah 7:2 Women, slaves, and minors are not included in *zimmun*.	נשים ועבדים וקטנים אין מזמנין עליהם.

The gemara responding to this mishnah focuses on minors and slaves (with one tangential digression), but does not mention women. That omission will be the subject of one of the questions I ask in this reflection, in addition to issues and ideas raised in the content that does appear. The sugya, b. Berachot 47b-48a, begins as follows.

<table>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>R. Yose said: "A minor who is set in a cradle is included in *zimmun*." But did not the mishnah teach that women, slaves, and minors are not included in *zimmun*? His opinion follows that of R. Yehoshua ben Levi, who said: "Even though it is said that a minor set in a cradle is not included in *zimmun*, he can count as an adjunct for ten."</td>
<td dir="rtl">אמר רבי יוסי קטן המוטל בעריסה מזמנין עליו. והא תנן נשים ועבדים וקטנים אין מזמנין עליהם? הוא דאמר כרבי יהושע בן לוי דאמר ריב"ל אף על פי שאמרו קטן המוטל בעריסה אין מזמנין עליו אבל עושין אותו סניף לעשרה.</td>
</tr>
</table>

As I've already mentioned, the most pressing question raised by the opening of this sugya is *why are women not addressed*? Is it because their relationship to *zimmun* is covered elsewhere?[1] In a sugya near the beginning of this chapter, in Ber. 45a-b, women and slaves are both discussed with regard to whether two can do *zimmun* or not. One answer suggests women or slaves can do *zimmun* amongst themselves but not across categories (of women, slaves, and men). Perhaps this has been enough to focus the current sugya on minors. However, slaves appear in the continuation of this sugya, so why not women as well? Perhaps the mixing of genders is more problematic (the prior sugya banned women and slaves from doing *zimmun* because of promiscuity) than mixing free and enslaved men. Male slaves, like minors (who I assume are boys and not girls), may be seen as not quite wholly yet still essentially men, whereas women are completely othered and thus excluded fully.

The sugya begins with R. Yose offering a controversial opinion in which minors, apparently (male) babies, can be included in *zimmun*, which seems to directly contradict the mishnah. The gemara notes this contradiction, but supplies a saying by R. Yehoshua ben Levi that restricts R. Yose's statement to a particular case, thus resolving the contradiction. He claims that if you have nine men, the baby in a cradle can be counted as adjunct in order to reach the ten necessary for invoking God's name. The sugya leaves this statement without challenge. Why? Isn't this still technically contradicting the mishnah's exclusion of minors

---

[1] I have not yet researched other locations in which women and *zimmun* may be discussed.

from *zimmun*? Perhaps because we are talking about ten, rather than the minimum three in order to do *zimmun* in the first place, use of an adjunct is less problematic.

The sugya continues by way of additional statements from R. Yehoshua ben Levi.

2	R. Yehoshua ben Levi said: "Nine and a slave can join." They challenged him by bringing a story. R. Eliezer entered a synagogue and did not find ten, so he freed his slave, thus completing the ten. [Therefore,] free a slave and he counts, but don't free him and he doesn't count. [The story can be resolved with R. Yehoshua ben Levi's opinion by saying] he needed two [in order to reach ten], so he freed one slave [to get to nine], and then a second slave went [into the ten]. But how could he do this? Hasn't R. Yehuda said anyone who frees a slave is transgressing a positive commandment? As it says (Lev. 25), "They shall serve them forever." It is different [when one frees a slave] for the sake of a *mitzvah*. But it is a *mitzvah* that is accomplished through transgression! It is different when the *mitzvah* [accomplished through transgression] is for the sake of multitudes (or others).	ואמר ריב"ל תשעה ועבד מצטרפין. מיתיבי: מעשה ברבי אליעזר שנכנס לבית הכנסת ולא מצא עשרה ושחרר עבדו והשלימו לעשרה. שחרר אין לא שחרר לא. תרי אצטריכו שחרר חד ונפיק בחד. והיכי עביד הכי? והאמר רב יהודה כל המשחרר עבדו עובר בעשה, שנאמר (ויקרא כה) לעולם בהם תעבודו. לדבר מצוה שאני. מצוה הבאה בעבירה היא! מצוה דרבים שאני.

Having already claimed that a minor could serve as an adjunct, allowing nine adult men plus a minor to count as ten for *zimmun*, R. Yehoshua ben Levi claims additionally that nine free men and a slave can create a valid group of ten. Because the subsequent story involves a prayer *minyan*, rather than the ten required for *zimmun*, my assumption is that R. Yehoshua ben Levi is talking here about using a slave to fill out a *minyan*, rather than for *zimmun*. In this case, the rejection of the use of a slave to fill out a *minyan* is because slaves do not have the same obligations to pray as free men.

Alternatively, R. Yehoshua ben Levi could still be talking about *zimmun*, in which case the story is brought as proof from as close to a similar context as possible. If this is the case, then the similarities and differences between the ten required for *zimmun* and for a *minyan* must be examined. Perhaps in the case of *zimmun*, which technically has a minimum

of three, adding a slave to nine is less problematic than in the case of a *minyan*, where ten is the minimum threshold.

The story recounts how R. Eliezer goes into a synagogue, sees they won't have enough to make a *minyan* and so frees a slave in order to reach ten. The gemara claims that this story proves that one cannot use an unfreed slave to create a *minyan*. However, it then suggests that the story may have involved R. Eliezer finding only eight, including himself, so he freed one slave to reach nine and counted an unfreed slave to reach ten, in accordance with R. Yehoshua ben Levi's opinion. Thus, the story does not definitely invalidate the inclusion of a slave to meet a quorum of ten.

The gemara then shifts the focus of its challenge, questioning how R. Eliezer could free a slave in the first place. It assumes the slaves are non-Jewish; until this point I had been assuming the opposite, because how could a non-Jewish slave do *zimmun* or count in a *minyan*? The gemara cites R. Yehuda, who describes freeing a non-Jewish slave as a transgression of a positive commandment, based on the verse from Lev. 26 which says non-Jewish slaves should be an inheritance. The gemara argues back that one can free a non-Jewish slave for the sake of a mitzvah. There is some precedent for freeing a slave to coincide with full conversion of the slave to Judaism.[2] In any event, this portion of the sugya teaches us that a transgression committed for the sake of a mitzvah benefiting the multitudes/others is worth committing.

The sugya continues with yet another statement from R. Yehoshua ben Levi, this time even further afield than before.

---

[2] See a corresponding sugya in b. Gittin 38b, and Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Issurei Bi'a, 13:11-12.

<table>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>R. Yehoshua ben Levi said: "One should always arrive early to the synagogue in order to merit and be counted with the first ten; even if a hundred come after him, he will receive the reward of all of them." Do not think it means the reward of all of them, rather that he is given a reward equivalent to all of them.</td>
<td dir="rtl">ואמר ריב"ל לעולם ישכים אדם לבית הכנסת כדי שיזכה וימנה עם עשרה הראשונים שאפילו מאה באים אחריו קבל עליו שכר כולם. שכר כולם סלקא דעתך אלא אימא נותנין לו שכר כנגד כולם.</td>
</tr>
</table>

Here our sage suggests the importance of counting in a *minyan*, going so far as to say if you are one of the first ten, you receive a greater reward.

While we are on the topic of *who counts*, the sugya includes two more accounts related to reaching a quorum.

<table>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>R. Huna said: "Nine and the ark can join." R. Nachman said: "Is the ark a person? Rather, nine who appear as ten can join." Some said [they appear as ten when crowded, some said when dispersed.

R. Ami said: "Two and Shabbat can join. R. Nachman said: "Is Shabbat a person? Rather, two scholars studying halachah together can join." R. Chisda showed as an example: "Like me and R. Sheshet." R. Sheshet showed as an example: "Like me and R. Chisda."</td>
<td dir="rtl">אמר רב הונא תשעה וארון מצטרפין. א"ל רב נחמן וארון גברא הוא? אלא אמר רב הונא תשעה נראין כעשרה מצטרפין. אמרי לה כי מכנפי ואמרי לה כי מבדרי. אמר רבי אמי שנים ושבת מצטרפין. אמר ליה רב נחמן ושבת גברא הוא? אלא אמר רבי אמי שני תלמידי חכמים המחדדין זה את זה בהלכה מצטרפין. מחוי רב חסדא כגון אנא ורב ששת, מחוי רב ששת כגון אנא ורב חסדא.</td>
</tr>
</table>

R. Huna suggests an ark can count in reaching a *minyan*, presumably meaning the Torah inside. I believe current practice does indicate that nine and a Torah make a *minyan*, but here R. Nachman shuts down the suggestion by pointing out that an ark/Torah does not a person make. The alternate opinion then says that nine who appear like ten can just be considered ten. Either way, only nine actual people are present, so why does Nachman redirect to another approach instead of just saying nine do not equal ten? If a *minyan* is required, and because the ark is being talked about it seems certain we are not talking about *zimmun*, I do not see how simply appearing like ten matters. At least a Torah is physically present and has some holiness associated with it.

The next passage reverts to talking about *zimmun*, where R. Ami suggests Shabbat can count as the third in order to do *zimmun*. This is an odd suggestion, unless the idea of extra souls or of a personified Shabbat metaphysically actualizes at least three presences. Since magnifying God's name is one of the stated reasons for the quorum in *zimmun*, Shabbat strikes me as a more valid compensation here than an appearance of ten does for the *minyan*. But R. Nachman again shuts down the suggestion with his declaration that even Shabbat is not really a person. The alternate opinion then says that two scholars engaged in halachic discussion can do *zimmun*. Earlier in the chapter, the gemara (45b) relates a tradition that it is a mitzvah for two learned people eating together to bless separately. What is the relation of that teaching to the present one? In any event, the final lines regarding R. Chisda and R. Sheshet are charming and a nice conclusion to this diversion from the topic of minors being included in *zimmun*.

The final selection in this sugya reverts to the topic of minors and *zimmun*.

5   R. Yochanan said: "A budding minor is included in *zimmun*." A baraita also says: "A minor who has [at least] two pubic hairs is included in *zimmun*. If he does not have [at least] two pubic hairs, he is not included in *zimmun*. But one does not need to be precise with a minor." The body of this text presents a difficulty! You said [a minor] with [at least] two pubic hairs, yes [for *zimmun*]; not having [at least two pubic hairs], no. Then you returned and taught, one does not need to be precise with a minor! What for? Was it not to indicate a budding minor? The halachah is not in accord with all these teachings.

Rather, [the halachah] is in accord with what R. Nachman said: "A minor who knows to whom he is blessing is included in *zimmun*." Abaye and Rava were sitting before Rabba. Rabba asked them: "To whom do we bless?" They said to him: "The Compassionate One." "And where does the Compassionate One dwell?" Rava showed the ceiling. Abaye went outside, and showed the skies. Rabba said to them: "You two will become sages." It is as people say, "A cucumber is known by its blossoming."

א"ר יוחנן קטן פורח מזמנין עליו. תנ"ה קטן שהביא שתי שערות מזמנין עליו ושלא הביא שתי שערות אין מזמנין עליו ואין מדקדקין בקטן. הא גופא קשיא אמרת הביא שתי שערות אין לא הביא לא? והדר תני אין מדקדקין בקטן. לאתויי מאי. לאו לאתויי קטן פורח? ולית הלכתא ככל הני שמעתתא אלא כי הא דאמר רב נחמן קטן היודע למי מברכין מזמנין עליו. אביי ורבא הוו יתבי קמיה דרבה. אמר להו רבה למי מברכין? אמרי ליה לרחמנא. ורחמנא היכא יתיב? רבא אחוי לשמי טללא אביי נפק לברא אחוי כלפי שמיא. אמר להו רבה תרוייכו רבנן הויתו. היינו דאמרי אינשי בוצין בוצין מקטפיה ידיע.

9

Various opinions are offered as to when a minor might be included in *zimmun*. R. Yochanan suggests a "budding", or maturing, minor can be included. A baraita – perhaps clarifying what "budding" or maturing looks like – suggests that two pubic hairs allow a minor to be included. But then it continues to tell us that one shouldn't be too precise. This whole conversation is shortly dismissed as not being relevant to the halacha, which is in accord rather with R. Nachman, who says one can include a minor in *zimmun* when the minor can comprehend to whom people are blessing, i.e. God. The sugya concludes with a story to illustrate R. Nachman's statement.

The very fact that these sages are attempting to define when a minor can be included in *zimmun* undermines the apparent intent that women, slaves, and minors are not included in *zimmun*. If the basic paradigm for the rabbis involves males as actors in the meal ritual, women represent the categorical *other*. They seem to be completely excluded from participating in a male-inclusive *zimmun*. Male slaves, on the other hand, present a somewhat-more-complicated group because they are both male (and on this count available for inclusion in *zimmun*) yet slaves (in a state which normally prevents the full agency required for *mitzvot*). Thus, at least in some opinions, a male slave could complete a minyan. Male minors represent the most ambiguous grouping, because for all intents and purposes they are the same as the males included in *zimmun*, except they are not yet fully grown.

When do you know a minor has become enough of an adult male to be included? Rabbinic tradition offers a heuristic – at thirteen years of age, a male is considered *de jure* an adult. This legal simplification, though, overlooks the reality that children mature physically and intellectually at different rates. What happens if a minor achieves whatever qualities define adulthood prior to achieving the legal age of adulthood? In some cases it may not

matter for legal reasons. In the case of *zimmun*, however, which is not mandatory (one theoretically might never eat a meal in the company of at least two others), and furthermore is rooted in relation to God (acknowledging God's greatness), there would be no reason to exclude a male minor of less than thirteen years of age who could pass as enough of an adult in other ways than age. However, what it means to be an adult here remains ambiguous.

The opinion found in the baraita suggests that physical maturation should guide judgment. R. Yochanan's plant metaphor may also indicate physical maturation, although the similar use of metaphor in the folk saying at the end of the story indicates intellectual rather than physical maturation. Only R. Nachman affirms that intellectual capacity is the necessary "adult" quality that a minor needs in order to particupate in the meal ritual. Given that *zimmun* relies heavily on the *kavana* of acknowledging God's greatness, the intellectual ability to comprehend an idea of God and perhaps an abstract notion of greatness (as evidenced in the story when the two young students point upwards when asked where God resides) are the only qualifications necessary for the minors to transcend their age-restricted legal status.

I'm intrigued by the relationship between R. Nachman's statement and the concluding story. Although the story demonstrates minors who are able to articulate to whom they are blessing, it also accentuates their status as minors when Rabba tells Abaye and Rava that they *will become* sages. They are not yet there, although sufficiently on the way to participate in *zimmun*. The final line, a folk saying, provides an inclusion for this last section of the sugya. Just as R. Yochanan suggested a budding minor could be included, the folk saying avers that

a minor's capacity can be seen while still a minor, just as a cucumber blossom indicates whether it will be male or female.[3]

Both the metaphorical allusion to the first discussion, which was dismissed, as well as Rabba's indication that the two minors continued to be not-quite-adults, serves to place the larger discussion of when a minor can be included in *zimmun* in a less certain frame than one might expect from simply reading R. Nachman's statement and the story. Perhaps this betrays some discomfort in the arbitrary distinction between adult and minor.

---

[3] Adin Steinsaltz*, Talmud Bavli, Masechet Berakhot*, n. 308.

How does one discover insights about leadership? Experience, of course, remains primary. When you have experienced good and bad leadership from others, and made your own way by trial and error, you cannot help but form opinions and develop practices around leadership. Studies from the Harvard Business School and advice from countless other academics and consultants surely contribute their part as well.

I want to share with you an additional resource, a selection of teachings from the ninth chapter of Berakhot, the first tractate in the Babylonian Talmud. Each of these teachings offers insight into aspects of leadership that I believe are critically important for contemporary America, no less than for Babylon of the early Common Era.

The texts we will explore teach about (1) power and consent, (2) leading and following, and (3) careful consideration in community.

Power and Consent

Text: B. Berakhot 55a

אמר רבי יוחנן שלשה דברים מכריז עליהם הקב"ה בעצמו ואלו הן רעב ושובע ופרנס טוב. רעב דכתיב (מלכים ב ח) כי קרא ה' לרעב וגו'. שובע דכתיב (יחזקאל לו) וקראתי אל הדגן והרביתי אותו. פרנס טוב דכתיב (שמות לא) ויאמר ה' אל משה לאמר ראה קראתי בשם בצלאל וגו'.

אמר רבי יצחק אין מעמידין פרנס על הצבור אלא אם כן נמלכים בצבור שנא' (שמות לה) ראו קרא ה' בשם בצלאל. אמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא למשה משה הגון עליך בצלאל אמר לו רבונו של עולם אם לפניך הגון לפני לא כל שכן אמר לו אף על פי כן לך אמור להם. הלך ואמר להם לישראל הגון עליכם בצלאל אמרו לו אם לפני הקדוש ברוך הוא ולפניך הוא הגון לפנינו לא כל שכן.

R. Yochanan said: Three things God declares personally. These are famine, plenty, and a good leader[4]. Famine – as it is written, "For God has called a famine" (2 Kings 8:1). Plenty – as it is written, "And I will call for the grain and I will increase it" (Ezekiel 36:29). A good leader – as it is written, "And God said to Moses, 'See, I have called by name Bezalel'" (Exodus 31:1-2).

---

[4] Hebrew *parnas*. For more information, see http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/11915-parnas.

> R. Yitchak said: One only appoints a leader if he consults with the public, as it is said, "See, God called by name Bezalel" (Exodus 35:30). God said to Moses, "Moses, is Bezalel suitable to you?" Moses replied, "Master of the Universe, if he is suitable before you, then all the more so he is suitable before me." God said to him, "Nevertheless, go and speak to the [Israelites]." Moses went and said to the Israelites, "Is Bezalel suitable to you?" They replied, "If he is suitable before God and before you, all the more so he is suitable before us!"

The first paragraph of this text specifies three things that are apparently important enough that God doesn't delegate their declaration but handles it God's self: Famine, plenty, and a good leader. Why these three things? The easy answer would be to say that there are convenient proof texts which can be (and are) cited. Let me suggest another answer. Ancient religions and their various gods (as well as the God of the Bible) are intimately associated with agriculture. For example, the Shema, recited day and night, includes verses (Deut. 11:13-21) that link Israel's agricultural success or ruin to the observance of God's mitzvot. Numerous times throughout the Hebrew Bible God threatens or is linked to famine. Famine and its antidote – plenty – impact everyone across the board. I would argue that leadership, too, has a widespread impact. Leadership has consequences as essential and inevitable as famine and surplus, and therefore God personally calls up good leaders. In light of this great potential for impact, how should leaders view their power?

The first paragraph emphasizes divine selection of leaders. The second paragraph clarifies – the community should ratify the choice. The radical implication seems to be that even when God makes a decision about who should lead, that decision should not be enacted without consent. The Steinsaltz commentary remarks that this teaching reflects a truth about organizations and communities – just because someone has formal power from a designated role does not make him or her effective; only with the consent of those working for the leader can anything happen.

However, in the scenario presented, the approval seems to be all too easy, as first Moses and then the people just agree with the opinion of the one higher up the chain. What is the point of asking for consent if it is always given? Perhaps this is really about trust and respect, as much as it is about consensus.

Review of the leadership lessons learned from this text:
- Leadership has great power to affect many people. Both **divine appointment** and **communal consent** determine good leaders. What does divine appointment mean to you? Why does it need to be balanced with communal consent?
- How does one get consent to exercise power? (Hint: Ask.)
- But also, be someone about whom people can say – I **trust** you and your decisions.

When to Lead, When to Follow

Texts: B. Berakhot 63a, 64a

דרש בר קפרא זלת קבוץ קנה מינה באתר דלית גבר תמן הוי גבר אמר אביי ש"מ באתר דאית גבר תמן לא תהוי גבר. פשיטא! לא נצרכה אלא בששניהם שוין.

אמר ר' אבין הלוי כל הדוחק את השעה שעה דוחקתו וכל הנדחה מפני השעה שעה נדחה מפניו. מדרבה ורב יוסף דרב יוסף סיני ורבה עוקר הרים. אצטריכא להו שעתא שלחו להתם סיני ועוקר הרים איזה מהם קודם? שלחו להו סיני קודם שהכל צריכין למרי חטיא אף על פי כן לא קבל עליו ר' יוסף דאמרי ליה כלדאי מלכת תרתין שנין. מלך רבה עשרין ותרתין שנין מלך רב יוסף תרתין שנין ופלגא. כל הנך שני דמלך רבה אפילו אומנא לביתיה לא קרא

Bar Kappara taught: [If the price] declines, jump and purchase from it; and where there is no man, there be a man. Abaye said: Infer from this that in a place where there is a man, there do not be a man. This is obvious! We need this statement only in a case where the two are equal.

R. Avin Halevy said: Whoever forces the moment, the moment forces him. Whoever yields to the moment, the moment yields to him. [This may be derived] from Rabba and R. Yosef, as R. Yosef was Sinai [i.e. erudite], and Rabba was one who uproots mountains [i.e. very sharp]. The moment arrived when they were needed [to be the new rosh yeshiva]. They sent there [the question]: Which takes precedence, Sinai or the one who uproots mountains? They sent to them [in response]: Sinai takes precedence, because everyone needs the owner of wheat. Nevertheless, R. Yosef did not accept [the appointment], because the Chaldeans told him: You will preside for two years. Rabba presided for twenty-two years. R. Yosef presided for two and a half years. All the years that Rabba presided, [R. Yosef] did not even call a bloodletter to his home.

These two teachings present a complex picture of how potential leaders should interact with one another. Bar Kappara's teaching appears to include a direct Aramaic translation of Hillel's statement in M. Avot 2:6, "In a place where there is no man, be a man." The gist of the teaching is that one should step up when there is a lack of leadership. Do not avoid your responsibility; rather be the person the hour requires.

Abaye deepens the teaching by drawing the inference that the teaching also means, "In a place where there already is a man, don't be a man." In other words, don't encroach on someone else's leadership. Abaye's inference is not necessary. Bar Kappara's teaching simply argues for filling a leadership vacuum. It doesn't *require* that just one person should lead, but Abaye reads it that way. The anonymous voice then asserts that Abaye's inference only comes into play when two leaders are equal; presumably, if one would be a better leader, one should be a man even when there is already a (lesser) man.

R. Avin Halevy's teaching focuses on timing. Contrary to the oft-quoted Latin phrase *carpe diem*, R. Avin suggests that seizing the day actually sets you up for failure, while letting time play itself out opens up the opportunities you sought in the first place. What follows is a story that supposedly illustrates this point. In contrast to the previous teaching which concerned two equals, R. Yosef is designated as the one who takes precedence over Rabba for the rosh yeshiva position. However, he does not seize the day, but rather allows Rabba to serve. When R. Yosef eventually becomes rosh yeshiva after Rabba, the moral of the story seems complete.

However, there is an interesting detail that complicates the relationship between R. Avin's teaching and the story that follows. R. Yosef is explicitly said to have refused to serve because of a fortune told by Chaldeans that he would only serve two years. The easiest

inference to make would be that he did not want to start a job in his prime with a foreordained tenure of only two years – he would be courting disaster and possibly early death. R. Yosef may not even want the job at the time it was offered, and this lack of clarity around his motivation makes the story an ill fit for the teaching. What, then, does the Talmudic editor want to teach by placing the story in relation to R. Avin's *memra*?

I suggest that both selections of text, when taken as a whole, emphasize the importance of respect by potential leaders for active leaders, bordering on deference. Bar Kappara's initial statement is nothing less than a bold encouragement of agency, a call to responsibility even when no one else heeds it. Every teaching from this point on undermines that bold call. Abaye draws an unnecessary inference to encourage quiescence when others are taking responsibility. The *stam* limits Abaye's statement to a case of two equals, but in the process only furthers his point – it is obvious that unless one can credibly claim superiority to the established leadership, one should not get involved. This attitude supplants individual responsibility with conditions ripe for heavy-handed enforcement of the status quo.

In the next text, R. Avin's teaching seems to grow out of the attitude of accepting the status quo by warning not to force the moment. The story that follows, while not a perfect fit in illustrating R. Avin's teaching, continues the pattern of undermining Bar Kappara's teaching by countering the *stam*'s limitation of Abaye's version of Bar Kappara's teaching. Here is a situation where presumably one could finally act on Bar Kappara's call to be a man where there is no man. There is a power vacuum at the yeshiva, and the story asserts R. Yosef's superiority, and yet, even here where the two are not equal, R. Yosef defers to Rabba's leadership. Granted, this story does not deal with the status quo so much, but its

valorization of deference (or deferral, in terms of R. Avin's teaching) cannot help but contribute to attitudes and practices that uphold the status quo.

It seems to me that the tensions presented in these texts reflect rabbinic ambivalence or even anxiety around change, combined with awareness of the rabbis' own role in bringing about change. To that end, they seek to teach students of their texts that assuming the responsibilities of leadership is very important (such as the rabbis themselves in the post-Temple period), especially where others are failing to do so, but that at the same time, leadership will be most effective when potential competitors internalize ways of respecting current leaders. Knowing when to follow and when to wait one's turn are in fact essential leadership qualities.

The rhetoric of these texts consistently presents scenarios with sole leaders. Contemporary wisdom has grown suspicious of the efficacy of lone leadership, emphasizing instead collaboration, facilitation, and other ways of including more people in the leadership process. From this perspective, one might accuse Abaye of supporting an abdication of responsibility to lead along with the nominal leader. However, Bar Kappara and Abaye remind us that we need clarity in leadership structure. Without an obvious leader, the organization or group can fall into chaos. Abaye offers another helpful tip – when there already is an obvious leader, you can do your part precisely by being a follower. Leadership and followership are equally important if the work is to get done.

The story of Rabba and R. Yosef demonstrates as well the importance of maintaining clear role boundaries, exemplified when R. Yosef refuses even to call a bloodletter to his home (a privileged option, when most people went to the bloodletter). R. Yosef takes great

care to avoid any appearance of usurping the benefits associated with the formal leadership

Rabba held.

Review of the leadership lessons learned from these texts:
- Take **responsibility** when no one else will.
- But learn how to be a **follower** as well, when there is capable leadership.
- Whether one is leading or following (or co-leading), **clarity in role and structure** facilitates effectiveness.

Careful Consideration in Community

Text: B. Berakhot 63b

> "הסכת" עשו כתות כתות ועסקו בתורה, לפי שאין התורה נקנית אלא בחבורה. כדר' יוסי ברבי חנינא דאמר ר' יוסי ברבי חנינא מאי דכתיב (ירמיהו נ) "חרב אל הבדים ונואלו" חרב על שונאיהם של תלמידי חכמים שיושבים בד בבד ועוסקים בתורה. ולא עוד אלא שמטפשים כתיב הכא "ונואלו" וכתיב התם (במדבר יב) "אשר נואלנו" ולא עוד אלא שחוטאים שנאמר "ואשר חטאנו".

> "Be silent" (*hasket*): Form many groups (*asu kitot kitot*) and study Torah, for Torah is only acquired in a group. This is in accordance with R. Yosei, for R. Yosei said in the name of R. Chanina: What is the meaning of that which is written, "A sword is upon the boasters (*habaddim*) and they shall become fools (*noalu*)" (Jeremiah 50:36)? A sword upon the enemies of Torah scholars who sit alone (*bad bevad*) and study Torah. And furthermore they become foolish, as it is written here, "become fools", and it is written there, "that we have done foolishly" (Numbers 12:11) and furthermore they sin, as it is said, "and that we have sinned".

> This text consists of a midrashic interpretation of a word from Deuteronomy 27:9.

The verse reads, "Moses and the priests and Levites spoke to all of Israel, 'Keep silent (*hasket*) and hear, Israel, today you have become a people to Adonai your God.'" The

Talmudic interpretation appears to turn away from the context of the verse, using wordplay

to refocus not on the national project but on the spiritual project of Torah study. "Be silent"

turns into "form many groups", or better yet, "create study groups". The biblical verse's

implication that God's *mitzvot* can be heard only during or after silence evolves into rabbinic

appreciation that God's voice may be refracted through numerous clamoring and even

contradictory voices. Education is emphasized over ethnic belonging.

R. Yosei's teaching, based on a similar midrashic wordplay interpreting Jeremiah 50:36, argues that only those who engage with others in their study escape foolishness. In fact, isolated study produces not only foolishness but sin. Torah must be pursued in collaboration with others, or the consequences can be severe.

This text is clearly more concerned with education than leadership, but given the centrality of Torah study to rabbinic society and its prominence in granting credibility and legitimacy to leaders, I think it fair to interrogate this text for lessons for contemporary leaders. The first interpretation – that Torah can only be acquired in a group – makes the case for a collaborative environment. Some unspecified mix of competition, cross-fertilization, and co-creation of new ideas and new applications of old ideas emerges best in situations where people are constantly in dialogue with one another. Perhaps echoing through this interpretation is the iconic image of 600,000 Israelite men[5] receiving the Ten Commandments at Mt. Sinai, revelation received together by an uncommonly large number of people. Silent followers make for efficiency, but this text argues that open communication is more effective. One challenge for leaders in a collaborative environment lies in nurturing a safe culture for sharing while insisting on adhering to a unifying mission. That is, *Torah* is acquired in a group, not just anything. It can be difficult to discern which views and processes contribute to furthering the mission and which are distracting or toxic.

Where the opening teaching argues for mission-oriented collaboration (Torah acquired only in a group), R. Yosei's teaching explores the dangers of solo endeavors. He depicts lone learners of Torah as falling into foolishness and sinning. Foolishness could be understood as distraction, or simply unproductive effort, while sinning clearly represents a negative contribution to the project. Why is R. Yosei so harsh on those who spend time

---

[5] And the unnumbered women and children also present.

studying Torah alone? In terms of the period he lived in, the rabbinic project navigated the tension between cultivating charismatic teachers and building a cohesive movement. The legacy of that tension is preserved in the Talmud's form, which often goes to great trouble to name transmitters of traditions (honoring the individuals who advanced rabbinic Judaism) while as a whole seeking to reduce contradictions and often using an anonymous voice. Individuals are valued to the extent they fit within the larger rabbinic community, and even then they are expected to engage in study with teachers, peers, and students. Rogue rabbis threaten that paradigm and thus warrant condemnation. R. Yosei may also be acknowledging that Torah study is complex, and no one can truly see it with only one pair of eyes. Even when individuals are not threatening the larger system, R. Yosei's teaching suggests that wisdom is limited when one seeks it alone. In terms of leadership, lone efforts will rarely have the wisdom or influence to provide effective guidance. As Ron Heifetz has remarked, it is better to be a grain of sand agitating others to contribute to the creation of a pearl within the organizational oyster.

As a coda to this discussion of collaborative leadership, I want to note that not everything must be undertaken in partnership. The text itself reflects this when it moves from the anonymous voice of the first teaching (intimating a collaborative effort) to the individual voice of R. Yosei. The point is not to do everything with someone else all the time, but rather that even when one works alone, one needs a communal context. Torah, as well as leadership, are not abstract, nor are they universal. What Torah and leadership mean depends to a great extent on what community they are meant to serve, and therefore responsible Torah study and leadership *must* be acquired through awareness of the larger group in which one is embedded.

Review of the leadership lessons learned from this text:

- Nurture safe cultures where people can collaborate, but maintain focus on the shared mission.
- Do not tolerate "rogue" actors toxic to the system.
- More can be seen with more than one pair of eyes.
- Leadership application depends greatly on communal/cultural context.

On Texts and Leadership

I have attempted to shine new light both on Jewish texts and on various leadership concepts through these reflections. The texts themselves are united primarily through the virtue of appearing in the final chapter of B. Berakhot, and beyond that connection are not intrinsically related. Taken together, though, I think they offer a compelling and well-rounded curriculum for understanding leadership through a Jewish lens and for glimpsing some of the priorities and methods of early rabbinic Judaism.

All three texts depict, in different ways, the core fact of leadership: it is between and among people. Each text captures a tension inherent in leadership and offers a view, not necessarily to its resolution but to its utilization. The first text suggests that power should be accompanied by transparency, and consent only with trust. The second text explores competition, and offers a picture of courage balanced with respectful deference. The third text implores us to recognize the centrality of community, contextualizing the importance of individuals and their efforts within a relational, dialogic system.

A final question: Of what value is text study for leadership? First, text offers an opportunity to study similar themes in a different context, allowing for recognition without triggering some of the familiar defenses that come when evaluating one's own context directly. Second, the process of Jewish text study is itself dialogic, so that even when one person studies it multiple voices emerge. At risk of drawing R. Yosei's ire, I wonder if it is

truly possible to study Torah alone, even when no other person is nearby Not only are there often explicitly diverse voices with the text, there are generations of interpretation that provide even greater diversity. Third, engagement with text, whether it is Talmud or poetry, allows for and cultivates a reflective mind, a crucial quality in leaders. And fourth, Jewish texts claim some degree of sacred centrality, a strong reminder that Torah and for me leadership *matter* and should be approached with humility and urgency. R. Yochanan says that God declares a good leader personally. May we all respond to that voice as leaders, followers, and students of Torah.

Reading and Relating: Jewish Text in Dialogue with Community Organizing

Reading and reasoning are, for them, instruments for
bringing justice and compassion to the worlds they inhabit.[6]

My rabbinic internship, in my final two years in seminary, has been devoted

significantly to community organizing. Although many Jews, especially ones immersed in a

Reform context, will immediately intuit a connection between Jewish tradition and social

justice work, that intuition is rarely examined more closely. When texts are taught, my

experience has been that the text is offered as proof or inspiration for the work currently

being done or about to be undertaken. This use of text can be helpful in bolstering American

social justice work with a sense of Jewish undergirding and in tapping into Jewish pride and

passion. What it does not accomplish is an open dialogue between models of justice work

and Jewish texts, both of which have a diversity of values and applications of those values.

The ongoing question in my mind as I continue to immerse in one social justice

model – congregation-based community organizing – while wearing the hat of a rabbinical

intern is: what is Jewish about community organizing? Or more to the point: given that the

study of Jewish text and community organizing are largely independent ways of

conceptualizing and enacting values, how might I interrelate them for a rich, meaningful

synthesis of Jewish community organizing?

This paper serves as one attempt to interrelate community organizing and Jewish text.

One of the core values of community organizing is accountability. Similarly, Judaism

traditionally has stressed obligation. Both community organizing and Judaism are thus

somewhat countercultural in an American environment that values rights, freedom, and

voluntarism. What might Talmudic texts on *vows*, the closest Jewish equivalent to voluntary

---

[6] Peter Ochs and Nancy Levene, eds. *Textual Reasonings: Jewish Philosophy and Text Study at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: 2002), 6.

commitments for which one then becomes accountable, contribute to understanding voluntary commitments in a community organizing context? And how does an understanding of accountability and its importance in community organizing shed new light on ancient texts? I will first explore several texts from B. Nedarim that express rabbinic discomfort with vows. Next, I will offer some stories and ideas that highlight the importance of voluntary commitments in the organizing process. Then, I will suggest ways in which these texts and organizing might be synthesized. Finally, I will reflect on how the exercise of studying Jewish text and community organizing practices together can lead to a deeply Jewish performance of community organizing.

Let me clarify that I am not an expert scholar in Talmud, nor am I extensively experienced in community organizing theory and practice. What I share in this paper is largely my own perspective on both text and organizing, based significantly on learning with organizer Lee Winkelman and Rabbis Dr. Dvora Weisberg, Stephanie Kolin, Ken Chasen, Rachel Timoner, and Lisa Berney. To the extent that other Jewish professionals engaging in community organizing are also familiar with but not necessarily academic experts in these fields, I hope to model a practice of taking both text and organizing seriously and personally.

Discouraging Voluntary Commitments: B. Nedarim

Jewish texts predominantly emphasize obligation over rights. Aryeh Cohen describes the rabbinic view of a "community of obligation [where]…the privilege of citizenship is the assumption of the obligations of the city toward others who are not always in view."[7] In other words, the basis of being part of a community is not rights that should be protected, but obligations towards others that must be fulfilled. The primary network of obligations originates in *mitzvot*, divine commandments, and is spelled out by *halakhah*, Jewish law. To

---

[7] Aryeh Cohen, *Justice in the City: An Argument from the Sources of Rabbinic Judaism* (Brighton, MA: 2012), 9.

be Jewish, in the traditional sense, is to consider oneself bound to *mitzvot*. In the modern

world, this notion rapidly ceased to appeal and apply in liberal Jewish circles as an emphasis

on individual rights took precedence, nowhere more so than in America.

There is one area of commitment in addition to *mitzvot*, a voluntary commitment

called a *neder*, or vow. Although one did not need to make a vow, if one did so it was

considered binding. The first text we will look at lists four conditions under which vows are

not considered binding, which will hint towards some of the problems the rabbis have with

vows.

<div dir="rtl">

משנה: ארבעה נדרים התירו חכמים נדרי זרוזין ונדרי הבאי ונדרי שגגות ונדרי אונסין

</div>

> Mishnah: Four vows the sages annulled [immediately]: Vows of
> exhortation, vows of exaggeration, unintentional vows, and vows in
> circumstances beyond one's control. (*B. Nedarim 20b*)

A good portion of tractate *Nedarim* is dedicated to talking not about making vows but

how to get out of them once they have been made. The chapter which this mishnah opens

covers the four situations mentioned. Typically one who made a vow and no longer wished to

be bound by it would seek a rabbi and ask for annulment. Here, Falk notes that "once the four

cases had been listed there was no need to ask for the decision of a sage. The cases therefore

became illustration of void rather than voidable vows."[8] In other words, under these four

circumstances a vow is automatically void the moment it has been made or retroactively void

the moment the situation becomes apparent.

Underlying the Mishnah's claim regarding vows of exhortation and exaggeration is

an awareness that people may use serious language, such as vows, to intensify a point in an

argument or to convey sincerity, while not really intending to carry out the technical

requirements of said language. In contemporary terms, one might say, "I promise you'll love

---

[8] Ze'ev W. Falk, "Binding and Loosing," *Journal of Jewish Studies 25* (1974), 95.

this new car!" not as a technical guarantee for which one is then liable but idiomatically as an

enthusiastic endorsement of the car. The rabbis disliked this loose use of language –

especially language committing one implicitly or explicitly to God - because it depreciates

the seriousness of vows. Vows in which one errs, as well as vows which then become

impossible to fulfill due to extenuating circumstances are automatically annulled for practical

reasons. The possibility of making mistakes and encountering barriers to fulfillment

contributes to the rabbis' wary relationship with vows.

     The rabbinic antipathy towards vows and those who make them shows up clearly in

the following selections from B. Nedarim 22a.

> בר ברתיה דר' ינאי סבא אתא לקמיה דר' ינאי סבא אמר ליה אילו הוה ידעת דפתחין
> פינקסך וממשמשין בעובדך מי נדרת אמר ליה לא ושרייה אמר ר' אבא מאי קראה
> (משלי כ) ואחר נדרים לבקר ואע"ג דפתח ר' ינאי ליה אנן לא פתחינן ליה בהא

The son of the daughter of R. Yannai the Elder came before R. Yannai the Elder [to dissolve his vow.] He said to him: Had you known that **they open your record book and examine your actions**, would you have vowed? He said to him: No, and he dissolved it for him. R. Abba said: What is the verse [from which this is derived]? "And after vows to make inquiry" (Prov. 20:25). And although R. Yannai found an opening [to get out of the vow] with him, we do not find an opening in this way.[9]

> ולא פתחינן בהדא אחרנייתא דאמר רבה בר בר חנה אמר ר' יוחנן מאי פתח ליה רבן
> גמליאל להההוא סבא (משלי יב) יש בוטה כמדקרות חרב ולשון חכמים מרפא כל הבוטה
> ראוי לדוקרו בחרב אלא לשון חכמים מרפא

And we do not find an opening in this other way, as Rabba bar bar Chana said that R. Yochanan said: How did R. Gamliel find an opening for a certain elderly man? "There is one who speaks like the piercing of the sword, but the tongue of the wise is health" (Prov. 12:18). **Anyone who expresses [a vow], it is appropriate to pierce him with a sword**, but the tongue of the wise heals [i.e. a rabbi can release him from the vow].

---

[9] All translations are from the English Koren Steinsaltz edition of the Talmud Bavli, Masechet Nedarim, with occasional alterations.

ולא פתחינן בהדא אחרנייתא דתניא ר' נתן אומר הנודר כאילו בנה במה והמקיימו
כאילו מקריב עליו קרבן

And we do not find an opening in this other way, as taught in a baraita:
R. Natan says: **One who vows, it is as if he built an altar, and if he
fulfills the vow it is as if he offered a sacrifice on it**.

ולא פתחינן בהא נמי דשמואל דאמר שמואל אף על פי שמקיימו נקרא רשע אמר רבי
אבהו מאי קרא (דברים כג) וכי תחדל לנדור לא יהיה בך חטא ויליף חדלה חדלה כתיב
הכא כי תחדל לנדור וכתיב התם (איוב ג) שם רשעים חדלו רוגז

And we also do not find an opening in the way Shmuel did, as Shmuel
said: **Even though he fulfills it, he is called wicked**. R. Abbahu said:
What is the verse? "But if you cease from vowing there will be no sin
in you" (Deut. 23:23). And he derives "cease" here from "cease"
written there. Here it is written, "If you cease from vowing" (Deut.
23:23) and there it is written, "There the wicked cease from troubling"
(Job 3:17).

The Bavli presents three different images that depict negatively people who make

vows. Although these images are brought up for the purpose of avoiding them, the fact that

they are presented at all illustrate a depth of antagonism that at least some rabbis had towards

vows.

The first image is that of a heavenly accounting, where making vows hurts the bottom

line. The text begins with a story where one rabbi actually did use this image of divine

displeasure to find an opening to annul someone's vow. However, the Gemara quickly

asserts that he was the exception and this tactic is unsuitable. It then proceeds to list other

tactics unsuitable.

The second image, drawn from Proverbs, cleverly misreads a verse to suggest that if

you take a vow you are fit to be stabbed. This assertion is more dramatic and shocking than

the previous one – a passive accounting turns into possible violence.

Finally, the third image suggests comparison of someone making vows to someone

building their own altar, either idolatrous or simply not the sole proper place of sacrifice, the

Temple. While the other two images spell trouble for the one making a vow, this image more directly casts aspersion on the institution of vow-making itself. Vows are placed outside the proper system. Shmuel takes it a step further and declares that those who fulfill their vows are called wicked. Giving one's word and then following through on it, using the language of vows, is not commendable, nor is it even not preferable; fulfilling a vow is sinful. The text is clearly discouraging of vows, even as it restricts rabbis from using such tactics to create an opening for dissolving a vow.

At the end of the day, vows represent individual commitments outside of the purview of rabbinic authority, except to the extent that rabbis can annul them, and they appear quite eager to do so given their dislike of vows. The use of the phrase "find an opening" (in Hebrew, *poteach*) with regard to annulling a vow "emphasizes the ingenuity and initiative of the sage in discovering an element for the justification of the release."[10]

There are several stories in a row that illustrate the rabbis' great desire to annul a vow if at all possible. In each story, the rabbis attempt to find a condition that the person making the vow had not thought of, without any success, until finally a creative solution is reached and the vow is dissolved. One example should suffice to make the point that the creative solution comes across as far-fetched.

> ר"ש ברבי הוה ליה נדרא למישרא אתא לקמייהו דרבנן אמרי ליה נדרת אדעתא דהכי
> אמר אין אדעתא דהכי אין כמה זימנין והוו מצטערי רבנן משימשא לטולא ומטולא
> לשימשא אמר ליה בטנית בריה דאבא שאול בן בטנית מי נדרת אדעתא דמצערי רבנן
> מטולא לשימשא ומשימשא לטולא אמר לא ושריוה

> R. Shimon in the name of Rabbi had a vow to dissolve. He came before the Sages. They said to him: Did you vow with the knowledge of this? He said: Yes. With the knowledge of this? Yes. [This happened] several times, and the Sages were troubled. They moved from a sunny location to a shady location, and from the shady location to the sunny location. Botnit son of Abba Shaul ben Botnit said to him:

---

[10] Falk, 97

> Would you have vowed with the knowledge that the Sages would be troubled [to the point of going] from shade to sun and from sun to shade? He said: No, and they dissolved it.

R. Shimon wants to get out of a vow. He appears before other rabbis in order to do so. They question him, looking for a loophole, for some piece of information he had not considered when making the vow. When they cannot find anything that would render the vow void, they become distressed. The intent of their move from sun to shade and back again is ambiguous, but appears to demonstrate either length of time spent working on the problem or restlessness and pacing that comes from distress, or both options.

Moshe Benovitz notes that there seem to be two conceptions of what it means for a rabbi to dissolve a vow. One conception "views the dissolution of vows as a *power* vested in the Rabbis, [while the other] views dissolution as analogous to any other rabbinic ruling: the sage finds *grounds* which render the vow not binding *ab initio*."[11] One can read this text through either lens, with the Sages either doing due diligence to avoid dissolving vows recklessly as a show of their power, or working strenuously to find a loophole that can serve as grounds for dissolution. For the purposes of exploring voluntary commitments, I prefer the view that rabbis may not dissolve vows willy-nilly, but must find grounds to do so. This reading shifts the responsibility more towards the one making a vow, because no greater power can ultimately release one from one's commitment. In effect, the rabbis are then partners in the search for grounds for release. In this text, the rabbis' distress makes more sense as well if their restraint in not dissolving the vow reflects actual inability rather than meticulous caution. One imagines if they could dissolve the vow without cause, they surely would have done so in their distress.

---

[11] Moshe Benovitz, *Kol Nidre: Studies in the Development of Rabbinic Votive Institutions* (Atlanta: 1998), 152-153.

At some point, Botnit enters the scene and notices that the Sages' own distress might be something R. Shimon had not considered. When that turns out in fact to be the case, the Sages then dissolve his vow. Powerlessness provides the key, as the inability to dissolve the vow causes the very distress that gives the Sages the ability to dissolve the vow. This scenario is absurd, and its absurdity reflects rhetorically the urgent desire of the Talmudic text to communicate the danger and undesirability of vows.

Encouraging Voluntary Commitments: Community Organizing

The understanding of voluntary commitments in an organizing context that I present here is a synthesis of my learning from trainings, personal experience, and reading. Others will have their own take on organizing and commitment, and in the spirit of Jewish text study, I hope some may offer a *davar acher* in response to my thinking.

For my very first official meeting with the lay leader team as an organizing intern for Leo Baeck Temple, I was asked by my mentor to lead a training on *turnout*. Immediately I wondered, what is turnout? Thankfully, my mentors helped me prepare, and the training I led was successful.

Turnout is the term organizers use for the process of (1) committing to getting a certain amount of people to an event; and (2) relationally asking others to commit to attending. The concept is simple, but crucial. If the heart of organizing is the effort to relate and uncover shared self-interest, turnout is the backbone of organizing. Relating means showing up *to* each other, while turnout means showing up *for* each other. And if no one shows up, or if people say they will show up and then don't, the power that community organizing promises evaporates. David Nyberg states it starkly: "Organization and power are

conjugal concepts."[12] The precondition for any effective and meaningful community organizing is found in individuals making voluntary commitments and being accountable for them.

I find it no coincidence that my first interaction with community organizing in practice came in the form of a training around commitment and accountability. One of the most uncomfortable moments in my work in organizing came months later, when our team prepared for an organizing event to which we committed ourselves a turnout of 150 members of the synagogue. The team was split into four subgroups, and individuals in each subgroup listed in front of the whole team the number they committed to turning out. I was tasked with supporting the turnout process, checking in with team members as they made calls. A month into the process, and weeks away from our event, the numbers started coming in. The picture was disappointing – only one of our twenty members had met his commitment, and it did not look likely that anyone else would be joining him in meeting that goal. I led an honest, evaluative conversation in which each person had to face publically (within the larger team) the difference between actual turnout and the commitments made earlier. The transparency of our conversation constituted accountability, and put us in a very vulnerable situation. We all realized the discomfort – and the necessity – of being publically accountable. Next time, the team would try to be more realistic and more strategic in fulfilling its commitment.

I share this story to illustrate how seriously community organizing as a model takes accountability to commitments, even when those commitments will not always be kept in practice. The tension we felt in that room reflected what Parker Palmer describes when talking about democracy: "At the heart of the American experiment is an insight…a good society will emerge from the tension between freedom and discipline, between what the

---

[12] David Nyberg, *Power Over Power* (Ithaca, NY: 1981), 61.

Constitution calls 'the blessings of liberty' and the rule of law."[13] At its best, organizing

creates microcosms of the great ideals upon which American democracy is based, not least

among which is the tension inherent in voluntary commitment. A commitment freely made

endures through disciplined accountability. Through each small group that voluntarily enters

into community organizing, and through the coalitions of institutions that link group to

group, community organizing consciously promotes a culture in which commitment is valued

and taken seriously.

Bringing Together Rabbinic and Community Organizing Perspectives

I have shared some Talmudic texts on vows, and told some stories about commitment

in a community organizing context, but I have not yet shown the relationship between the

two realms. Let me do so in the following ways: (1) as critiques and correctives of each

other; (2) as revealing a common underlying concern.

Critique and corrective. As clearly demonstrated earlier, Tractate Nedarim reveals a

bias against vows,. What is lost under the minutiae of how vows work and how one gets out

of them is an appreciation of internal motivation. The rabbis see a world where language is

trivialized, where people speak rashly and foolishly, where the sacred gets bent into

bargaining banter and exaggerated rhetoric. They void immediately any vow made under

certain circumstances, and do their best to limit the accountability of those under vow by

finding any excuse to dissolve vows. They do so in part to protect the integrity of the vow,

but in the process communicate at best wariness about what vows are meant to do.

Community organizing ethos, on the other hand, might speak to the value of consciously

emphasizing accountability, even or especially in a countercultural way. Rather than help

---

[13] Parker Palmer, *Healing the Heart of Democracy: The Courage to Create a Politics Worthy of the Human Spirit* (San Francisco: 2011), 70.

people find an excuse for not fulfilling their word, no matter how much they regret it, community organizing would insist on holding up a mirror when people fail to show up or follow through as promised. Organizing starts with a focus on self-interest, and when people identify what matters to them and how they want to be in the world, the commitments they make rest on the strongest of motivations. Only by insisting on holding people accountable to their commitments can they grow into better selves and better citizens. There are two related principles in organizing, one insisting that people be treated like adults and the other, often termed the Iron Rule, urges not to do for others what they can do for themselves. The rabbinic attitudes towards vows betrays concern that people do not always act like responsible adults, and the rabbis go to great lengths to get others out of their vows. On the other hand, acknowledging human nature as honestly as B. Nedarim does helps those engaged in community organizing reflect on how they commit. What does it mean to be very careful in making commitments? When should I really be saying no so that I can say yes and follow through on issues of personal and communal importance? Taken together, these rabbinic texts and reflection on community organizing turnout create a balanced and honest approach to individual motivation and the limits of commitment.

Common concern. In the rabbinic milieu, where society is conceived of as a network of obligations, vows – voluntary commitments - are disliked and discouraged in part because they shift individuals away from the communal life towards the individual.[14] In America today, on the other hand, community organizing theory urges accountability around voluntary commitments for precisely the same reason: absent an active commitment to other citizens in the public arena, the "privatized individual's…world has become so small that he

---

[14] For another example where the community bound through *mitzvot* is prioritized over individual action, see B. Bava Kama 77a, "Greater is one who is commanded (*hametzaveh*) and acts than one who is not commanded and acts.

or she cannot assist in weaving a common life."[15] Commitment can be understood in no other

way than voluntary in the modern milieu, yet functions to weave people together. In contrast,

the Talmudic rabbis saw voluntary commitments (vows) as threatening the fabric of

community, as evidenced by the analogy of the institution of vows to that of independent

altars which weakened the centralized religion of Temple Judaism.

The common concern that bubbles up in both text and community organizing is

proper relationship between individual and larger community. Vows in the rabbinic context

undermine communal life by binding individuals to their own trajectories, while voluntary

commitments in an organizing context seek to bind those individual trajectories together in

shared purpose and destiny. What seem like adversarial views on voluntary commitments

turn out to have a similar principle animating them.

Jewish Community Organizing: A Synthesis of Traditions

When I as an American citizen engage in community organizing, I am part of a

tradition that first crystallized with Saul Alinsky in the 1940s. When I engage in community

organizing as an American Jew, I grapple with over two millennia of texts and contexts.

What does it mean to do community organizing Jewishly, rather than simply as a Jew?

Another key principle of community organizing goes as follows: All good organizing

is dis-organizing and re-organizing. In other words, there is a constant reevaluation of

structures, goals, and relationships. But change happens neither for its own sake nor without

great intention. Organizers work to identify and help others reflect on past processes in order

to strategically move forward in ways that deepen relationships, move more people into

action with shared purpose, and create greater impact in local neighborhoods as well as the

---

[15] Palmer, 87

larger political system. For this reason, community organizing is often described as a cycle, evolving in each successive iteration.

In my admittedly post-modern perspective of Jewish text study, I might formulate a similar key principle of Jewish engagement with text: All good text study is deconstructing and re-interpreting. Jewish tradition tends to mask innovative reading through what has been called "conservative audacity"[16], a technique of exclaiming fealty to an ancient truth while in fact quietly interpreting text and law in new ways. However, a critical examination of Jewish text throughout history reveals a consistent re-application of older texts in new ways for unanticipated circumstances.

A Jewish performance of community organizing might be conceptualized as adding a component to the organizing cycle. In addition to listening to the stories of people in the community, one might "listen" to Jewish texts, and engage the community in studying texts in the same way that organizing suggests listening to each others' stories. In other words, community organizing in a synagogue could include a relational push not just between person and person, but between person and text. What themes of concern emerge from whichever Jewish texts are being studied collectively? How do they resonate with the stories of congregants, and what insights do they contribute to understanding problems in the world today?

As the organizing cycle comes to an end, the evaluation phase emphasizes reflection looking backward and re-organizing moving forward. A study of texts such as the ones I brought from B. Nedarim could be useful in reflecting on habits of accountability, relating, listening, and more, and building them more intentionally in the next cycle.

---

[16] Avi Ravitsky, "'Ways of Peace' and the Status of Gentiles according to the Rambam: An Exchange of Letters with Rabbi Hayyim David Halevi," in Zohar and Sagi, eds., *A Living Judaism* (Jerusalem: 2007), 264.

Ultimately, a Jewish performance of community organizing will involve an honest engagement with text and a reflective attitude towards organizing practice and theory, creating a dialogue that might highlight unexpected areas of convergence as well as tension. I believe tension is the key to truth, and convergence – shared sense of purpose and the ability to act together – the path to justice.

Bibliography

Benovitz, Moshe. *Kol Nidre: Studies in the Development of Rabbinic Votive Institutions.*
      (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998.)

Palmer, Parker. *Healing the Heart of Democracy: The Courage to Create a Politics Worthy*
      of the Human Spirit. Second Edition. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2014.)

Nyberg, David, *Power Over Power: What Power Means in Ordinary Life, How It Is Related*
      to Acting Freely, and What It Can Contribute to a Renovated Ethics of Education.
      (Ithaca, NY: Cornell, 1981.)

Falk, Ze'ev W. "Binding and Loosing," in *Journal of Jewish Studies 25* (1974).

Ochs, Peter and Nancy Levene, eds. *Textual Reasonings: Jewish Philosophy and Text Study*
      at the End of the Twentieth Century. (Grand Rapids, MI, Wm. B. Eerdmans: 2002.)

Cohen, Aryeh. *Justice in the City: An Argument from the Sources of Rabbinic Judaism.*
      (Brighton, MA: Academic Studies, 2012.)