

A number of you have seen the article in the Jewish Week a few weeks ago in which I was quoted, as well as Harry Glazer's letter following up on that article, which was published last Friday. Harry and I have discussed the article and the letter, and although we have philosophical disagreements, I don't think that he and I have been addressing the same point. Thus, I think that characterizing his letter as a "rebuttal" to my comments is not fair or appropriate.

By way of explanation, and since some of my comments were taken out of context and/or not elaborated on fully, I wanted to share an explanation/d'var torah with you. I am not doing this to "rebut" Harry's letter, nor am I doing it to apologize for my comments in the paper. I reread my comments this morning, and I still stand 100% behind them. However, since a number of people may have taken them out of context or may have read more into them due to their juxtaposition with comments made by other individuals from other communities, I am taking this opportunity to send you my take on the issue.

Let me tell you a little bit about myself.

I grew up in Saint Louis Park, Minnesota, in the late 60's and early 70's. My parents sent me to an Orthodox day school, and my father, my brother, and I, attended an Orthodox shul, Kenesseth Israel, every Shabbat. One of my memories of Kenesseth Israel is the gabbai, Bert Weinberg, whom I cannot recall ever not smiling, and who went out of his way to include every male in some aspect of the service. Although I can't ever remember having a long conversation with him, in his quiet way, he had a tremendous impact on my thinking about what constitutes a meaningful shul experience for me.

On Simchat Torah, Bert and the other gabbaim would have the congregation recite the Ata Horaita numerous times, systematically going up and down rows to ensure that each and every male congregant, above and below bar mitzvah age, had an opportunity to lead the congregation in the recitation of one pasuk.

Additionally, Bert ensured that aliyot were given even to boys under bar mitzvah age.

Boys who were too young to lead Anim Zemirot instead were asked to open the Aron Hakodesh for it. Bert delegated the task of rounding up Anim Zemirot leaders and Aron openers to boys who had reached bar mitzvah age – in my turn, I got to be the "Anim Zemirot" gabbai for a year or two. I remember standing next to little kids, maybe three or four years old, as they opened the Aron, giving them directions, making sure that their Tallit stayed on, and lending moral support (standing in front of the entire shul can be scary to a little kid). On Friday nights, not only was Yigdal led by a boy – Kiddush was, too. As I recollect, there was another teenage "Friday night gabbai" responsible for that.

Bert had a notebook where he kept not only the English and Hebrew names of each male congregant – he also kept the date of their bar mitzvah. Bert made sure that each and every male congregant, even ones who did not have an obligation to have an aliyah at all over the course of the year, got an aliyah at least once a year on the anniversary of their bar mitzvah. The route used to take the Torah to and from the Aron to the bimah and back was chosen so that women were able to reach over the mechitza and kiss the Torah (I honestly don't know who was responsible for that decision.) In short, Bert and the other gabbaim did their best to include as many people as they could in any way that they could in shul life. In his personal life, Bert, who had three daughters, ensured that each daughter had some sort of public Bat Mitzvah celebration.

Surprisingly, Bert was what we'd now call a "black hat" or a "chareidi." As a matter of fact, a significant number of the members of Keneseth Israel were on that end of the spectrum. Yet, in their own way, they were still able to convey the idea that "inclusiveness" was a priority.

When I graduated 9th grade, I attended Yeshiva High School ("Skokie Yeshiva") in Skokie. I was what we will kindly term a "momma's boy" and a "nerd." I was also skinny ("98 pound weakling" skinny) and had bifocals. Since Illinois at that time was on a four-year high school plan, and Minnesota was on a three-year high school plan, I started high school as a sophomore with a bunch of classmates who had been together as freshmen. Due to who I was and having started as an "odd man out," I was miserable for three years in high school because I somehow felt excluded from the group (teenage boys being teenage boys, they also took pains to make it known to me that I did not fit in.)

I then attended college at the University of Minnesota. Many people don't know that I largely paid my way through college by working part-time (and sometimes full-time – I took a year off to work in the middle.) For a year or so, I was a custodian at the U of M Hillel, in exchange for a rent-free room. When I moved in, another one of the custodians (there were three of us) warned me about the Women's Minyan that met regularly there – "when they are around, you want to make yourself scarce." This was my first introduction to feminism, and, to this day, every time I hear the word "feminist," it conjures up images of an angry, militant mob of women chasing three male college-age custodians who are running for their lives.

A few years later, I had an opportunity to meet with a bunch of women who were discussing a feminist issue. I believe I was the only male in the room. At one point, I spoke up, introducing my remarks with "I'm not a feminist, but..." Another member of the group politely pointed out that I did not need to be a woman to be

a feminist. However, due to my prior association with the more radical brand of feminism, I resisted identifying myself as a feminist for a long time after that meeting.

As of late, I have been able to come to terms with the fact that I am, for some inexplicable reason, a feminist. Feminism, like any other discipline, encompasses a wide spectrum of views. There are a lot of ideas within the corpus of feminist theory that I find foreign. As a matter of fact, although I seem to have been labeled as a “radical feminist” by some within the Orthodox community, that same mob of angry women at the U of M Hillel (I wonder if they’re still meeting) might, upon meeting me and talking to me, label me a typical, male, Orthodox Jewish misogynist. However, based on my life experience, I find many things within feminist theory that speak very strongly to me, and I guess that makes me a feminist.

One of the bastions of Modern Orthodoxy, Yeshiva University, espouses the concept of “Torah U’Mada.” Although I do not speak for YU, I think that the idea of “Mada” means a body of knowledge not obviously contained within the corpus of Torah Shebichtav and Torah She’Beal Peh, such as physics or psychology. My totally uninformed opinion is that “Torah U’Mada” is a methodology whereby Torah and other disciplines can be integrated, and that valuable lessons from those other disciplines can be brought back to help us better understand Torah. Does this mean the entire corpus of material from other disciplines, no matter how loony or farfetched, can be used to help us understand Torah? Maybe, or maybe not. We need to keep Torah first, and filter out messages from other disciplines which are inconsistent with our view of Torah and Halacha.

I’ll go a step further. I propose that anyone who is involved in a “lishma” search for truth in a non-Torah discipline is effectively involved in a Torah pursuit. I say lishma because, obviously, there are people out there who have some personal axe to grind or some ulterior motive. However, I feel that, ultimately, possibly with great difficulty, all such “lishma” quests for truth can ultimately be reconciled with Torah and can be shown to be different views of the same, underlying, Torah.

I had a rebbe in sophomore year who once remarked, in passing, that scientists will eventually invent an electron microscope strong enough to view elementary particles, and when they look in the eyepiece, they will see a tiny sefer torah. I think he meant this literally. I, however, take this figuratively, and feel that he was, in his way, saying the same thing that I said above.

Feminism, like any other “Mada” pursuit, has its “lishma” adherents and its fringe element. I feel that, within the corpus of feminist theory, there are valuable

lessons that can help to enhance our understanding of Torah and our practice of Judaism. Subscribing to this view does not mean that I have to “let it all in” – I can pick and choose those lessons that are consistent with Torah and discard those which are foreign ideas. The choices that I make may not necessarily be the choices that you or someone else makes. I need to choose those lessons which have meaning to me.

So far, the subject of this document does not really seem to make a lot of sense. Let me explain myself.

I feel that, essentially, the Torah cannot legislate emotions. People have no direct control over their emotions. What the Torah can do and does is to legislate behavior. It is hoped that, by modeling a Torah behavior, one will eventually experience the appropriate emotions at the appropriate times. For example, the Jewish laws of mourning are a very specific enumeration of how one must conduct themselves and cover all sorts of borderline cases and eventualities.

Psychology, on the other hand, breaks mourning into five distinct stages of emotions. It is left as an exercise for the reader (don't you love that phrase?) to show that by following the halachot of mourning, one will, at the end of the mourning process, arrive at the fifth stage, acceptance. To sum it up, engaging in behavior can change the way you feel.

Many times, we find ourselves between a rock and a hard place, with no clear path ahead of us. Take, as a simple example, a male with extremely sensitive skin, who is allergic to wool and cotton. Now, the normative halacha is that the garment of a tallit katan (tzitzit) must be made of one of these two materials.

What is this individual to do? He can (a) wear the tzitzit in fulfillment of the halacha, or (b) not wear tzitzit in violation of halacha. He seems to be between a rock and a hard place. However, there is a choice (c), a way out – researching the issue, we find an opinion, of the Tzitz Eliezer, zatsal, which allows the garment portion of the tzitzit to be made of other materials. Is this an appropriate choice for everyone? Not according to a Rav who I asked a number of years ago (regarding mesh tzitzit.) Is this an appropriate choice for this individual? Absolutely, because it gives him a way out.

On a much different topic, *lehavdil elef havdalot*, take the issue of homosexuality. I admit that homosexuality is a topic with which I am personally very uncomfortable. I don't know where I stand on the whole nature versus nurture question. However, it seems that studies of animal populations show that a certain percentage of those populations exhibit homosexual behavior. Also, the Torah only legislates against circumstances where the activity occurs in a statistically significant quantity. Since the Torah prohibits homosexual activity, it logically follows that homosexual behavior is “normal” (in the sense that

homosexual feelings are within the statistically significant range of human emotions and feelings.) Someone who feels this way – what are they supposed to do? Many deny their feelings, and go on to marry and have families. Some live their entire lives this way, in a state of misery. Others do so for a while, and then can't take the pressure anymore, and act out in all sorts of strange ways.

Either way, this is choice (a) and it leads to tremendous anguish for all parties involved in those relationships. Choice (b) is to isolate themselves and, rachmana litzlan, go off the derech. Unfortunately, for many this is an attractive choice. I believe that there is a choice (c) which allows this person to accept that they are a homosexual, yet lead a life in accordance with halacha. Whatever that path is, it most likely will be a monumental struggle for that person, and I don't envy them.

Note that I am **not** advocating that homosexual behavior is halachic – quite the contrary. What I am saying, however, is that halacha can speak to an individual who finds themselves in this circumstance and show them a way that they can lead a productive life as a full member of klal yisrael and free from personal anguish. What is necessary is that the individual acknowledge that this is a personal nisayon (test) that they face, a willingness to abide by halacha and to engage in halachic give and take about the issue, and a Rav who is open-minded enough to set aside whatever personal revulsion they may have to and preconceived notions they have about homosexuality and engage this individual in a discussion about their personal circumstance. (In this sense, I view the dictum of “aseh lecha Rav” as it being incumbent on individuals to educate their Rabbanim about issues of importance to them – and it being incumbent on the Rabbanim to be open to learning about these issues in a non-judgmental manner before giving halachic guidance.)

Again, lehavdil elef havdalot, feminism is integral part of who I am. (I am most emphatically **not** equating feminism and homosexuality. And, actually, the inclusiveness aspect of feminism speaks most to me.) I feel, sometimes, that I am between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, it seems that Orthodoxy has big problems with feminism in general, and somehow, I must live a life of misery and somehow ignore my sensitivity to this particular issue. This is my choice (a). On the other hand, I can very easily join a Conservative egalitarian minyan or a chavurah, both of which exist in my community. However, that's not who I am, either. I tried it (in college, another long story) and it felt very uncomfortable to me – the changes in the nusach, etc. Also, for me, it's a non-halachic choice. I firmly believe that there is a choice (c) for me to get me out from between this rock and hard place, and that I can find choice (c) by looking to halacha for guidance. I am, have been, and will be, firmly committed to an approach grounded in halacha. I most likely will choose the “Tzitz Eliezers” rather than other more stringent opinions in this regard; however, Judaism has a long history of conflicting opinions. Abbaye and Rava have managed to co-exist

peacefully on the pages of the Gemara for over one thousand years, and I think people of different halachic opinions can do so nowadays, as well.

In actuality, I believe that all of us face personal challenges in life at one time or another. What may seem to be a trivial matter to one person can easily be overwhelming to the next. Since none of us are mind readers, we are not always aware of what personal challenges our friends and neighbors face. Often, we end up hurting each other due to our lack of sensitivity for the different challenges each of us faces (it is only natural for us to think that everyone is just like us.) However, I believe that we all do face personal challenges, and those challenges are different for each and every one of us. I also firmly believe in the universality of halacha. This means that there is always some halacha that applies (when we move to outer space, there will probably be seforim written about that) and that, at some time or another in life, all of us will need to use halacha to find a choice (c) to navigate our way out of a place that feels like we are between a rock and a hard place. I'll go even further, and say that halacha **guarantees** it. Often, choice (a) and (b) are obvious and the easy way out. We need to strive and sometimes struggle mightily to find the choice (c) in our lives, and that is what I am doing. I am doing my best to be true to myself, and to be the best Danny Geretz that I can.

Recently, I relearned mishnayot masechet Berachot. The very last mishna of the masechet (9:5) is quite long. In my initial zeal to finish the masechet, I overlooked something in the mishna that I subsequently thought about, and I think it also applies here. Briefly, the mishna says that one must bless Hashem over negative developments the same way one blesses Hashem for positive ones, and then goes about supporting this statement with the pasuk “you shall love Hashem with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your money” (Devarim 6:5). It then goes on to offer an alternate explanation to the last clause, “u've'chol me'o'decha” which applies to the statement made about blessing Hashem under all circumstances. It then goes on to other topics.

In all of this, it is very easy to miss the explanation for “all your heart,” which is “with both of your inclinations – your righteous inclination and your evil inclination.” When I reflected on this more, I realized that it, too, is consistent with what I said above. With only your righteous inclination is analogous to the choices (a) presented above. With only your evil inclination is analogous to choices (b). Only when you are able to use both your righteous and evil inclinations in tandem and in balance with each other, as in choices (c), are you truly able to fulfill the commandment as Hashem intended.

This is a long document already. However, I need to thank a number of individuals who have had a significant impact on me and my thinking. First and foremost, I want to thank Avi Mori, Jack Geretz, who taught me to look at all setbacks in life as a blessing in disguise, and Imi Morati, Rachel Geretz, for showing me that women, too, can be learned in limudei kodesh. I also thank both my parents for the tremendous sacrifices they made in order to send me and my siblings to day school, in a time and a place where sending kids to public school was the norm. I also thank my Sabta Dina Lerner for repeating (incessantly) that it's not the kippah on your head that makes you a Torah Jew, it's how you behave towards others (I think I finally got it). I thank my siblings and their spouses, Rafi and Alla, Michi and Jeff, and Aliza, for the numerous discussions we've had over the years (especially Rafi, whose "interrogations" can sometimes be uncomfortable, but invaluable in identifying muddled thinking.) I live in a family of debaters, and I love it (both the family and the debating).

Additionally, I want to thank my close friend, chavrusa, and "bar plugta" Harry Glazer, for the numerous hours of (sometimes enjoyable, sometimes maddening) debate we've had on this and other topics. Harry and I rarely agree about anything, and I hope that he learns as much from our debates as I do. Without a long discussion with Harry about portions of this topic, I probably would not have been able to put my thoughts together as coherently as I have (hopefully) done. Additionally, I thank the following close friends for their patience and sympathetic ears: Jennifer Kotzker, Mason Resnick, Barry Levinson, David Riceman, Jeff Korbman, David Stern, John Winer, Michael Rabin, Mark Kligman, Rabbi Ronald Schwarzberg, and Rabbi Steven Miodownik. There are others, whom I must thank, from whom I have learned Torah, or information about other disciplines. Alas, they are too numerous to name. Among them are a number of Rabbanim for whom I have tremendous respect, but who I will not name for the fear of leaving one or more of them out. Mikol Melamdai Hiskalti – this document is a mosaic that all of you have helped me complete in one way or another.

I especially thank my ex-wife, Hadassah Geretz, and my daughters, Aviva and Eliana, for their forbearance over the many years that I spent an hour here or two hours there in the pursuit of my own personal and intellectual goals.