מכון הדר

MECHON HADAR

Substance and Standards:
Anchoring and Grounding the American Jewish Future

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Welcome to all of you, both to those who are here for the first time, as well as to those for whom this Beit Midrash has become a regular place of learning. We hope that those of you in the first category will move over to the second and help us to build this space as a vital center of Jewish learning and community building.

I offer thoughts tonight on the future of the North American Jewish community, not as a polished manifesto, but as searching reflections on what feels like a significant moment in Jewish history and in our corner of the Diaspora. I trust that you will understand that any clarity you hear is nuanced by lingering questions and any confident prescriptions for the future are humbly submitted for further engagement and critique.

I invite you to imagine a beautiful restaurant with an elaborate and wide-ranging menu, spacious seating and glorious picture windows that look out onto a pristine and magical landscape. The restaurant also has an outdoor deck, where one can eat one's meal in an even more intimate relationship with the stunning surroundings. And at night, heat lamps adorn this outdoor seating area, enabling those who wish to sit outside in the growing cold to do so in comfort. As the winter approaches, a number of regular diners move inside, to avoid the increasingly freezing temperatures. But most remain outside, unwilling to forego direct contact with the awe-inspiring landscapes. Those who wish to maintain their former level of comfort pay the restaurant significant sums of money to upgrade the wattage of the heat lamps and they move their chairs closer to this source of warmth.

While no metaphor is perfect, I want to suggest that this one captures a good deal of our present moment. Here, in 21st century North America, Jewish life is perhaps best understood as running a heat lamp outdoors in the dead of winter.

The entropy of the open society in which we live naturally pulls Jews in many different directions. We are beckoned into the conventional patterns of various forms of mass culture, which while occasionally twinged by Jewishness is not defined and certainly not dominated by it. Jews in America live modern, autonomous lives outside of the sphere of coercive rabbinic power and make their own normative choices about how to live Jewishly. We live in an environment devoid of any significant anti-Semitism. And we have achieved integration into the general society at a level virtually unparalleled in Jewish history. There is thus no inertial force keeping Jews Jewish any more.

And most American Jews, including many ritually observant ones, do not choose to exercise their options and freedoms to wall themselves off from this reality.

Just as the heat in a given space can only be retained with insulation or constant replenishment at a replacement rate greater than the rate of entropic cooling, so too **Judaism can only survive with a well-defined perimeter or a red-hot, radiant core.** Either Jewish identity is penned in by external geographical and sociological forces, or it must be warmed by the fire of a compelling vision for Jewish life that causes its adherents to return to it repeatedly of their own free will. Since the perimeters of legal and cultural anti-Semitism have fallen and since elective cultural solitary confinement is untenable and undesirable for many North American Jews, the consequence seems clear: There is no alternative to running the heat lamps as high as possible and sitting as close to them as possible.

There are many big picture questions about the sustainability of this project. How much money does it take to run those heat lamps on full power with no insulation in the dead of winter? Where will that money come from? Is it possible for Judaism to survive in an open market as a minority without boundaries and protections, minimally semi-permeable ones that guarantee some security? Can Jews in contemporary North America afford *not* to think of themselves, as Professor Jonathan Sarna has suggested, as an endangered species, fragile creatures in an unforgiving ecosystem that cannot be expected to survive under the wild laws of nature?

I take those questions seriously, and as I prepare to spend next academic year in a very different Jewish environment in Israel, I will be thinking about them a great deal. But I am speaking tonight about the millions of us who are not coming in off the deck, at least for the time being. We are not relocating to a sovereign Jewish space with an identity reinforced by various Others and enemies within and without. We are not retreating to the indoor seating that marks a withdrawal from contemporary society.

We must confront the following two basic facts about our reality: A first truth is that Jews with tenuous and thin connections to Jewish substance and practice will not be successful engines of Jewish culture in contemporary North America. Bonds of peoplehood divorced from substance will ultimately be overwhelmed by the forces of cultural entropy that define our society. You sit too far from the lamp and your body will not generate enough heat on its own to keep you warm. A second truth is that running the engines of Jewish culture at the level required to heat the core red-hot will require coordination and tremendous investment. Any strategic approach to Jewish life that writes off the vast majority of Jews will have insufficient resources and commitment to run the engines on its own.

I want to suggest that that new reality requires a new way of thinking and talking about Jewish life. We need to move away from frameworks of denominational and ideological conflict and instead try to anchor and ground Jewish life in a shared framework of substance and standards.

Our current culture focuses disproportionately on sectarian divisions among the Jews, in a way that I fear distracts and divides those of us who are, in one form or another, sitting outside on the deck. I confess to you that I would be very happy if I never again saw a Jewish demographic study that gave us the latest results on the great American denominational horse race. The North American Jewish community will only thrive in the coming years if it can find ways to transcend those differences, honestly identify intense pockets of Jewish life, invest deeply in those who are creating them, and ensure that the entire community has a shared sense of purpose.

We have been through this transition before and we can do it again. Mishnah Zevahim tells us the following:

משנה זבחים יד משנה ד

עד שלא הוקם המשכן היו הבמות מותרות ועבודה בבכורות משהוקם המשכן נאסרו הבמות ועבודה בכהנים

Mishnah Zevahim 14:4

Before the Tabernacle was set up in the desert, it was permissible to sacrifice on local altars, and cultic worship was performed by the firstborn in every family. Once the Tabernacle was set up, local altars were forbidden and cultic worship was performed by the priests.

The Mishnah tells a story here of a dramatic reorganization of the Jewish people at a significant inflection point in our history. In Egypt, and in the first year of the desert journey, the Israelites could offer sacrifices wherever they saw fit. Any high place was fit for an altar and every first-born was a priest. Multiple centers of religious life could compete and jockey for attention. The first-born, proportionately distributed among the tribes would also have divided religious leaders into various factions. And I can imagine the demographic surveys of the day delivering updates on how the tribe of Judah's great fertility meant that many more first-born were entering their schools of cultural training, while Menasheh's low birth rate had them struggling for new recruits.

This system was appropriate for life in Egypt and its immediate aftermath. We were oppressed, lived in Goshen, and were walled off and well-insulated from the broader contours of Egyptian culture. This sort of lack of coordination would pose no real threat to the Jewish mission—and certainly not to Jewish identity—due to the presence of a well-defined perimeter.

But the Mishnah tells us that that changed once the people truly entered the desert context. The erection of the Tabernacle signals a response—ordered at Sinai—to a new reality with no boundaries. They were now in a no-man's land, a place selected for the giving of the Torah specifically so that its message would never be associated with one particular parcel of historical and national land. In this boundary-less place, the rules change. We move, in very graphic form, from competing centers to concentric circles. Multiple altars are forbidden, and worship is entrusted to a select group coming from one tribe, a group that will embody a red-hot core of commitment that can effectively radiate out to the rest of the people.

The very nature of the desert encampment changes. God, once content with a ragtag arrangement of former slaves, now orders that the tribes be arranged in a concentric formation around the central focal point of the *mishkan*, the Tabernacle. In the inner core—closest to this mobile sanctuary—are the priests and the Levites, the newly-minted elite tribe that will selflessly devote their energies to the spiritual vitality of the entire camp. Lest we think that this arrangement marks the inauguration of a separatist group, the Torah emphatically tells us otherwise:

במדבר ג:ו-י

הַקְרֵב֙ אֶת־מַטֵּ֣ה לֵוִ֔י וְהַעֲמַדְתָּ֥ אֹת֖וֹ לִפְנֵ֣י אַהֲרֹ֣ן הַכֹּהֵ֑ן וְשֵׁרְת֖וּ אֹתֽוֹ׃ וְשָׁמְר֣וּ אֶת־מִשְׁמַרְתּ֗וֹ וְאֶת־מִשְׁמֶ֙רֶת֙ כָּל־הָעֵדָ֔ה לִפְנֵ֖י אֹ֣הֶל מוֹעֵ֑ד לַעֲבֹ֖ד אֶת־עֲבֹדַ֥ת הַמִּשְׁכָּֽן׃ וְשָׁמְר֗וּ אֶת־כָּל־כְּלֵי֙ אֹ֣הֶל מוֹעֵ֔ד וְאֶת־מִשְׁמֶ֖רֶת בְּנֵ֣י יִשְׂרָאֵ֑ל לַעֲבֹ֖ד אֶת־עֲבֹדַ֥ת הַמִּשְׁכָּֽן׃

Bemidbar 3:6-10

Bring close the tribe of Levi and present them to Aharon the priest and let them serve him. They must guard his duties and *the duties of the entire congregation* in the presence of the Tent of Meeting, to perform the work of the *mishkan*. They shall guard all the vessels of the Tent of Meeting and *the duties of the Israelites*, to perform the work of the *mishkan*.

The work of the Levites, the Torah tells us, is the duty of the entire community. Theirs is not a privileged perch of heightened religious experience. Their role is part of a *communal strategy* for organizing religious life in the desert, a place with no perimeter and in need of a red-hot core. The strategy is simple: place the embodiment of your mission and purpose at the center of your community, invest in the people and projects most intensively committed to stoking the core, and ensure that everyone understands that the purpose of that heat is to radiate outwards to the entire people.

We in North American are now in the מדבר. Not in the sense of a wasteland, but in the best tradition of the idea that the Torah was given in a no-man's land, a place without boundaries, so that all of humanity could potentially receive it and so that the Jewish people could trumpet its message broadly. We like the Jews in the desert, must reorganize our camp, reorienting it around the substance of our mission, investing deeply in models that generate tremendous amounts of heat and energy and ensuring that that energy has broad reach to all corners of our people.

Anchoring our community in substance entails recognizing that, in contemporary North America, notions of belonging alone are insufficient for running the heat lamps hot enough to sustain Jewish life and culture. The Jewish future will need to be anchored in a red-hot core of Torah, deep Jewish learning and knowledge, *mitzvot*, mission-oriented practice, and the vitality of thick Jewish culture more broadly, especially as expressed through Jewish languages, particularly Hebrew.

But as the Torah itself says—והזר הקרב יומת—for some people, living in that inner intense core is simply too much and they will not survive and thrive there. Whether or not that is an ideal—I am personally not willing to say that—it is a reality and it must be confronted.

A more concentric model of Jewish life thus requires a humility that different people will want to stand at different distances from the heat lamps, but that we can still all be part of a shared ecosystem. One beautiful text that captures this dynamic is said to have been a favorite of the earliest members of the rabbinic project. Back in the days of Yavneh, the perimeter of the Second Commonwealth had fallen, and the old center of the Temple needed to be replaced with the radiant core of the nascent rabbinic culture of learning. Far from seeing themselves as urban elites arrayed against the broader rural Jewish population, the rabbis of Yavneh envisioned a positive relationship with a variety of Jews unevenly invested in the intensity of Jewish life.

בבלי ברכות יז.

מרגלא בפומייהו דרבנן דיבנה: אני בריה וחברי בריה, אני מלאכתי בעיר והוא מלאכתו בשדה, אני משכים למלאכתי והוא משכים למלאכתו, כשם שהוא אינו מתגדר במלאכתי כך אני איני מתגדר במלאכתו, ושמא תאמר: אני מרבה והוא ממעיט – שנינו: אחד המרבה ואחד הממעיט ובלבד שיכוין לבו לשמים.

Talmud Bavli 17a

A favorite saying of the Rabbis of Yavneh was: I am God's creature and my fellow is God's creature. My work is in the town and his work is in the country. I rise early for my work and he rises early for his work. Just as he does not presume to do my work, so I do not presume to do his work. Will you say, I do much and he does little? We have learnt: One may do much or one may do little; it is all one, provided he directs his heart to heaven.

In order to sharpen this point, I want you to consider another metaphor for a moment: that of the ecosystem of classical music. A broad range of people are a part of this ecosystem. There is the first violinist at the New York Philharmonic. There is the named funder of Avery Fisher Hall, where that premiere orchestra plays. There is the season subscriber. There is the person who occasionally, on a whim, decides to go to a concert. There is the violinist that plays at the local community theater, at a much lower level than the first violinist in Avery Fisher Hall, but in a setting that connects with a broader variety of people than make it to the Upper West Side of Manhattan for an evening out. And then there is the end-listener of WQXR, who tunes in to 105.9 FM when stuck in traffic but can't be counted on for much else. [That would be me.]

Now, it strikes me that two things are reasonably clear about this ecosystem. First, without the first violinist and Avery Fisher Hall, the ecosystem collapses into mediocrity. Those people and institutions that have talent and invest deeply and heavily in classical music are the engine of the entire culture. And the

end-listener of WQXR and the violinists in local communities know this as well as anyone and admire and encourage those culture generators in their essential roles. The end-listener of WQXR, in particular, recognizes that if the future of classical music depended on his level of engagement and commitment, the enterprise would be doomed.

Second, the first violinist is aware of and deeply grateful for the existence of that haphazard radio listener. He represents the broad reach of this cultural phenomenon and the case for it being worthwhile and significant in the first place. While the patrons of Avery Fisher Hall might be eager to see more and more people take up classical music in their own lives, they are not dismissive of those who don't, instead appreciating everyone's potential role in a shared cause of strengthening this aspect of our society's cultural makeup.

This combination of a clear sense of shared standards around seriousness and excellence with a generous appreciation for everyone's role in sustaining and supporting a culture make this a healthy ecosystem, one that will do its best to muster all its energies to attract new supporters and to sustain itself from within. By avoiding factional definitions of what classical music is or hiding from an honest assessment of who is objectively more deeply invested in it, a level of collective work is possible that would be otherwise squandered on territorial fights.

We need more of that dynamic in contemporary Jewish life.

Now, identifying exactly who is the first violinist and who is not would get me in far greater trouble than I am looking for tonight, so I won't do that. But truth be told, the metaphor here does not map on to one kind of Jew, institution or movement. The mapping would shift depending on what were speaking about, whether in the areas of learning, ritual *mitzvot*, scholarship, philanthropy, *hesed* or Zionism. But in many of those areas, the metrics are actually reasonably clear. Some Jews invest dramatically more social and religious capital in these various areas than others. Wouldn't it be better if we could acknowledge that, support those keeping the core red-hot and ensure that their energy has a broad reach? What prevents us from doing that?

Some of it has to do with ideology. Moving away from ideology as the major marker of Jewish difference requires that Jewish communities don't see their different positions and practices on a variety of issues as being fundamentally constitutive of their larger commitment to Judaism. Issues around gender and

sexuality, definitions of Jewish identity and particular approaches to Zionism are among those issues that feel the most intractable and the least amenable to being contained within a common discourse. And that is precisely what those and other similar issues must command our attention and our energies. Is it not possible to acknowledge that two Jews, though they daven differently, both acknowledge that issues of gender and prayer must be engaged and dealt with? Can we not imagine a world in which honest readings of halakhic texts and human experience would point us to complex, non-binary definitions of Jewish identity that evade (and rightly so) pat answers on those questions? Are we hopelessly removed from seeing all Jews who care deeply about the flourishing of the state of Israel as being allies with whom we have fundamental disagreements as opposed to heretics and extremists to be hunted down? More broadly, can we develop a discourse of halakhah that can balance the need for personal integrity with the need to forge community with others who practice differently? I feel very confident that Jews are potentially less far apart on these than they think and that the language of Torah is capacious enough to contain multiple approaches to these issues within a shared framework. That is not easy work and we are proud at Hadar to play our part in bridging some of those divides. We must find ways not to make our principled disagreements go away, but to contain them in a shared language of discussion and debate.

But a good deal of the work is simply to commit to talking and thinking a certain way. We can firmly insist that our communities and institutions embrace the language of standards rather than ideology in much of their work. What if we defined our educational environments not by what movement they were a part of, but what they actually teach? Which elementary schools produce graduates fluent in Hebrew and which do not? Which high school environments empower students to engage rabbinic texts independently in the original and which prefer broad exposure to rabbinic ideas fully mediated by the teacher? What if rabbinical schools were defined not by ideology and movement, but by their standards of knowledge and expertise in various areas and their curricula? I want to suggest that this would lead to a much healthier Jewish ecosystem, and a more excellent one at that.

This is just the beginning of what a discourse of substance and standards would look like. It would return a shared Torah to the center of our camp as the shared birthright of all Jews. It would force us to be honest about who is and is not investing in various aspects of Jewish life at the highest levels. It would drive us to hold ourselves accountable to a vision of Jewish life that serves not a confined ghetto, but that reaches out broadly to all corners of our people. If we work together, it would enable us to keep the lamps running at full power so another generation can be inspired and take up the mantle. And we can, with God's help,

merit the promise of ושכנתי בתוכם, that this effort of shared building brings the Divine Presence down to Earth.