

Always Be (Un-)Learning

Parashat B'shallach 5783

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Knowing me now as you do, you won't be surprised to hear that a motto I have for myself is "ABL—Always Be Learning."

In Judaism, learning is not only a highly valued endeavor, and it's not only a *mitzvah* (religious obligation), but it's also considered to be the highest form of spirituality a person can practice—higher, even, than prayer. The famous phrase of the Mishnah "*Talmud Torah k'neged kulam*" means "the study of Torah is equal to all the other 612 *mitzvot* combined."

So, I was surprised by something I discovered this week in conversation with some of my rabbinic colleagues.

Along with Shelley and Stephen Limmer's son, Rabbi Seth Limmer—who, I am excited to tell you, is going to be our guest scholar-in-residence on the Shabbat of March 17-18—I am part of a cohort of eight rabbis who work together on leadership development.

This week, our group gathered for our annual three-and-a-half-day retreat in Boulder, CO. (There's nothing like the beauty of the snow-covered Rockies and the crisp mountain air to inspire thinking and conversation.)

As we dove deeply into our experiences and challenges and aspirations and growth trajectories as rabbis, our discussions brought out an insight that we found ourselves returning to again and again throughout the retreat—and insight that we found at once both profound and, given our grounding in the rabbinic ethic, also quite surprising—and that is: the importance of *un-learning*.

Un-learning—the enterprise of deconstructing existing ways of thinking, breaking down long-held assumptions, and rooting out unconscious biases and preconceptions—we discovered, is critical to our ability to grow, and change, and think and see the world more expansively.

Rabbi Moshe Feinstein taught that learning Torah is meant to be different from learning other subjects like, say, math or science. Whereas in these secular disciplines, learning is about acquiring information, the purpose of Talmud Torah is self-transformation (*Ig'rot Moshe*, YD 3:71)—meaning that study should help you become not just a more knowledgeable person, but, more importantly, it should help you become a *better* person. That's the essence of the *mitzvah*.

But, here's the *chidush*—the new corollary my colleagues and I discovered together: New knowledge can only take us so far if we are not also able (and willing) to *un-learn* what we already know—or, perhaps more to the point, what we *think* we already know.

Why? Because the assumptions and preconceptions we carry around with us create something like an interpretive key we use to make sense of all the information we take in through our encounters with the world.

Every experience we have, every new piece of information we take in, and every idea that comes our way is processed through that interpretive key and cataloged in our brains accordingly.

Ultimately, it determines the way we see other people, how we see ourselves, and how we interact with the world around us—and, consequently, it impacts the way we live and the people we become.

This means that if we want to become *better* (in any number of ways that could mean), we have to change the interpretive key.

And, sometimes, the only way to do that is to *un-learn* things we were taught to think and believe, sometimes from the earliest stages of our formation as human beings.

Un-learning can be difficult and painful.

On the macro level, American culture is navigating a process of *un-learning* right now: We're trying to *un-learn* long-held and unconscious beliefs about substantive concepts like race and gender and sexuality and equity and merit.

We're engaged right now in a serious national conversation about systemic racism, which many argue pervades our institutions, and our laws, and our cultural norms, and our educational infrastructure, and the means by which our society distributes opportunity and access to prosperity.

For example, American society generally considers a college degree to be a requisite credential for getting a good job and building a reputable career.

We say that this opportunity is available to anyone who wants it and is willing to work hard for it—but is that true?

College costs a lot of money and not everyone can afford it. Scholarships are available, but, in many cases, getting one requires a student to have strong grades and a variety of extracurricular activities that demonstrate their diligence and their contributions to the community.

To pay for the costs of a college degree, the ticket into upwardly mobile society, a student will generally need access to money, or an abundance of time to get involved in activities outside of school, and the transportation to get there, and parents who can support them in their academic and outside pursuits, and so forth.

This is an oversimplification, of course, but the point is that, when we decide that we're only going to hire a candidate who has a college degree because they're the only ones who are capable of doing the job well, that decision is based on a whole matrix of assumptions about what "capability" means, and we perpetuate a system that uses those assumptions to allocate opportunity.

Many of us here tonight have a stake in, and have benefited from, these conventional assumptions.

But unless we, as a society, are able and willing to *un-learn* those ways of thinking about college and capability that have been ingrained in us our whole lives, it is unlikely that substantive change in racial and economic dynamics in our country will be possible.

Un-learning can also be critically important on an individual level, too, because we all have been trained or acculturated to think about certain things in specific ways that may stand in the way of our growth and prevent us from flourishing as much as we could.

I have experienced this recently in my development as a leader.

I was raised, both personally and professionally, to respect authority and to believe that hierarchical structures are natural and inviolable.

When I was a kid, my dad told my brother and me that, in our house, he was the coach and we were the players.

And in my jobs in political campaigns and the U.S. Senate and in my first synagogue as an associate rabbi, it was always clear to me that there was a boss and I was the employee and I had to do what they told me to do, period.

And, frankly, it never occurred to me that it could work any other way.

But I found out the hard way that, sometimes, it does—and it has to.

I read contemporary leadership literature that says hierarchy is *passé* in the 21st-century; that the world is too complex and moves too quickly for organizations to get bogged down in bureaucratic, hierarchical structures—and that today's employees want and need to feel empowered, trusted, and inspired in order to thrive and do their best work.

Thanks to excellent professional coaching, I was able to reconsider my deeply ingrained beliefs about hierarchy and authority. Only by doing this *un-learning* was I able to expand my narrow view of leadership into a spacious and flexible one and become a nimble, collaborative, and empowering leader.

So, my question for you is: What do *you* need to *un-learn*?

What assumptions, or beliefs, or biases, or ways of thinking are standing in *your* way of becoming the person you want to be?

Tonight is Shabbat Shirah, the Shabbat of song. It's called that because our parashah this week, B'shallach, includes the "Song of the Sea," which our ancestors sang when the sea split and opened the pathway for them to freedom.

The splitting of the sea is so central to the Jewish way of being in the world that we reenact it every day in our prayers by singing "Mi Chamochah."

As part of that liturgy, we say "*shirah chadashah shib'chu g'ulim al s'fat ha-yam*," which means: "The Israelites sang a new song on the shores of the sea."

Why a "new song"? Because throughout their journey, they'd been complaining about how horrible life was in the desert and how great things had been in Egypt.

They were so conditioned to see things in a negative light that each successive experience only served to reinforce their discontent and made them complain even more. They just kept singing the same old song, again and again.

Only now, here at the sea, did they finally find the strength and the will to change their tune.

Instead of complaining, they offered praise; instead of negativity, they saw opportunity; instead of despair, they began to hope.

Only by *un-learning* what they thought they knew were they able to escape the narrow straits and enter the wide expanse, where God and infinite possibility dwell. (Psalm 118:5)

And just as it was for them, *un-learning* the tired and crusty ways of thinking that hold us back is our only way forward, too.

As we stand here again, symbolically, on the shores of the sea, can we find it within ourselves to sing a new song?

If so, I think we'll be amazed by the seas that will split and the pathways to growth and change that will open right before our eyes.