

A Guide To Jewish Practice - Facilitator's Guide

Nathan Weiner

Primer – Values-Based Decision Making

Lesson 1 of 3

Essential Question: What is the role of Torah in our lives?

Objectives: Participants will be able to:

- Name Hillel and Shammai, and tell the story of “on one foot.”
- Offer explanations for the role of Torah in our lives

Materials Needed: Copies of the Babylonian Talmud, *Masechet Shabbat 31a*, Volume 1 of *A Guide to Jewish Practice*, ability to show a video from the internet

Set Induction: (10 minutes) Welcome the participants. For introductions, invite all the participants to share their names, and a Jewish value or Jewish custom, that they hold dear to them. Encourage them to explain why the value or custom is important to them. After everyone has had an opportunity to speak, explain that we will be learning about a process called Values-Based Decision Making, or VBDM. This process is central to all of the material that the three volumes of *A Guide to Jewish Practice* contain.

Exploring the Text:

1. (20 minutes) Show a short video about Hillel and Shammai, by clicking the link <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SIPsITJkSfw> . Explain that we will be studying this particular text today to help us think about Jewish ethics. After viewing, distribute copies of the Babylonian Talmud, *Masechet Shabbat 31a*. Direct participants to this section: “... It happened that a non-Jew came to Shammai and said to him, 'Make me a convert, on condition that you teach me the whole Torah while I stand on one foot.' Thereupon Shammai repulsed him with the builder's cubit he was in his hand. When (the non-Jew) went to Hillel, Hillel said to him, 'What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor: that is the whole Torah, the rest is commentary; go and learn it.'” Break participants into *hevrutot* and instruct each *hevruta* to read this famous story and to discuss the following questions:

- Who had the correct response, Hillel or Shammai? Why?
- What, if anything, is surprising about Hillel's response?
- Hillel says, “The rest is commentary.” What does this mean?
- If Hillel is correct about what Torah is, how are we supposed to view the role of Torah in our lives?
- If the Torah is about ethics, how do we think about mitzvot (commandments) and *halakha* (Jewish law)?
- According to both Hillel and Shammai, what is wisdom in this story?

(10 minutes) Return to the large group, and invite participants to share what they discussed.

Steer the groups to coming to an understanding that Hillel meant that the essence of Judaism is that we are to be ethical creatures, and that the study of Torah helps us to understand how to do that.

Wrapping It Up: (10 minutes) Explain that in our next lesson together, we will be learning about the process of Values-Based Decision Making, which will help us to frame our discussions, as we learn and discuss the material in the three volumes of *A Guide to Jewish Practice*. Explain that the

group must generate a trusting environment. Further, a benchmark of Values-Based Decision Making is that participants must be challenged in their underlying ethical and religious assumptions. This can be difficult and unsettling. As a group, explore what questions or concerns participants are bringing to this.

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Lesson 2 of 3

Essential Question: How has Jews' relationship to *halakha* (Jewish Law) evolved in the modern and post-modern periods, and what is the Reconstructionist approach?

Objectives: Participants will be able to:

- Define *halakha* and provide a brief explanation of its evolution
- Articulate the Reconstructionist approach to Jewish law and ethical decision making

Materials Needed: Copies of “Evolution of Halacha” found here: <http://www.lehrhaus.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/01/Evolution-of-Halacha-Chart.pdf> , copies of *A Guide to Jewish Practice: Volume 1 – Everyday Living*

Set Induction: (15 minutes) Open the lesson by reading this story aloud, which is found in the book, “Rabbi Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld on the Parashah (Torah portion of Each Week),” compiled by Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Sonnenfeld: “It is written, ‘You shall safeguard the matzot.’ (Exodus 12:17) In Hebrew, the word *matzot* has the same letters as *mitzvot* (commandments); thus, the sages explain that the verse can be read as, ‘You shall safeguard the mitzvot.’ In the following story, Rav Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld finds within this teaching of the sages an ethical message:

Rav Yosef Chaim took painstaking care when baking his matzot to ensure that everything should proceed according to the strictest standards, beyond the minimum requirements of the *halacha* (Jewish Law). This stricter standard is known as *mehudar*. It once happened that one of those assisting him in matzoh baking pointed out to him that one of the workers who was kneading the dough was not doing such a good job in terms of the stricter standards. He suggested to Rav Yosef Chaim that the worker be admonished and told to work faster and more efficiently.

Rav Yosef Chaim declined, however, saying, ‘I refuse to distress a poor worker by admonishing him to work harder than he already does, just because I want my matzot to be a notch more *mehudar*! I, for my part, am willing to undergo the greatest effort and expense to improve the quality of my matzoh. Furthermore, I pray that God grant me the merit of having matzoh that meets the strictest standard, and I trust that God will accept my prayer, for God knows how intense my desire is to fulfill this mitzvah in the best possible manner. However, to obtain *mehudar* matzot at the expense of rebuking a poor laborer – the gain in terms of mitzvah quality would be canceled out by the loss!’

Rav Yosef Chaim did not want to achieve a higher standard of ‘kosher for Passover’ matzoh at the expense of hurting the worker’s feelings. Consideration for someone’s feelings is also a mitzvah, as the Torah states, “You shall not hurt the feelings of one another” (Leviticus 25:17). Rav Yosef Chaim added that perhaps this is what the sages had in mind when they said that the words, *safeguard the matzot*, can be read as *safeguard the mitzvot*. This is to teach us, said Rav Yosef Chaim, to take the following approach: ‘When baking matzot, one must remember that there are other mitzvot besides matzah in the Torah, and that care should be taken to observe them scrupulously as well!’”

After reading the story, discuss as a group the following questions:

- What are the competing interests that Rav Yosef Chaim is negotiating in this story?
- How does he go about resolving the conflict?
- Rav Yosef Chaim couches his ethical understanding in terms of *halakha*. If you were in his shoes, how would you do it? Why?
- Does *halakha* function as a force in your life? If so, how? Why or why not?

Exploring the Text:

2. (15 minutes) Distribute a copy of the chart “Evolution of Halacha” to each participant. Point out that this chart is a very basic explanation of the chain of transmission of Jewish law. Encourage participants to look online for deeper understandings or provide a source, such as the one found here: <http://eretzhemdah.org/Data/UploadedFiles/SitePages/273-FileRedirEn.pdf> for further reading. Then, beginning at the top of the sheet, read through the chart and help answer any questions your participants may have along the way. Feel free to use the above source to help you answer questions.

3. (15 minutes) Explain that much of what is traditionally considered to be *halakha* (Jewish law) was codified in the *Shulhan Arukh*. Given that society continually changes and advances, new questions about practice arise and need to be addressed. Among the progressive denominations, both the Reform and Conservative movements have rabbinic bodies that issue *t'shuvot* (responsa). Reconstructionism takes a different approach, and *A Guide to Jewish Practice* is the embodiment of the Reconstructionist approach. Invite a participant to read aloud the Introduction to *A Guide to Jewish Practice; Volume 1 – Everyday Living* from page xix until the bottom of page xxiii. Ask: what is unique about the Reconstructionist approach? What issues may arise from this approach? Is this approach in line with your understanding of the role of *halakha* in your life? Why/why not?

Wrapping It Up: (5 minutes) Tell participants that a basic understanding of *halakha* is one of the many resources important to applying Values-Based Decision Making in our lives. Next week, we will use a specific example to discuss the process of Values-Based Decision Making. In preparation, participants are invited to read on their own the short essay entitled “Reinvigorating the Practice of Contemporary Jewish Ethics” in *A Guide to Jewish Practice: Volume 1 – Everyday Living* beginning on page 579.

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Lesson 3 of 3

Essential Question: What are the steps of Values-Based Decision Making, and how does it function in practice?

Objectives: Participants will be able to:

- Describe the steps of Values-Based Decision Making
- Apply the steps of Values-Based Decision Making to a real life example

Materials Needed: Copies of *A Guide to Jewish Practice: Volume 1: Everyday Living*.

Set Induction: (15 minutes) Break participants into *hevrutot*. Invite all the participants to share with their *hevrutot* a time that an organization they were a part of made a difficult decision. Examples of organizations are: places of worship, non-profit boards, businesses, clubs, etc.... How was it decided that a decision needed to be made in the first place? What ethical, practical and historical norms and considerations went into making the decision? Was the decision made democratically? How was resistance or dissension to the decision managed? What do you think contributed to the decision's success or failure for the organization? Once each *hevruta* has had a chance to share, invite volunteers to share what was discussed. Ask if any themes emerge from both the successful and unsuccessful decisions.

Exploring the Text:

4. (10 minutes) Invite a participant to read aloud the text from page 551 to the top of page 553. Upon completion of the reading, review the eight steps of Values-Based Decision Making. Ask participants to share: At first glance, do you think any step is missing? Are any of the steps extraneous? Why?
5. (20 minutes) Using an example, walk participants through the steps of Values-Based Decision Making. An example you can use is: "I have a family, including a partner and two school-aged children. My partner and I both work; it is difficult to manage, but we do since we limit our work to 40 hours per week, each. I have been offered a promotion, which includes more money, more responsibility, and more hours. My partner intends to continue working, and has left the decision up to me. How do I think it through?" Present each step, and discuss what information may be needed to move onto the subsequent step.
 1. "Determine facts, alternate actions and their outcomes." Possible responses may include: "Do we need the money? How will this affect family time? What values does our family hold most precious? Are there ramifications for my current job/future promotions if I decline?" etc...
 2. "Examine relevant scientific and social scientific approaches to understanding these." Possible materials needed may include: the effects on children whose parents work long hours, the effects on intimate relationships, etc...
 3. "Consider the historical and contemporary context, including the history and rationales of Jewish practice." Possible materials needed may include: the list of Jewish values on pp. 565-578 of *A Guide to Jewish Practice: Volume 1 – Everyday Living*, such as *mishpaha*, *sh'lom bayit*, *parnasa*, etc....
 4. "Look for norms that might exclude some actions." Make a list of familial rules and explore whether deciding to take the promotion violates these rules, etc.
 5. "Assemble and weigh relevant attitudes, beliefs, and values." Have a discussion about the relevant information from steps 1-4, and determine how decision makers are feeling initially.
 6. "Formulate decision alternatives." Now that the research has been done, what are the options?

7. Seek consensus (if a group is deciding.) Is there consensus? Are there any compromises possible that can help to meet the concerns of those who are opposed?
8. Make the decision. If a consensus cannot be reached after carefully looking for compromises, take a vote.

Upon completion of this exercise, invite participants to share their reflections on the process, and its utility for decision making.

Wrapping It Up: (5 minutes) Thank participants for their time, energy, and contributions to the discussions. Invite them to review the Tables of Contents of any or all of the three volumes of *A Guide to Jewish Practice* and to share what they find particularly interesting to discuss. Note that ready-made lesson plans for various units are available at <http://www.rrc.edu/ethics-center/DiscussionGuide>.