

Judaism without Apologies

Feeling Lucky?

Old chassidim like Shimen and young yeshivish types like Yitzy might quibble about the weight we ought to give to popular custom relative to written codes, but, unlike Heidi, they both agree that we ought to be very cautious about casually discarding established norms.

In this post, we'll consider the advantages of fidelity to received tradition – whether it be popular or formalized – for the long-term viability of a society. The structure of the argument is so painfully simple that it alarms me that so few Heidis get it: the social norms that have kept us going this far are more likely to keep us going than the ones that haven't.

Let's start with an example, which I'll take from a context entirely unrelated to our discussion of halacha.

Do you like tapioca? Me neither. It comes from the root of the cassava plant, which is one of the main sources of starch in the South American diet. Cassava root is similar to sweet potato and is one of the root vegetables they use for making those funny-colored potato chip wannabes (often marketed under the Spanish name, yuca). South American tribes have been cultivating cassava for millennia and each has rather complicated and painstaking methods for preparing it for consumption. For example, the anthropologist Joseph Henrich reports that the Tukonoans in the Colombian Amazon use a process involving scraping, grating, washing, boiling, drying for several days and finally baking. If, as Henrich did, you ask them why they go through this complicated rigmarole, they'll tell you that it's simply their tradition.

When consumption of cassava spread to parts of Africa in the 18th century, the traditional methods for preparing it did not always follow. Which, as it turns out, is quite a pity. But there is no way that someone not armed with modern knowledge of food chemistry and toxicology could possibly have anticipated the high incidence of goiters and leg paralysis that developed years later in those parts of Africa and that persist until today.

The Tukonoans were not aware, and could not have been aware, of the connection between their rituals and the prevention of cyanide poisoning in the long-term. The ritual developed in the distant past among some of their ancestors for whatever reason (or for no reason) and presumably slowly proliferated because young people have a slight preference – or maybe more opportunity – for learning rituals from people without goiters and leg paralysis.

I do not mean to infer from this example that traditions typically have some direct salutary effect on public health. Rather, the lesson should be that particular traditions proliferate and survive within a society because they contribute to the society's survival, even if no member of that society actually understands exactly how they do so. We discard such traditions at our peril.

As the late economist Friedrich Hayek puts it: "The cultural heritage into which man is born consists of a complex of practices or rules of conduct which have prevailed because they made a group of men successful but which were not adopted because it was known that they would bring about desired effects." (Law, Legislation and Liberty (<https://libsa.files.wordpress.com/2015/01/hayek-law-legislation-and-liberty.pdf>), p. 17)

Heidi might respond, quite sensibly, that this makes good sense for Tukonoans only as long as they lack the requisite scientific knowledge and remain unaware of methods of cultivating species of cassava low in cyanide. Once they learned such methods, however, their traditions would be nothing but a drag on resources and they'd be wise to abandon them.

This is a strong argument. But it rests on the assumption that we can retrospectively understand precisely how a given tradition contributes to a society's long-term viability. In fact, though, systems of social norms are delicate mechanisms; attempts to demystify them are inherently speculative and attempts to improve them are dangerous.

Tukonoans who switched to sweet cassava might discover, for example, that the lack of cyanide actually makes sweet cassava more attractive to pests and to thieves and that the diminished need for processing cassava lowers the status of those women whose primary contribution to the society is doing just that. They might further discover that discarding one tradition leads to weakening respect for other traditions for which there are no efficient alternatives.

The point is not that it is always worth maintaining every tradition, but rather that abandoning traditions that have proven over time to be useful for reasons that we do not fully understand, is very likely to lead to consequences that we do not anticipate. Before we decide, for example, that the very idea of gender dichotomy ought to be abandoned, we'd be well advised to ask ourselves if we're feeling lucky. I'm not.

(I emphasize again that I'm not making a claim here regarding which traditions are morally superior but rather which traditions are essential for a society's viability. But let's agree that if a society doesn't survive, it's probably also not doing much good.)

Of course, as circumstances change, taking traditions too seriously could itself be harmful. After all, the traditions we received have not been around forever but are rather the unanticipated result of subtle innovation that proved in retrospect to have staying power. Failing to adapt is exceedingly maladaptive.

In fact, perfect conservatism is poorly defined to the point of paradox. Suppose some new custom has spread in the past generation – say, standing up for a bride and groom. Would the perfect conservative reject the newfangled custom in favor of that old-time religion or adopt the tradition as he received it? How entrenched must a custom be before it becomes a member in good standing of that old-time religion? Curmudgeonliness alone can't be the answer.

So, we need mechanisms for adaptation. As we have seen, halacha's mechanisms for adaptation include some combination of intuitive popular practice with reasoned debate and formalization. In the next post, we'll see how and why that combination works.