

Earlier this year researchers determined that there is, in fact, truth in the saying that “the verdict depends on what the judge had for breakfast.”

The study was conducted in Israel by researchers studying parole decisions. They discovered that the time of day of the hearing was more closely tied to parole decisions than both the nature of the crime and the length of the sentence. 65% of hearings early in the day and right after lunch resulted in parole being granted; hearings before lunch and at the end of the day almost always resulted in parole being denied.<sup>1</sup>

John Tierney, *The New York Times*' science columnist, recently wrote an article about a phenomenon called decision fatigue: the idea that our ability to make a decision gets degraded from making hundreds of small decisions throughout the day. The more we choose, the less able we are to make more choices.

Tierney looked at several studies that confirm that we exhaust our brains when making multiple decisions, something can lead to bad decisions or making no decision at all. So after a long morning or afternoon of deciding on case after case after case, those Israeli judges were more likely to avoid making the decision to grant parole -- denying parole, after all, means *not* making a change, which has the least potential for negative consequences.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.pnas.org/content/108/17/6889>

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/21/magazine/do-you-suffer-from-decision-fatigue.html?\\_r=1&partner=rss&emc=rss&pagewanted=all](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/21/magazine/do-you-suffer-from-decision-fatigue.html?_r=1&partner=rss&emc=rss&pagewanted=all)

Now let's think about all the decisions we face in a given day. For some of us it starts with our morning coffee—hot, iced or blended—and, in this modern world, the small decisions continue to add up: which route to drive, when to answer email, what to eat, what to wear, and so on. Faced with what can feel like too many choices we can become paralyzed, unable to make any decision at all. How many of us have spent a morning repeatedly making important decisions at work, only to struggle when it comes to picking a place at which to eat lunch?

One antidote is having fewer choices. While that may sound counter-intuitive, having only a few options to choose from makes it easier for us to decide. One reason is that every choice means a loss of something else. If you choose one option from a selection of five, it means giving up on four options, and that's a big loss in our subconscious. We are only human and are prone to make mistakes or avoid choosing in our efforts to avoid loss.

Now at this point in a sermon, you expect to hear the rabbi tell you how the Torah solves the everyday problem we've been discussing and how our tradition is so forward-thinking. And what do you know?

The Torah teaches us in several places—this week's portion among them—that there are really only two choices we every need to consider: blessing and curse. The portion reads:

“See, this day I set before you blessing and curse: blessing, if you obey the commandments of Adonai your God that I enjoin upon you this day; and curse, if you do not obey the commandments of Adonai your God, but turn away from the path and follow other Gods.”

The midrash on this verse explains that God helps us out even more with this choice, since it’s not really an equal choice: God wants us to pick blessing, we *know* that we should choose blessing... it’s just a question of doing what God tells us.<sup>3</sup>

So how do we choose blessing? How do we as Reform Jews choose blessing, when in this week’s Torah portion alone there are 55 mitzvot—that is, commandments—17 of which are positive and 38 negative? And many of these mitzvot are related to Temple worship and sacrifice—mitzvot we would never be able to follow even if we wanted to! And if we are honest with ourselves, there are some that we don’t even *want* to perform. The on mitzvah about Passover that “none shall be left until morning”—a clear prohibition against saving leftovers—seems to run counter to everything Jewish mothers believe in.

The fact that there are a number of mitzvot that are clearly impossible to follow—and let’s face it, even the most observant Jews are unable to bring sacrificial offerings to the Temple in Jerusalem—means that we need to look beyond the literal meaning of the text. As Reform Jews we are used to looking beyond the literal.

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<sup>3</sup> Devarim Rabbah - from Plaut

You may be surprised that we are not the only Jews who look beyond the literal. Orthodox rabbi, Samson Raphael Hirsch, who is considered the father of modern Orthodox Judaism and is much more liberal than you might expect from an old-time rabbi, taught that this portion teaches us about human nature. The portion teaches that “you shall pronounce the blessing at Mt. Gerizim and the curse at Mt. Ebal.” These two mountains, despite their proximity to each other, could not be more different. Mt. Gerizim, the mountain for blessing, is lush and green, while Mt. Ebal, the mountain for the curse is dry and bleak. Hirsch teaches that:

“The two mountains lying next to each other form accordingly a most telling instructive picture of blessing and curse. They both rise on one and the same soil, both are watered by one and the same fall of rain and dew, the same air breathes over both of them, the same pollen wafts over both of them, and yet, Ebal remains in barren bleakness while Gerizim is clad to its summit in an embellishment of vegetation. In the same way, blessing and curse are not conditional on external circumstances but on our own inner receptivity for the one or the other, on our behavior towards that which is to bring blessing.”<sup>4</sup>

The mountains remind us that we each have the capacity to take the same circumstances for a blessing or for a curse; Hirsch is telling us that bringing blessing to ourselves comes down to an individual willingness to make that choice. Michael Josephson, founder of the Josephson Institute of Ethics and the Character Counts program, echoed something similar in his radio broadcast this week: “Pain is inevitable, but suffering is a choice.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Plaut

<sup>5</sup> [http://charactercounts.org/michael/2011/08/wisdom\\_in\\_20\\_words\\_or\\_fewer\\_pa.html](http://charactercounts.org/michael/2011/08/wisdom_in_20_words_or_fewer_pa.html)

We have to actively choose blessing. The details of all the commandments are there to teach us that in all moments we need to actively choose blessing—from what we eat to what we wear to how we celebrate holidays.

The Torah portion warns us against choosing not to choose. We are warned not to fall into idolatry when we enter the Promised Land, and this is part of the same message. It is always easier to follow the path of least resistance, to avoid choosing, and with so many other decisions to be made while entering the land it was a real risk that the Israelites would suffer from decision fatigue and just worship the local gods—along with our one God—just to avoid picking one. The Torah cautions against worshiping other gods just to be sure your bases are covered. Our task is not to find the easiest path, but to choose blessing.

The study with the Israeli judges at parole hearings led to other studies where it was discovered that a bit of glucose—sugar—could restore a person’s mental energy and make it easier to make good decisions. Yes, a bit of chocolate can help you make the right choice—although I personally believe that chocolate is always the right choice. And while chocolate is my personal favorite, one study found that it is not the taste that perks people up but the actual sugar. Groups that had a delicious milkshake and those that had a less delicious glucose slurry both bounced back from decision fatigue.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/21/magazine/do-you-suffer-from-decision-fatigue.html?\\_r=1&partner=rss&emc=rss&pagewanted=all](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/21/magazine/do-you-suffer-from-decision-fatigue.html?_r=1&partner=rss&emc=rss&pagewanted=all)

Shabbat, then, is like chocolate. After a week of making decisions and dealing with the reality of everyday life we can feel fatigued. Yes, that cookie or punch at *oneg* is more than a delicious snack, and we know that it can change your brain chemistry to relieve decision fatigue. But more importantly, the sweetness of Shabbat offers us a spiritual break—a chance to refresh so we can continue to choose blessing.

The more science teaches us about human beings, the clearer it becomes that one of the truths in the Torah is that we are not built to work non-stop—we need a break, and Shabbat is our chance to start fresh and continue to choose blessing.

This Shabbat, may we all find that refreshment, may we all find the will to choose blessing, and may we all have a Shabbat of peace. Shabbat shalom.