# Creating a Vibrant Conservative Community: A Layperson's View of Halakhic Engagement at Congregation Beth Sholom

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For many Conservative Jews, truly engaging with halakhah—the living tradition of Jewish law and practice—is the purview of rabbis and scholars. Congregants at Conservative synagogues can see Judaism as core to their identities and connect with certain aspects of halakhah without thinking of their Judaism in terms of halakhah or how halakhah affects their own observance; if these individuals consider halakhah, it is often as a distant or abstract concept – something that is peripheral to who they are. At its worst, halakhah can seem stale, elitist, and irrelevant. But many Conservative Jews miss what it can be at its best: a collective language, a shared practice, and a dynamic force that shapes the spiritual and intellectual lives of individuals and communities alike.

How, then, can we help more Conservative Jews experience the best of halakhah and ultimately choose to "opt in" to a halakhic life? We need to create joyous, unapologetically Jewish spaces where a critical mass of individuals are invested in living halakhically. For people not already invested in such a lifestyle, these spaces will offer a taste and a chance to opt in. The Conservative Movement once predicated its youth programming, including Ramah and United Synagogue Youth, on this very premise.

At Congregation Beth Sholom (CBS) in Teaneck, New Jersey, there is a critical mass of individuals who have committed to living in a halakhic community. That's not to say that every member of our kehillah has a certain level of halakhic observance, or that each individual considers halakhah to be a key aspect of his or her Jewish identity. CBS welcomes individuals with different levels and conceptions of halakhic practice to actively come together as part of our halakhic community. We strive to cultivate a culture

of halakhic engagement that is both deeply rooted in tradition and truly responsive to modern needs. When we succeed, we approach halakhah with *kavvanah* and creativity, offering an array of educational initiatives, leadership opportunities, and grass roots programming that appeals to different swaths of our community.

In this article, I analyze specific CBS halakhic learning opportunities, with a special focus on who leads and how that leadership is manifest. "Top-down halakhah" refers to rabbi-led teaching and decision making, where the *mara de'atra* guides the community through structured learning and halakhic processes. "Middle-out halakhah" captures the importance of skilled laypeople, who step into the role of educator and lead their peers in halakhic inquiry. Finally, "bottom-up halakhah" describes grass roots learning initiatives in which halakhic engagement is largely self-directed but still highly effective.

By examining how halakhic learning unfolds across these three dimensions through examples from the Jewish textual tradition and the CBS community, I try to paint a picture of Jewish law as dynamic, iterative, and deeply intertwined with the rhythms of communal and personal life. More than painting a picture, I hope this article challenges us to think through two related things: how we can nurture communities of all types that energize individuals to truly "opt in" to and take ownership of halakhah, and what it would take to create a broad, multigenerational halakhic culture that is both intellectually rigorous and spiritually fulfilling.

## Top-Down Halakhah

Top-down halakhah has a strong analog in the Torah (and rabbinic literature), where the main expression of halakhic transmission and learning can be described as "top down" or "frontal." God gives the majority of his instruction to Moses on Mount Sinai, with Moses bringing the law to the children of Israel. Sometimes, it's clear that there's some larger impulse for God giving a set of laws to Moses – as with the Passover laws transmitted to Moses (and Aaron) before the last plague in Egypt (and Israel's impending freedom);[1] In other cases, there is no clear logic within the Torah for why certain laws are given when they are, although our sages certainly try to

[1] See Exodus 12:1–28, 43–51; 13:3–10. While these laws associated with the Passover sacrifice are located within the larger Passover story, laws about Passover and its sacrifices are included in many other places in the Torah outside the Exodus narrative; see, for example, Exodus 34:18, 25; Leviticus 23:5–8; Numbers 28:16–25; Deuteronomy 16:1–8.

connect some of these laws to proximate narratives or events. There are a few instances where a slight wrinkle is introduced to this paradigm of top-down halakhah. The classic story of the daughters of Zelophehad toward the end of *Bamidbar* is one of those instances:

> The daughters of Zelophehad—son of Hepher, son of Gilead, son of Machir, son of Manasseh—of the family of Manasseh, son of Joseph, came forward. These were the names of his daughters—Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah. They stood before Moses, Elazar the priest, the chieftains, and the whole assembly, at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, saying: "Our father died in the wilderness. He was not part of the faction that banded together against the Eternal—the faction of Korah—but died for his own sin; he had no sons. Why should our father's name be withdrawn from his family just because he had no son? Give us a holding among our father's kinsmen!" Moses brought their case before the Eternal, and the Eternal said to Moses: "Zelophehad's daughters are speaking truth—you should certainly give them a hereditary holding among their father's kinsmen and transfer their father's share to them. Further, speak to the Israelites as follows: 'If someone dies without leaving a son, you should transfer his property to his daughter. If he has no daughter, you should give his property to his brothers. If he has no brothers, you should give his property to his father's brothers. If his father had no brothers, you should give his property to his nearest relative in his own family, who will inherit it.' This will be the procedure law for the Israelites," in accordance with the Eternal's command to Moses (Numbers 27:1–11).[2]

The top-down halakhic paradigm is true to form in verses 6–8. Here, God speaks to Moses, tells him what the law should be, and then commands Moses to transmit that law to the Israelites. But verses 1–5 introduce a complication to this paradigm. Instead of appearing as part of a larger group of

[2] For translations of the Tanakh in this article, I've used the most recent NJPS as a base with my own alterations included throughout.

laws (which is common in broad swaths of the Torah),[3] the laws in verses 6–11 are fronted by a short pericope that explains how they came to be. In this text, the daughters of Zelophehad expose a key gap in the Israelite system of inheritance law to Moses, as the system does not account for men who die without male heirs. This is not simply an academic exercise for Zelophehad's daughters; their father recently died without any sons, and so they have standing. Here, the people's own experiences and questions trigger God to create a new law and transmit it to Moses, who is entrusted with giving it to the people.

The *mara de'atra* at CBS, Rabbi Joel Pitkowsky, also leads the congregation in halakhic exposition when the community is confronted with new situations. In the mid 2010s, congregational leadership brought the question of whether the *shaliaḥ tsibbur* could, or should, include *immahot* within the *Amidah*. Instead of simply deciding himself (or in consultation with congregational leadership) whether or not to allow *immahot*—as would be his right as *mara de'atra*—Rabbi Pitkowsky decided to turn the question into a halakhic learning experience. He did his own research on the topic and gathered a range of opinions (with different practical implications) that he could support. Over a period of six–twelve months, Rabbi Pitkowsky, along with the ritual committee and other leadership, shepherded the shul through a process that included congregational surveys, discussions, and learning, all in the service of creating new halakhic parameters for davening at CBS. As the centerpiece of this process, the rabbi led various learning opportunities during which members of the congregation could read and discuss *teshuvot* connected to the inclusion of *immahot* from different ideological and denominational viewpoints. Members of CBS grappled with age-old Jewish questions and modern sensibilities, all while gaining a greater appreciation for the strategic choices and exegetical approaches that differentiated these halakhic building blocks from one another.

Importantly, Rabbi Pitkowsky and synagogue leadership did not begin this process with a "right answer" that they wanted the shul to get to on the question of "immahot." Instead, success was defined as a well-run process in which individuals had ample opportunities to learn about and discuss the intricacies of the question at hand. In the end, the congregation voted to allow the *shaliaḥ tsibbur* to choose whether or not to include *immahot* within the first paragraph of an *Amidah*; the *ḥatimah* of that first *berakhah* would remain unchanged even if the leader had included *immahot* within

[3] See, for example, Exodus 21–23, Leviticus 17–26, and Deuteronomy 12–26 (the so-called Covenant, Holiness, and Deuteronomic Codes) for different collections of laws within the Torah.

the body of the first *berakhah*, which sidesteps the problem of changing the concluding formula of a blessing.[4] For example, Shabbat morning davening at CBS could include *immahot* in the first paragraph of the *Shaḥarit Amidah* (but not in the *ḥatimah*) and a more traditional *Musaf Amidah*, depending on the decisions of the *sheliḥei tsibbur*. While this solution did not please everyone, it best represents where the congregation was (and is) on this issue.

In a related form of top-down learning, Rabbi Pitkowsky often leads individual sessions for the congregation that explore how new halakhah is created through *teshuvot*. While the learning opportunities connected to the inclusion of *immahot* occurred over a set period of time in order to prime the community for halakhic change, these individual sessions are ongoing and purely *leshem shamayim*, or learning "for the sake of heaven." These learning opportunities, variously offered on Shavuot or at the shul's annual Shabbaton, have focused on Conservative *teshuvot* that respond to hot-button issues. While some Conservative Jews have a basic idea of how the halakhic process works in our movement, fewer have read through and dissected a modern *teshuvah*. By diving into this process of halakhic innovation, the rabbi both draws back the curtain, so to speak, on a core system of Conservative Judaism and invites his congregation to weigh in on the process.

While there are many differences between the story of Zelophehad's daughters and both of these examples of top-down halakhah at CBS, the similarities that obtain are instructive. Each case moves beyond simple paradigms, where halakhic decisions can feel as if they are made "on high"—parallel to, but not part of, the world of real human interaction. In both cases, change occurs as a response to evolving communal needs and through real interactions between a community and its leader. In the biblical pericope, the laws of inheritance are altered because of a complaint brought by Zelophehad's daughters when they see that the current system does not account for them. Moses listens to their account and, through divine consultation, creates a new law to fit the evolving needs of his people. At CBS, some congregants expressed interest in using a liturgy that better fit their spiritual views and needs with Rabbi Pitkowsky, who then led the community in a months-long process of learning that culminated in giving the *shaliaḥ tsib-*

[4] But see the well-known (and accepted) opinion of Rav in b. Berakhot 12b to change the *ḥatimot* of the third and eleventh *berakhot* during the *'aseret yemei teshuvah*, as well as the brief (but enlightening) manuscript discussion in Joseph Tabory, "The Changes to the Amidah Blessings during the Ten Days of Penitence, TheGemara.com (2016) https://thegemara.com/article/the-changes-to-the-amidah-blessings-during-the-ten-days-of-penitence/.

*bur* the option to include *immahot* in the repetition of the *Amidah*.

Halakhic discussion is not an isolated enterprise in either case presented here. Instead, it is an iterative and productive activity. Some of the after-effects of Moses's ruling for the daughters of Zelophehad are felt at the very end of Numbers, where tribal heads from Manasseh come to Moses and note that, if the daughters of Zelophehad, who are from Manasseh and have now inherited property, marry out of the tribe, then some of the tribal territory will be lost. Moses deals with this potential downstream effect by proclaiming that the daughters of Zelophehad have to marry within the tribe so that Manasseh retains its territorial integrity. At CBS, engagement with the halakhic process is not limited to times of communal change. In fact, congregants have a chance to learn about how halakhic decisions are made in our movement at different times throughout the year with deep-dives into Conservative *teshuvot*. The case of Zelophehad's daughters and the two forms of rabbi-led learning at CBS are all strong examples of top-down halakhah—responsive to current needs, deeply connected to the community, and essentially iterative and ongoing.

## Middle-Out Halakhah

In top-down halakhah, the community leader engages congregants in halakhic learning. Middle-out halakhah is still a top-down enterprise, but skilled congregants assume the role of halakhic educator in place of the *mara de'atra*. Middle-out halakhic engagement is evident in the *Tanakh*, although it is not as common as its top-down counterpart. This mode of teaching is potentially present in a number of biblical texts that allude to it in passing; for example, Deuteronomy mentions the "Levitical priests" and "elders of Israel" as enjoining the people, alongside Moses, to keep various aspects of the Law.[5] In addition to these subtle allusions, a few texts do elaborate on middle-out aspects of teaching, including the Deuteronomic example of a group of officials (or potentially scribal functionaries, depending on how one understands the term שוטר) who speak to the troops before battle and excuse those soldiers who meet certain criteria (Deuteronomy 20:1–8).[6] What may be the strongest description of middle-out halakhic engagement

[5] See esp. Deuteronomy 27:1, 9.

[6] While the dynamics in this text are not fully clear, these officials seem to have some standing within the community, although they are not its leader(s). Instead, one would imagine that the leader is an empowered chieftain (as depicted in the book of Judges), a king (as is common later in the history of Israel and Judah), and/or a high priest (potentially to be identified as the priestly speaker in Deuteronomy 20:2–4).

in the *Tanakh* can be found in the book of Nehemiah:

> On the first day of the seventh month, Ezra the priest brought the Torah before the congregation, men and women and all who could listen with understanding. He read from it, facing the square before the Water Gate, from the first light until midday, to the men and the women and those who could understand; the ears of all the people were focused on the scroll of the Torah… And Yeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Yamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Yozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah and (the rest of) the Levites were explaining the Torah as the people were standing there. They [the Levites] read from the scroll, explaining from the Torah of God and giving (it) sense; so they [the people] understood the reading (Nehemiah 8:2–3, 7–8).

In this biblical depiction of middle-out halakhah in action, Ezra, a priest and scribe who leads the newly returned Judean community, is the primary educator, reading the Torah to the population that has come back to Jerusalem from Babylonia. While Ezra teaches the Torah to those "who could listen with understanding," Levitical educators seemingly pick up where Ezra leaves off and explain the Torah to the people. Unlike Ezra, who is described only as reading from the Torah, these Levites both read from the scroll and explain it to the people so that they can make sense of the ideas therein. In this pericope, the Levites act as halakhic intermediaries of sorts, both reading the Torah and interpreting it in order to ensure that its ideas are accessible to the larger populace. While the Levites are somewhat set apart from the rest of the returnees through their education and tribal affiliation, they clearly connect with the rest of people, intermingling with them and teaching them Torah in such a way that it can be understood.

At CBS, congregants (regardless of tribal affiliation) draw on their knowledge and talents to become middle-out halakhic educators. In this role, individuals can volunteer to lead one-off sessions at the shul's annual learning Shabbaton or teach "Mini U's" that dive into different aspects of a single topic over three lessons. Although many Shabbaton sessions and "Mini-U's" do not focus on halakhic issues per se, some do cover law, often from a practical perspective. In addition to these regular opportunities for

middle-out teaching, congregants at CBS are also empowered to propose and lead extemporaneous educational undertakings that delve into different aspects of halakhah.

In January 2024, the CBS Shabbaton featured sessions especially connected to ideas of Israel, Zionism, and contemporary Judaism in light of the horrific events of October 7th and their aftermath. A number of sessions at that Shabbaton dealt with halakhic issues, including one concentrated on the laws of war. This session drew on *hilkhot milḥamah* from the *Tanakh*, the Talmud, various Rishonim, and more modern *posqim* to paint a complex and varied halakhic picture of a topic that had been all but theoretical for centuries but is unfortunately more timely now than ever. The congregant who led this session is an esteemed scholar who has real facility for the sources he employed but is not an expert on Jewish laws of war. Instead, he volunteered to lead a halakhic discussion on a timely topic during a session set aside for open inquiry, when congregants are encouraged to lead their peers in learning, whether or not they are specialists on the topics in question.

After the passage from Nehemiah quoted above, the Levites come together with the priests and heads of the ancestral houses to learn more Torah with Ezra. They read about Sukkot and its customs and ostensibly instruct the people how to observe the festival, so that the people could then go and build *sukkot* themselves. The Levites' instruction is timely, teaching the people about the festival of Sukkot just when it should have been celebrated. While the topic could not have been further from Sukkot, the individual who led the Shabbaton session on *hilkhot milḥamah* similarly chose a germane and fitting subject to explore. Both examinations of halakhah were immediately applicable, although under dramatically different circumstances.

In the first half of 2025, another congregant led a three-session "Mini-U" focused on Jewish rituals of death and dying. While "Mini-U's" are premised on lay teaching and learning, they do not necessarily focus on halakhah. The community member who led this "Mini-U" incorporated Jewish law and halakhic discussions within the larger framework of death in Judaism. The leader now works in the funerary field and is well versed in both Jewish death practices and halakhah, although he is not necessarily an expert on the halakhot of death. He leveraged his professional skills and interests to teach other congregants about an integral halakhic topic that, while potentially less taboo than it once was, is still not as discussed and studied as it should be. In explaining the Torah to the returning Judeans eager to better under-

stand their own tradition, the Levites leaned on their professional training as well to expound on halakhic ideas that were clearly not common topics of discourse during the time of Ezra.[7]

In addition to these structured opportunities for middle-out teaching, CBS community members are encouraged to act on their own ideas for halakhic initiatives. A number of congregants have been studying Talmud in the current *Daf Yomi* cycle, and one of them came up with a creative way to engage others in this learning on a limited basis. For *Masechet Makkot*, one of the shortest tractates in the Talmud, this congregant brought together a group of middle and high school students to commit to learning the tractate on the *Daf Yomi* cycle. While some of these students were actively engaged with Talmud through school, others were not, and almost none had regularly learned Talmud outside of school before. Over a number of Shabbatot, this individual gathered the students to connect with one another and discuss the halakhic and aggadic highlights of *Masechet Makkot* from the past week, further reinforcing their learning. He also told any of the participants who were interested about an online Haredi *Daf Yomi* program that had resources to augment their daily study, including videos posted by learners from around the world, easily digestible summaries of the *daf*, and more.

This example of middle-out learning, like the case of the Levites in the time of Ezra, exposed individuals to halakhah in new settings with strong results. While not fully clear, the passage from Nehemiah above implies that the exiles who returned to Jerusalem were communally engaging with Torah in Jerusalem for the first time during the public reading of the text. This unique opportunity caused the people to start observing specific laws, including the building of *sukkot* for the upcoming holiday, and to react strongly to what they heard from Ezra and the Levites.

For middle and high school students learning *Masechet Makkot*, engaging with Talmud outside of a classroom setting and among friends from shul allowed them to explore and relate to Jewish texts in new ways. Moreover, it pushed these kids to grow as both individuals and learners. In this *Daf Yomi* program, participants did the learning and preparation themselves because they wanted to, not as a requirement for school. Although the learning at-

[7] It is not explicitly stated in the text that the Levites here are teaching about ideas that were not common topics of discussion. This can be derived from the verses immediately after those quoted above (Nehemiah 8:9–12), where the people's initial reaction at hearing the public recitation and explanation of the Torah is to weep (which one would not expect if these ideas were already common knowledge in the community); they have to be instructed by Ezra, Nehemiah, and the Levites to instead celebrate with those around them.

mosphere was relatively informal, participants felt responsible to the larger group, so they continued to engage and grapple with the text even if there were no grades involved. Participants learned as much from their peers as they did from the text itself. The leader of this group also tried to instill in participants how remarkable it was that they were engaging in *Daf Yomi* as middle and high school students and pushed them to understand that if they continued to seriously learn Jewish texts outside of school, they would develop skills and cultivate knowledge that few do, both in our movement and beyond. Indeed, one of the strongest effects of this *Daf Yomi* program was how it exposed adolescents to the potentially transformative nature of informal learning opportunities, which are the linchpins for continued Jewish growth as one leaves the structure of school and enters adulthood.

Another potentially transformative effect of this *Daf Yomi* program was how it challenged participants to see themselves within the larger Jewish world. All of the participants in this program were part of CBS and came from Conservative Jewish homes. Their conceptions of Judaism, whether they knew it or not, were heavily colored by the fact that they now lived (and most had grown up) in Northern New Jersey, with its strong Jewish culture. Additionally, many went to pluralistic or Modern Orthodox day schools throughout the school year and attended pluralistic, Conservative, or Modern Orthodox camps over the summer. Those individuals who used the online *Daf Yomi* program encountered videos and other materials made by Jews from around the world—from South Africa to Australia, Europe, and South America. Participants got a real taste of the geographical diversity of our people and the differences that may come with that diversity. Additionally, the participants who engaged with the online *Daf Yomi* program were often presented with materials that came from a (radically) different *hashqafah* than what they were used to. While these perspectives could pose some difficulties, the larger Shabbat discussion groups that gave participants opportunities to digest what they were learning were also places for them to understand similarities and points of departure between their own perspectives and those expressed in materials from the online program. Encountering these materials gave participants a way to engage with diverse Jewish viewpoints in a familiar space. Moreover, it concretized for participants the idea that the *Daf Yomi* project in particular, and a commitment to engaging with halakhah more generally, can be a point of connection for communities and individuals across ideological and geographical lines of difference.

This idea of Jewish learning as a unifying force is present in the text from Nehemiah as well. In that text, the community of returnees from Babylonia gathers together in Jerusalem to engage with Torah, although this community is far from homogenous. The previous chapter in Nehemiah details the different ancestral locations within Judea, Benjamin, and the wider land from where the exiled families (if not the individuals themselves) had originally come from and to which they returned (Nehemiah 7:6–60); the gathering in Jerusalem crosses those geographical boundaries and ostensibly includes returned exiles from each of these locales. Moreover, Ezra and the Levites explicitly teach Torah to both men and women together (Nehemiah 8:2–3), and because the text notes that "the entire people were assembled," we can infer that attendees from different social, economic, and religious strata came together here as well, to say nothing of the different viewpoints or experiences these individuals must have had.[8]

## Bottom-Up Halakhah

I have dubbed the final type of learning we will investigate in this article "bottom-up halakhah." Each of the other forms of halakhic engagement that we have encountered are led by someone, whether that individual is the leader of the community or a learned layperson. In bottom-up halakhic engagement, a layperson may organize the circumstances in which learning takes place, but there is no leader to speak of. Instead, bottom-up halakhic engagement is characterized by individuals taking up the mantle of learning themselves, often in small groups. They may have broader latitude over what, how, and even when they want to connect with halakhah. The leader here can plan certain aspects of the initiative, including setting intentions and larger goals for engagement, helping participants with questions that arise during learning, or even organizing when and how participants should come together. But this individual typically does not develop source sheets or bring others on a highly curated learning journey. Instead, participants take the initiative and wrestle with halakhah themselves.

Classical Jewish sources are overwhelmingly created by and cater toward the elite (in some sense of the word), so examples of bottom-up halakhah are relatively sparse.[9] Still, there are a few instances where subsets of the

[8] For an idea of the different social, economic, and religious groupings among the returned exiles, see Nehemiah 7:5, 72; 8:13.

[9] Notwithstanding the times when the people's collective initiative is praised in the Tanakh,

population come together and take on halakhic *ḥumrot*, or stringencies, themselves. A good example of this is recounted in the Talmud with the so-called *Humra deRabbi Zeira*:

> Rav Yosef said Rav Yehuda said (that) Rav said: Rabbi (Yehuda haNasi) decreed (that) in the fields, if (a woman) saw (blood on) one day, she must sit (for) six (days without a discharge) and that (first day—as if she were menstruating, even though she could be only a minor *zava* who is impure for one day). (If she sees blood for) two (days), she must sit (for) six (days without a discharge) and those (first two days, for a total of eight days—as if she were a minor *zava* for a day and menstruating for a day). (If she sees blood for) three (days) she must sit (for) seven clean (days, for a total of ten days—as she might be a greater *zava* who must count seven clean days). Rabbi Zeira said: the daughters of Israel were stringent with themselves, so that even if they see a drop of blood like (the size of) a mustard (seed), they sit seven clean (days) for it (as if they are greater *zavot*) (b. Niddah 66a).[10]

The gemara above conveys two related ideas about women's impurity as a result of vaginal discharge. The first, which was only operative in "the fields" (places where there were no rabbinic authorities), presents a stringent heuristic that tries to eliminate doubt connected to a woman's purity.[11] This ruling was instituted from the top, by Rabbi Yehudah haNasi, with no mention in the text of how it was accepted by women themselves. The idea related by the third-generation Amora, Rabbi Zeira, also tries to eliminate doubt connected to women's purity, this time through a *ḥumrah* that the "daughters of Israel" took upon themselves, not through a rabbinic ruling. Importantly, the statement of Rabbi Zeira is instituted from the bottom up; although it is conveyed by a rabbi in our gemara, it does not come about through a top-down decree. Instead, the idea for this *ḥumrah* seemingly

including Moses's response to the prophesying of Eldad and Medad—"if only all the Eternal's people were prophets" (Numbers 11:29)—or the people's famous response when presented with the law at Sinai, "we will do and we will listen" (Exodus 24:7).

[10] The translation here is an adaptation of the Koren (Steinsaltz) Talmud.

[11] For this interpretation of "in the fields," which is now the de facto (although certainly not the only possible) understanding here, see Rashi's comment on this word.

came from the same women who were affected by the law; as such, it is a prime example of women taking halakhah into their own hands.[12]

Two examples of recent bottom-up halakhic engagement at CBS illustrate how transformative this type of learning can be. The first case took shape as a way to honor Rabbi Pitkowsky before he went on sabbatical in early 2025. A congregant took it upon himself to organize a community-wide program in honor of the rabbi and set a goal of studying the entire Mishnah as a congregation before the sabbatical began. While there was initially some skepticism over whether we could accomplish this goal, the congregant in charge of this endeavor pushed through, putting together a shared spreadsheet that included each chapter of the Mishnah and encouraging individuals and small groups of congregants from across the CBS community to sign up to learn. As with the construction of the *Mishkan*, individuals volunteered to contribute what they could toward this common goal and, in so doing, came together in a way that was nothing short of spectacular. People signed up for single chapters, pledged to learn entire *masekhtot*, and, at the end, studied whatever chapters were left to ensure that the congregation could meet its goal. Congregants read the Mishnah in translation, in the original Hebrew, and in a mix of the two, with and without the help of various commentaries. Individuals signed up to learn, friends learned in groups, couples volunteered to learn as one, families learned together, and grandparents took advantage of the opportunity to learn with their grandchildren.

This initiative was a wide-ranging, bottom-up endeavor that energized congregants from all walks of life to personally engage with halakhah in the service of something bigger. As such, it had an oversized impact on our congregation. One individual took on learning all of *Masekhet Ḥallah* because he was a regular (and accomplished) challah baker. This initiative gave him a reason to study the debates and learn the halakhah around a practice that is directly connected to his own life, helping to enrich and reinforce the ritual aspect of something that could otherwise slip into the mundane.

At the *siyyum* to celebrate this communal achievement and honor our *mara de'atra*, we heard from a number of individuals who were especially affected by this initiative. One was an older couple, neither of whom had studied Mishnah independently before, who went on to discuss what it was like for them to learn from this foundational Jewish text as both a first-time

[12] So the Meiri on b. Berakhot 31a. Other *mepharshim* see a rabbinic basis for this *ḥumrah*; for more, see Miriam Berkowitz, "Reshaping the Laws of Family Purity for the Modern World" (approved September 13, 2006), 12–13, https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/public/halakhah/teshuvot/20052010/berkowitz_niddah.pdf.

*ḥevruta* and part of a larger community. Another group that told its story was a grandfather and his two young grandchildren; while the grandfather was well-versed in Torah, the trio were learning Mishnah together for the first time. When they learned chapters of *Masechet Sukkot*, this group went beyond the text, reinforcing that learning and bringing it to life by creating edible models of what they had studied. In both groups, the initiative spurred individuals to forge real learning partnerships, all while engaging with special people in their lives in new ways.

This second example of bottom-up halakhic engagement at CBS, like the initiative to study the entire Mishnah as a congregation, has a strong intergenerational learning component, although here intergenerational engagement through text is the goal, as opposed to a potential (desirable) outcome. In our community, a number of Orthodox synagogues run parent-child learning *motsei Shabbat* in the fall and winter and normally attract dozens of participants. After some CBS members attended a few of these sessions and experienced what it was like to regularly learn with their children in an energetic *beit midrash* setting, two individuals decided to start a similar program at CBS.

Parent-child learning at CBS takes advantage of early Shabbat start-times to offer monthly programming on Saturday night in the fall and winter; during the spring and summer, this learning shifts to Shabbat afternoon, after *kiddush*. A hallmark of parent-child learning is the inherently multivocal and bottom-up nature of the program. Each *ḥevruta* of (grand)parents and (grand)children chooses its own course of study depending on the interests and abilities of the learners involved, from reading and discussing Torah in translation to probing the depths of a sugya of Gemara in its original language (and everything in between). For those *ḥevrutot* that want to participate but do not know what to study, there are always engaging materials available connected to the weekly *parashah* or an upcoming holiday. In addition to *ḥevruta*-based text study, participants can expect snacks (including kosher pizza for sessions after Shabbat), prizes, games, and the unrivaled din of a *beit midrash*. The program attracts a wide range of learners, including children in both day school and public school, (grand)parents who regularly study Torah, those with some background but without a regular learning practice, and individuals who are relatively new to Jewish learning.

Participants in parent-child learning understand what makes the program special. For (grand)parents, it is an amazing opportunity to learn closely with (grand)children, to demonstrate for them that the study of

Torah is a core value and inculcate them with a lifelong love of learning. Kids enjoy engaging with Torah over snacks in a laid-back atmosphere, spending time with friends, winning prizes, developing text skills, and getting an opportunity to share the knowledge they have acquired outside of a classroom setting with some of the people they love the most. No matter their age, learners come out of the program having learned something new and with a drive to continue that learning in the weeks and months to come.

In the *Humra deRabbi Zeira*, the way the daughters of Israel adopt a *ḥumrah* for how to deal with vaginal bleeding is deceptively simple. The brevity of the text smoothes over the inevitable complications this process of bottom-up halakhic change would have entailed; a critical mass of Jewish women would have potentially needed to bridge socioeconomic, geographical, religious, and other differences to achieve the communal buy-in needed to codify this halakhic practice in the first place and make it stick over the long term. The Meiri notes that the *Humra deRabbi Zeira* came about because a core of "scrupulous" women (*benot zerizot*) decided together that they would set themselves apart for seven days no matter the length and type of bleeding; in so doing, this group created a standard not just for themselves, but for the Jewish community as a whole.[13]

In the *Humra deRabbi Zeira*, as with the two CBS initiatives explored above, individuals came together in service of Jewish Law. Moreover, these three examples of bottom-up halakhic engagement reinforce the importance of halakhah as a cornerstone of contemporary community and a link that simultaneously connects us to our past and our future. Both in studying the Mishnah as a congregation and at parent-child learning, "scrupulous" individuals set the bar for others, showing them that acts of bottom-up learning and halakhic engagement are important. A few congregants, including the person who suggested the idea of studying the entire Mishnah in the first place, closely followed the Mishnah sign-ups over months and learned any free *masekhtot* to ensure that the congregation could complete its goal on time. In the case of parent-child learning, a core group of *ḥevrutot* (including the individual who suggested CBS adopt this program and the congregant who now runs it) not only make an effort to attend each monthly session but reach out to others to invite them to participate as well. Without core groups, it is doubtful whether these two bottom-up initiatives would have gotten off the ground, let alone thrive as they have.

[13] See the Meiri on b. Berakhot 31a, where this *ḥumrah* is presented as an example of a "conclusive halakhah" (*halakhah pesuqah*).

## Conclusion

Halakhah, when approached with intentionality and creativity, can become a unifying communal force that invites participation, fosters ownership, and deepens connection. When we get things right, halakhic engagement at CBS is not confined to the pulpit; it is woven into the fabric of communal experience, shaped by rabbis, lay leaders, and congregants alike. Whether through structured rabbinic teaching, peer-led inquiry, or grassroots initiatives, CBS endeavors to make halakhah dynamic, inclusive, and deeply personal.

The challenge we all face is to construct communities that truly showcase the joy and meaning of halakhah; where halakhic discourse is accessible, compelling, and relevant; where Jews of all backgrounds "opt in" to a halakhic life that is communally focused, individually fulfilling, and spiritually alive. While this article outlines what a halakhah-centered community looks like at CBS, we all know that what works for one congregation may not work for another. To make this article more actionable, I will finish with a few key takeaways from the initiatives described above that can be adapted to fit any circumstance:

1. **Find inspiration anywhere, even from other communities.** CBS's parent-child learning was inspired by similar initiatives in neighboring Orthodox synagogues. What other ideas exist adjacent to our communities that we could adapt to our own needs?

2. **Design content-rich initiatives that are broadly accessible.** The organizer of the community-wide Mishnah study worked hard to get different congregational cohorts involved. It is easy for us to constrain ideas to the audiences most likely to be receptive to them. What would happen if we did that less often?

3. **Lean in to the expertise of congregants.** A CBS member with professional experience in the funerary field led a Mini-U on Jewish end-of-life rituals. What kind of expertise remains untapped that we can leverage to help us have better halakhic conversations?

4. **Create spaces for open inquiry where congregants are empowered to lead.** A member took the initiative to organize a *Daf Yomi* group for teens at shul, encouraging them to connect to Talmud in new ways. How can we catalyze more individuals to step up?

5. **Do not let fear of failure constrain innovation.** Despite initial skepticism, CBS completed its goal of studying the entire Mishnah before the rabbi's sabbatical, thanks to persistent leadership and communal buy-in. All too often, we abandon good ideas because we think they will not succeed. Instead, let's put more effort into removing the obstacles those ideas face.

6. **Leverage halakhah to build bridges across difference.** Multivocality is a cornerstone of the Jewish textual tradition, and an idea that came to the fore as CBS decided whether to include *immahot* in the *Amidah*. At a time when people are struggling to connect—or even talk—to individuals who hold different opinions, we should lean into Jewish life and learning to help us rebuild this lost skill.

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