

Choice and Commitment: An Uneasy Matrimony *By Erica Brown*

Next time you are in the refrigerator section of a supermarket, count the different types of orange juices available. In addition to multiple brands, you can buy juice from concentrate or a premium brand, made from oranges straight from the grove. You can buy juice in sizes ranging from two quarts to two gallons as well as juice that is calcium enriched. Then there is juice with low pulp, no pulp and lots of pulp. Until you identify what kind of orange-juice drinker you are, you may get quite frosty as you face the bewildering array of choices. Just when you have determined your preferred brand, size and style of orange juice, a new product will appear that will once again place you in the throes of decision-making.

These days, commitments to products as banal as orange juice or dish detergent change all of the time because items are always being improved. Sadly, this phenomenon has affected not only how we make relatively unimportant decisions but also how we make life-altering ones. Because various forces in the marketplace want us to change our commitments and continue making choices,

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we perhaps do more decision-making than ever before. We see this in the expanding number of choices consumers can make but also in how often we, and those around us, change jobs, home locations and partners. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has written cogently on the sea change in attitude to commitment that globalization has wrought.

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Never before have we been faced with more choices, but never before have the great society-shaping institutions offered less guidance on why we should choose this way rather than that. The great metaphors of our time—the supermarket, cable and satellite television and the Internet—put before us a seemingly endless range of options, each offering the great deal, the best buy, the highest specification, the lowest price. But consumption is a poor candidate for salvation.¹

The days when people retired from jobs they held for thirty-plus years are dwindling. Look around your office. How many people have worked with you for more than five years? How many of us live near friends we've had

for decades? Because of the dizzying pace of change, we find ourselves constantly renegotiating relationships and areas of our lives that we thought were relatively stable. Times like these give particular color to Robert Browning's phrase, "Life's business being just the terrible choice."

The importance of stability and commitment features prominently in the writings of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik. Whether in his discussions of the bond between husband and wife, the link between individual and community or the covenant between a human and the Divine, commitment is one of the Rav's enduring themes.

In one of his essays, the Rav bemoans the loss of commitment to tradition among modern Jews. It seems that in this context, the Rav uses the term modern Jews to imply those who opt out of tradition, lured by the enticements of modernity. These Jews want religion to be simple and undemanding. But the Rav insists that religion is far from an arcadia; it does not present easy answers or a charmed spiritual existence. Instead, religion, he claims, presents us with complex personal and theological choices. While we hope these choices will guide us to commitments, more often than not we reside with the options themselves rather than with any conclusions. Perhaps something unique in our specific place in history has made commit-

ment an anomaly of our day.

Jewish organizations are taking quite a blow from the changes in our style of decision-making. Charities are trying harder to create personalized giving plans. And choosing a synagogue is beginning to resemble shopping in a grocery store. If you can have your orange juice customized, why can't your religion be customized as well? Synagogues and Jewish institutions are bending to these market forces, trying hard to reach out to people with different kinds of programs. Since a daily commitment to *talmud Torah* is often not enough of a motivator, classes are given snazzy titles to attract people. I recall with some embarrassment a series of classes on the Book of Esther that I once gave. A friend suggested I try a more attention-grabbing title for the class. It was during the Clinton intern crisis, and my friend suggested, "Is Monica Lewinsky the Modern-Day Esther?" Troubled by the weak attendance of the class, I caved in to his idea. Never have I had so many eager attendees; those who could not attend shared their interest in the subject with me and asked if I would consider offering the class again at a different time. Those who did participate in the class were exposed to the same material I had been using week after week. They got a dose of yet another popular market phrase: bait and switch.

The attempt to market Judaism can be an exhausting process and one that can come at the price of authenticity. Institutions cannot always stay true to themselves when they are trying to be so much to so many and are almost always, not surprisingly, coming up short.

The difficulty involved in making commitments may be best illustrated by the Jewish singles' scene. Some singles are extremely selective in their choice of whom to date; choices are often based on how well someone fits into the romantic and practical barometers by which they measure success in relationships. Having choices seems like much more fun than making commitments. Not making a commitment leaves one's options wide open, so open

in fact, that many singles spend more than a decade doubting whether they will ever be happily married with children. As the years go by, that possibility can seem more and more remote.

Choice is a privilege. Commitment requires work. It is no surprise then that everywhere we look people complain about "commitment issues." It is only natural that we prefer the distance that choice offers to the effort that commitment demands. It's like that old joke that traveled around Manhattan's Upper West Side: How does a Jewish single woman get cockroaches out of her apartment? She asks them for a commitment.

In Exodus 24:7, the Israelites proclaimed that they would "observe and heed" (*na'aseh venishma*) the demands of the Torah even though its contents had not yet been fully revealed to

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them. This unconditional commitment has been analyzed by Bible commentators for centuries. Rabbi Soloveitchik felt that this kind of behavior was out of character for the Jewish people. The Israelites,

...accepted a distinctive and demanding national destiny for themselves and for their future generations, without prior deliberation and without subjecting the proposition to critical evaluation. Such unqualified, indiscriminating commitments would seem rash and unwise in other spheres of life. The Jews are not known to be a gullible people; they are often inclined to be skeptical and rebellious; they are not easily persuaded.²

The Rav resolved this difficulty by


suggesting that the human mind is composed of a deliberative side, which weighs the pros and cons of each decision, as well as a higher endowment, which allows man to supersede the intellect. The latter, he writes, is "the center of the spiritual personality and constitutes real identity." This is not to suggest that human reason plays no role in our decision-making. Rational processes of analysis are key components of decision-making; they are just not the only or the highest of man's faculties. Our choice of a life partner or profession as well as our choice of a house or car or any other expensive item might come after careful consideration but it will not be the result of a purely rational decision. After all, there are probably multiple potential partners, jobs, homes or cars that fit the criteria on our wish lists. One friend confided in me that she knew she had met her life partner when she had to throw away the "list." "He just didn't fit anything on it."

Commitment follows from the combination of a rational choice coupled with a "supra-rational chemistry," which allows our choices to become uniquely personal. The very act of committing ourselves to our choices creates deeper self-knowledge. The well-known expression, "*Ain simchah kehatarot hasefakot*," "There is no happiness like the resolution of doubts," teaches us that the resolution of doubts creates happiness because it removes us from a state of nagging and bewitching confusion about what to do. The *pasuk* speaks powerfully to the way that commitment helps resolve deep-seated ambiguities we have about the world and about ourselves. Rabbi Dovid Altschuler, the eighteenth-century exegete and author of the *Metzudat David* and the *Metzudat Zion* commentaries, uses this expression in his explication of Mishlei 15:30, "What brightens the eye, gladdens the heart..." While other commentators understand the brightening of the eye as being an aesthetic or intellectual response, Rabbi Altschuler understands it to be the resolution of

doubt. Commitment does not only mean that we are losing an ability to choose. It may also mean that we are gaining a deeper understanding of our values, our needs and ourselves. This process of self-definition brightens the eyes and gladdens the heart.

Market forces and the need to overly customize our choices trap us in the Rav's lower realm of decision-making. We so often find ourselves stuck there, weighing the pros and cons, with the hope that an ever-improving product will appear to simplify our choices. Instead, we need to educate others and ourselves about the value of commitments that get to the very core of our identities and

spiritual centers. Sometimes making a decision—even with all the ambivalence involved—allows us to cut through the sticky tape of ambiguity and reach the margins of self-definition. We can always review our decisions and commitments with the hindsight of experience, but if we stand at the edge of doubt's gaping black hole, we will never get to the point of earnest reflection. Once we hover in that upper realm of commitment, other decisions become easier because they flow from a keener understanding of who we are. Rather than confuse us, this kind of higher decision-making helps each of us confirm and affirm our own identity.

So the next time you visit the supermarket, take on the orange juice aisle with confidence and a strong sense of self. Be the decision-maker you always wanted to be. Find in your favorite brand a higher level of decision-making that helps you identify your spiritual core. As for me, I'll take the calcium-enriched Tropicana (without pulp). 

Notes

1. *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations* (London, 2002), 40.
2. Rabbi Abraham R. Besdin, *Reflections of the Rav*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem, 1979), 90.