

Do you pride yourself on being logical, analytic, and objective? Or maybe you are better described as intuitive, thoughtful, and emotionally-in touch? Do you prefer science and reason to the arts and creativity, or does boundless imagination define your thought processes better than logic and equations? Are you more Sheldon than Penny or more Frankie than Grace? Would you describe yourself as a left-brained thinker or would others instantly recognize that you are more right-brained? This dichotomy between the sides of our brain is ever-present in society: Facebook quizzes and Pinterest photos, self-help books and even scientific theories to try to explain gender all rely on the notion that the brain's two hemispheres are involved in different modes of thinking...and that one frequently dominates the other. This idea...really needs to die.

So, without question, the two hemispheres of our brains do engage in different kinds of information processing. In the vast majority of cases, though, these two hemispheres are in constant communication and work together. In other words we are not right- or left- brained but simply brained.¹ To think otherwise, to accept the pseudoscience of being left-brained or right-brained, is not only misguided but actively harmful.

By attributing certain ways of thinking to one side of the brain, and by suggesting that people excel on only one side, we are inadvertently making the case that certain cognitive abilities are innate, hard-wired, fixed. Girls will never be good at math, for instance, or groundbreaking doctors will never excel at bedside manner are some of the tragic and fallacious consequences that come from this kind of thinking. Yes, of course there are indeed individual differences in cognitive strengths, but the idea that people are left-brained or right-brained needs to die.

While we're at it, the term "rocket scientist," as in, "it doesn't take a rocket scientist to..." needs to die as well. This cliché imposes a boundary of unattainable brilliance that separates the scientist from everyone else and subconsciously discourages kids from getting involved. As Dr. Victoria Wyatt writes, I mean no offense to real rocket scientists — some of my best friends are rocket scientists — and that's exactly the point. They are real people, inhabiting the real world, and with enough hard work and discipline we can become rocket scientists, too².

Perhaps there are actually a large number of commonly-accepted ideas that are inadvertently impeding progress and are ready for permanent retirement. Calculus for example. Not the study of the area under a curve but the university hazing ritual and prescribed gateway to degrees that will never, ever use calculus again. (I can't be the only person in this room who almost failed calculus.)³ These ideas and more are featured in 2015 bestselling book: *This Idea Must Die; Scientific Theories That Are Blocking Progress*. Once these ideas have taken root in our imagination, they become difficult to displace even when shown to be either erroneous or superseded by something better. It is no wonder that physicist Max Planck suggested that science can only progress one funeral at a time. Yet "even after defenders of old practices go to their final resting places," writes Dr. Alex Holcombe in the same book, "the antiquated traditions sometimes endure...a policy doesn't die until someone kills it."⁴

This Yom Kippur, as we meditate on our personal transgressions and what is holding us back from being the people we need to be in 5778, we would do well to apply the same introspection to our community. Ideas and policies restricting growth and potential don't die

¹ Blakemore, Sarah-Jayne. Left-Brain/Right-Brain in *This Idea Must Die*: Pages 299-300.

² Wyatt, Victoria. The Rocket Scientist in *This Idea Must Die*: Pages 22-24.

³ Lih, Andrew. Calculus in *This Idea Must Die*: Pages 475-477.

⁴ Holcombe, Alex. Science is Self-Correcting in *This Idea Must Die*: Pages 369-372.

unless someone kills them...and we have some serious house cleaning to do. Some 3,000 years' worth, to be exact. Our reluctance to do so often makes sense. We are a people taught by culture and tradition to respect our elders and to know that wisdom comes through experience and age. This is true, and the Jewish community needs to be more nimble today than at any time in its past to cope with technological disruption and our rapidly changing demographics.

So, let's do this. What ideas in Jewish tradition need to die?

First, I would posit, is the statement that our synagogue welcomes interfaith couples.

I trust I have your attention now.

At first blush, not only is there nothing wrong with this idea but it is actually a statement of our highest values as a community. **Of course** we want to welcome people of all stripes — those who are intermarried and those who are in-married, those who were once married and those who are never married. We want to be audaciously hospitable...and I would argue this statement actually stands in our way.

“We welcome interfaith couples” was born during a divisive time in Reform Judaism’s past when few rabbis would officiate at interfaith ceremonies. Saying “we welcome you in our congregation but we won’t sanctify your marriage” was an impossible dance that damaged many Reform Jews’ connection to their synagogue and its clergy. It’s a question that is now settled: a clear majority of Reform rabbis, and virtually all of the next generation, recognize that the only way to ensure Jewish continuity, to bring people closer to Torah, is to embrace the people they embrace rather than turning them away. We have long known this, we have long done this, and it’s time to retire the slogan that marginalizes, that “others,” so many in our community. Our synagogue, Reform synagogues, ARE interfaith couples — and gay couples, and interracial couples, and in-married couples and unmarried individuals. We are stronger for it and it’s time our language reflected it. It is a principled statement not well suited to Twitter, but the same is true for most things actually worth reading.

A second idea that I would posit needs to die is the belief that a mitzvah is a good deed. Born perhaps of Reform Judaism’s emphasis on ethical mitzvot over those more technical in nature, this sterile translation threatens to undermine the core concept in Jewish tradition. While a mitzvah can indeed be good or beneficial, we do good deeds because they seem nice; we do good deeds when it’s convenient; we do good deeds because we have some extra money this month or because it makes us happy to help others. Mitzvot — commandments, obligations, reflexes — we do even when we are tired, even when we don’t feel like it, even when doing so comes at a great personal cost because it is at the core of our being to constantly strive for the realization of our highest values.

An embrace of a Jewish life **is** an embrace of mitzvot. When coupled with Reform Judaism’s expanding repertoire and ethicization of ritual,⁵ mitzvot serve to connect us to the world beyond ourselves. They are the actions that habituate us to say “yes,” to unflinchingly do the right thing, to connect with our God...whether it feels good to us as individuals in the moment or not.

Finally, we need to talk about something vital to the future of Reform Judaism. The idea that the Reform Movement is the catch-all for the unaffiliated, the avowedly secular, and the simply

⁵ Wolf, Arnold Jacob. Back to the Future: On Rediscovering Commandments in *Duties of the Soul*: Pages 19-27.

lazy in the Jewish community really needs to die. On one hand, so many marginally-affiliated Jews casting their lot with us inflates our numbers and gives us considerable clout as the largest movement in American Jewish life. On the other, it's difficult to maintain intellectual rigor and moral clarity while leaving open our doors to those for whom apathy is the ultimate arbiter of their faith.

The Reform Movement has long struggled to square the circle of emphasizing both individual autonomy and commanded-ness. Being told to do something makes us bristle, as when we were teenagers told to clean up our rooms, yet we endeavor to live our lives with God as our covenant partner. Reform Judaism operates in the grey, liminal space of holding us accountable for our personal autonomy. It requires intention and sacrifice and action to continue to be a verb, reform, rather than a noun, reformed. I would trade scores of people from the ranks of Reform Judaism to never hear the words "I don't keep kosher, I'm Reform" again, a statement whose very logic is antithetical to Reform Judaism. Reform Judaism isn't an excuse; it must be a source of enrichment and empowerment.

Music to my ears? "I don't keep kosher; my religious tradition respects my autonomy to make knowledge-based choices, and after careful consideration I have decided that while I must be conscientious about what I put in my body, the rules around kashrut obstruct rather than further my spiritual elevation in the modern day." Again, too long for Twitter, but most worthwhile things are. For the Reform ethos of choice through knowledge to survive, to be anything other than our ancestors' choices when they possessed the knowledge, we need to reaffirm our core principles of ethical monotheism and sacred obligation — we need to affirm that we have core principles — even if it comes at the expense of excluding those who disagree with us.

I could go on and on and on...but there are only so many soapboxes on which I am willing to stand in any one sermon. Once an idea has taken root in our imagination, it becomes difficult to shake...even when shown to be erroneous, superseded, or detrimental. Small wonder that physicist Max Planck suggested that science can only progress one funeral at a time. The same phenomena is all too true in the Jewish community as well. Commonly held ideas that are actually restricting our potential don't die unless someone kills them...and we have some serious house cleaning to do.

As we meditate on our personal transgressions and what is holding us back from being the people we need to be in 5778, we would do well to apply the same introspection to our larger community. I hope the three ideas I raised this morning — that we need to move beyond a previous generation's fight over welcoming interfaith couples to recognizing that we ARE interfaith couples; that mitzvot are not good deeds to be performed to earn a gold star but obligations toward the realization of the world in which we want to live; and that Reform Judaism thrives on action and not apathy — sparked some ideas in you as well. I hope you will join me in the Chapel following services this morning to brainstorm collectively, or further debate this concept at your respective break-the-fasts this evening, for together we must ensure Judaism holds its core values while shedding these harmful ideas quickly enough to survive another 3,000 years.

Ken Yehi Ratzon, May this Be God's Will.