

**“Elu v’Elu: Holding the Truth in Both Hands”**  
**Rabbi Marc Margolius**  
**West End Synagogue, Rosh Hashanah Day One 5775/2014**

You may have heard of the shul whose new rabbi became embroiled in a controversy. Every week, when the time came to chant the Shema, half the congregation would stand, the other half would sit. Those who stood screamed at those who sat, “That’s not our tradition!” And those who sat screamed at those who stood, “That’s not our tradition!” This went on week after week. It was driving everyone crazy.

Finally, the new rabbi had a great idea. She brought representatives from each group to visit the shul’s last remaining founding member. They gathered around his bed in the nursing home.

First, those who stood for the Shema asked the old man: “Wasn’t it always the tradition in our synagogue to stand for the Shema?” “No,” the old man whispered. “That was definitely not the tradition.”

The other delegation jumped up in triumph. “So, we’re right!” they said. “It’s always been our tradition to sit for the Shema!” The old man shook his head: “No,” he whispered. “That wasn’t the tradition either.”

The annoyed rabbi screamed: “I can’t take this anymore! Do you know what goes on in shul every week — the people who are standing yell at the people who are sitting, the people who are sitting yell at the people who are standing—”

Suddenly, the old man interrupted, almost jumping out of his bed. “Aha!” he said. “That was the tradition!”

Of course, it doesn’t always take a group of Jews to have conflicting views. Sometimes we Jews experience conflict internally, competing opinions within ourselves. Fifty years ago, Tevya appeared on Broadway and wrestled with himself over his daughter Hodel’s engagement to the Jewish revolutionary, Perchik:

On the one hand, he loves her. Love, it's a new style... On the other hand, our old ways were once new, weren't they?... On the other hand, they decided without parents, without a matchmaker!... On the other hand, did Adam and Eve have a matchmaker?... Well, yes, they did. And it seems these two have the same Matchmaker! On the other hand...

It’s prototypically Jewish to examine multiple truths at the same time, whether in communal debate or within our own hearts and minds. In the classic statement of this core Jewish value in Tractate Eruvin (13b) of the Babylonian Talmud, we learn:

For three years there was a dispute between Bet Shammai and Bet Hillel. Bet Shammai would say, ‘The *halachah* is in agreement with our views.’ Bet Hillel

contended, 'The *halachah* is in agreement with our views.' Then a *bat kol*, a heavenly voice announced: '*Elu v'elu divrei Elohim chayim*, these and these -- the teachings of both groups -- are the words of the living God.'

What kind of crazy religion says that even God takes opposing views simultaneously? How can totally contradictory opinions be true at the same time? How can we ever know who or what is right?

Over this past summer, my internal Tevya was in full swing. The conflict between Israel and Gaza provoked within me -- and probably within many of you -- a painful sense of internal conflict, an emotional swinging back and forth between one hand and the other.

On the one hand, Zionism represents the legitimate self-determination movement of the Jewish people. The State of Israel is the miraculous realization of our people's right to determine our own fate. Israel's right to exist in security is indisputable and indistinguishable from the right of any other nation.

On the other hand, the Palestinian people, too, have a right to self-determination and to live in safety and dignity within a homeland of their own.

On the one hand, Palestinian resistance too often is fueled by intense anti-Semitism and a desire to wipe out the Jewish presence in the land. Hamas is an avowedly anti-Semitic terrorist organization which deliberately targets innocent Israeli civilians and cynically, intentionally sacrifices innocent Palestinians as pawns to advance its goals. It seeks simply to kill Jews, and has zero interest in peaceful coexistence with Israel or in a two-state solution.

On the other hand, Israeli policies often ignore legitimate Palestinian aspirations, and are sometimes motivated by a desire to minimize if not eliminate the Palestinian presence in the land. Jewish extremists increasingly spew racist anti-Arab hatred and randomly attack innocent Palestinians. Palestinians are increasingly demonized and dehumanized by the occupation.

On the one hand, Israeli has an absolute right to defend itself. It cannot tolerate rocket fire targeting its citizens or tunnels breaching its borders. It cannot allow conditions which allow enemies to import missiles which endanger Israeli lives.

On the other hand, the lives of innocent Palestinians and children are no less important, no less sacred than the lives of innocent Jews and Jewish children. The Talmud itself teaches that one is forbidden to save one's own life by causing the death of an innocent. Who is to say that our own blood is redder than the blood of innocents who die so that we may live?

On the one hand, there's a solid basis to believe that the Palestinian national movement can't or won't settle permanently for a two state solution. With the fires of radical Islam burning in Gaza and racing throughout the Middle East, contemplating an Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank, with good reason, feels terrifying, perhaps suicidal.

On the other hand, many in Israel refuse to acknowledge a valid Palestinian claim. Occupation makes Israel even more of a pariah among the nations, undermining both its democratic status and prospects for long-term security. Ruling others by force inevitably corrupts and isolates.

On the one hand, on the other. One of the great gifts of Jewish living is cultivating the capacity to hold multiple, sometimes conflicting truths at the same time. This is usually neither easy nor pleasant. I remember well from younger days how much more comfortable it was to hold and defend a single truth while rejecting or ignoring conflicting views. We all know that it is totally delicious to feel as though we are in the right.

But as I grow older and hopefully wiser, I appreciate more and more the rabbinic concept that the Torah has 70 faces, that the truth is a diamond with many facets. To some, this may seem like a prescription for moral mushiness. "I'm right, you're right, we're all right." "It all depends how you look at it." This approach seems to prescribe perseverance and passivity in the face of ethical challenge.

But recognizing and holding multiple truths doesn't preclude staking out a moral stand. No doubt there are moral issues which are beyond the pale and may not require much reflection. But even here, remaining open to questions and doubts allows us to take a more powerful position because we are standing in a place of greater wisdom.

Yehudah Amichai, the great Israeli poet expressed this beautifully in his short and profound poem, "The Place Where We Are Right:"

מן המקום שבו אנו צודקים  
לא יצמחו לעולם  
פרחים באביב.  
המקום שבו אנו צודקים  
הוא קשה ורמוס  
כמו חצר.  
אבל ספקות ואהבות עושים  
את העולם לתחוח  
כמו חפרפרת, כמו חריש.  
ולחישה תשמע במקום  
שבו היה הבית  
אשר נחרב.

From the place where we are right  
flowers will never grow  
in the Spring.

The place where we are right  
 is hard and trampled  
 like a yard.  
 But doubts and loves  
 dig up the world  
 like a mole, a plough.  
 And a whisper will be heard in the place  
 where the ruined  
 house once stood.

Amichai teaches that whenever we cling absolutely to one view, when we build walls to keep out dissenting voices, we preclude the possibility of a better future. But when our rigid positions crack even a bit, when we allow for doubt, when we incorporate the perspectives of others, we can create conditions in which we may hear truth speaking – not in an angry shout, but in a loving, soft whisper.

Maybe we can understand that whisper as the *bat kol*, the faint voice of the Divine, which intercedes in the Talmudic debate between Bet Hillel and Bet Shammai. The *bat kol*, the Divine whisper, says that while both views are the words of the living God, the *halachah* — the answer to the debate – always follows Bet Hillel, because “the students of Bet Hillel were kindly and humble. They studied their own rulings and those of Bet Shammai, and were even so [humble] as to mention the actions of Bet Shammai before theirs.”

We follow Bet Hillel’s opinions not because they are inherently wiser or better reasoned. We follow them because Bet Hillel practiced the middah of *anavah*, of humility. They examined and taught the positions of their opponents before they expressed their own.

In our disagreements with others, in our own internal debates with ourselves, often we say, “yes – but.” That’s the Tevya way: “on the one hand yes, but on the other hand, no.”

What if instead we followed Bet Hillel’s approach? Why if we tried to hold truths in both hands at the same time? What if we surrendered our need to be 100% right? What if we had the courage to leave the world of black and white and venture into the world of nuance? What if we cultivated the courage and wisdom to embrace complexity, to see the truth in many narratives and in conflicting emotions we experience simultaneously? What if we were to drop the habit of saying “yes, but” and adopt instead the spiritual practice of saying “yes, this is true – and so is this.”

What if, when we feel hurt by others, we let go of our version of the story and considered first the other person’s version? What if, instead of focusing only on how we are right, we first looked at what is right in the other?

What if, when we feel angry, we also noticed other emotions which might be present? What if we experienced the grief and fear which accompany and often give rise to our anger? What if we practiced holding many, sometimes contradictory emotions and outlooks?

What if we followed Hillel's most famous teaching, based on his belief that God made us strong enough to hold more than one truth at a time – we can, simultaneously, be Jews and human beings; we can and we must stand up for ourselves and others.

*Im ein ani li, mi li?* “If I am not for myself, who will be for me?”

We are Jews. First, and primarily, we feel the pain and fears of our people here, in Europe, in Israel, around the world. We mourn for the heroic young soldiers who fell this summer defending Israel. We grieve for Naftali Fraenkel, Gilad Shaer, and Eyal Yifrah, murdered in cold blood. If we do not do our part to strengthen our Jewish family, who will? If we do not defend our people's right to self-determination in our historical homeland, who will?

*“Uk'she ani l'atzmi, mah ani? If I am only for myself, what am I?”*

We are members of the human family. We must also be concerned and responsible for the well-being of all beings, including the Palestinian people. The innocent dead of Gaza are also our family, our children. We mourn for them, and for 13 year old Mohammed Abu Khedair, unspeakably murdered by Jews claiming to act in our name and in the name of our tradition.

Today, the Torah describes the miraculous birth of our ancestor Isaac, and how Sarah and Abraham throw a big party to celebrate the day on which he is weaned – after all, he's their kid, their first and only biological child as a married couple.

*“Vateireh Sarah et ben Hagar haMitzrit asher yalda l'Avaraham m'tzacheik. Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had born to Avraham, playing.” Sarah instructs Avraham, “Cast out that slave-woman and her son, for the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son Isaac.”*

The expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael initiated the estrangement between Isaac and Ishmael which extends to this day. What was the nature of Ishmael's action that caused Sarah to want to expel him and his mother?

The Torah says only that Ishmael *m'tzacheik* -- Ishmael was playing or laughing with his new brother. According to the *p'shat*, the simple meaning of the text, there's every reason to think Ishmael's behavior is benign, or at least no worse than the behavior of any older sibling towards a new family of the family.

But many rabbinic interpretations spin a more nefarious narrative. Why would our foremother Sarah insist upon expulsion? Surely, Ishmael must have done something horrible. One rabbi says Ishmael was mocking all the fuss over Isaac's birth. Another says Ishmael

recklessly shot arrows towards his baby brother. And Rashi observes that the verb *metzacheik* or “playing” sometimes connotes idolatry, sexual immorality, even murder. So maybe Ishmael was trying to kill his baby half-brother. Of course. That must be the story.

Let’s imagine a more benign narrative from Hagar or Ishmael’s perspective. What if Sarah had tried to see things from Hagar’s perspective? What if she imagined the impact of her actions on Ishmael? How might the story play out differently today, if the descendents of Isaac and Ishmael could imagine the truth of each other’s experience?

A few Shabbat mornings ago at WES, we met Bassam Aramin, a descendent of our half-brother Ishmael. Bassam had been imprisoned in the 1980s as a teenager for attacking Israeli soldiers. He said he’d always been taught to demonize Jews. But in prison Bassam learned, for the first time, about the Holocaust. He began to see things a bit from the perspective of his enemies. He developed empathy with his captors. Bassam remembers the young Israeli soldiers smiling as they beat him and the other prisoners. He remembers feeling sadness that descendents of a tortured people had been reduced to torturing others.

When he was released in 1992, Bassam became a leader in the Palestinian peace movement. Fifteen years later, in 2007, Israeli soldiers shot and killed his 10 year old daughter Abir, on her way home from school. Despite this personal horror, Bassam remains committed to a vision of peace and coexistence. “I’m not going to lose my common sense, my direction, only because I’ve lost my heart, my child,” he says. “I will continue to fight in order to protect her siblings and her classmates, her girlfriends, both Palestinians and Israelis. They are all our children.”

*Elu v elu*, these and these. They are all our children.

I don’t know if peace will come to Israel and its neighbors this year or next. I don’t know when the myriad, complex international crises we face will pass. This is what I know: the best hope for our collective future lies in our potential to walk in the inspired, heroic path of people like Bassam Aramin, those who can hear the voice of the other, those who can hold multiple, excruciating realities with grace and wisdom. We cannot afford to delay in following his example.

Hillel concludes his teaching: *V'im lo achshav, eimatai* -- and if not now, when?” The time to start walking is *hayom*, today. Right now.

This year, may each of us grow in our capacity to hold multi-faceted truth in both hands.

May we learn to surrender the safety of moral certainty and tolerate the discomfort of complexity.

May we release our need to be right, and open ourselves to the narratives of others.

May we take a stand to protect ourselves, our people, our children -- and in doing so, may we remember they are all our children.

May we attune our ears to the *bat kol*, to the whispered truth which rises from the wreckage of our self-righteousness and flawed dogmas.

May we remember that wisdom lies not only in its blare of the shofar, but in the *bat kol*, the whispered truth between the notes.