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Congregation Beth Israel
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Living in Paradox, as Paradox

We have amazing teens in our congregation. And I have the privilege of teaching our tenth grade religious school class. One of the experiences I lead the students through is when I create two concentric circles of chairs, one facing in and one facing out so students can look one another in the eye as I ask them a series of questions. Every once in a while I say switch and the inner circle moves down by one.

It's like speed dating, but, you know, not.

I ask them to listen to their partner, not to judge, to share only what they're comfortable sharing. There are several simultaneous conversations happening at once between pairs; it's a beautiful cacophony of story. After a few questions about favorite activities to get us comfortable, I start to dig deeper.

Describe a time in your life when you felt powerful.

After a few "well, what do you mean, powerful?" type of questions, the conversations take off. There's an energy to them. These young people sound powerful as they share stories of their own power. I hear someone talking about serving on student council and another about what it feels like to be a mentor, making a difference in a young person's life.

I call out, Switch.

Describe a time in your life when you felt powerless.

There's some pause here. And then the stories start. A time when someone was bullied. Or someone watched from the sidelines as someone was being bullied. Someone else speaks about a death in the family.

Switch. And we're back to power.

Describe a time in your life when you saw injustice and you acted on what you saw.

Switch.

The tone changes after these conversations. Many students are leaning forward. There's personal investment now. I ask these questions, to help our young people understand that they are indeed powerful. They can do amazing things. They can mentor and help and challenge and stand up and educate themselves to better themselves and the world.

And I also want them to tap into their own powerlessness. For they are that, too.

At ages 15 and 16, these extremes are at their fingertips. They're on top of the world, discovering something new every day... but they also need permissions to use the bathroom at school because we don't yet trust our teenagers.

And that's life no matter how old we are. It just plays out in different ways. Balancing our extraordinary power with our extraordinary powerlessness.

In one of the classic teachings about these High Holidays, Rabbi Simcha of Bunim, a Hassidic teacher, suggests that each of us walk through the world with two slips of paper in our pockets. In one pocket, we carry the words: *Bishvili nivrah haolam* -- for my sake was the world created; in the other: *v'anochi afar v'efer* -- I am but dust and ashes.¹

It is most often presented as a text about humility, about a reminder to know and acknowledge our place in the world. But, I want to suggest another facet of the story. I want to suggest that it is about living in paradox, as paradox. It is about acknowledging that we are powerful AND powerless. We are mighty AND weak. We are central AND peripheral. We are AND.

Anyone who has ever taken an improv class -- or suffered through an awkward ice breaker -- has probably encountered the "Yes, and" game. All the participants sit in a circle, and build a story one sentence at a time. The only rule: each sentence must build on the one before, and each sentence must begin with: Yes, and..... In other words, you must agree with the statement, and then build on it with something new.

Kelly Leonard, an executive at Second City in Chicago explains that: "What you learn about improvisation when you apply 'Yes, And' is that there's a bounty of ideas, way more than will ever get used. When you say 'Yes, And,' he explains, you're dealing with an abundance of possibilities. And this creates an environment where ultimately you get the richest material."²

The concept has caught on; the business world is full of research and articles about how this technique can open up management skills, negotiations, business development, and more.³ The "yes, but" is a torpedo -- Yes! I love that idea. BUT, it will never work. You feel not only denied but also patronized.

In contrast, the research says: When you apply "Yes, and," people feel heard, valued and supported. It creates collaboration in times of conflict and engagement in times of trouble. If yes, and can do that in business -- imagine in yourself. Imagine in our community. What if you could look at yourself and say: Yes.....and?

Rabbi Shai Held, who has written profoundly about the ways that chronic illness has shaped his life, teaches:

¹ Based on Tractate Sanhedrin 37a of the Babylonian Talmud

² Hugh Hart, "Yes, And ... 5 More Lessons In Improv-ing Collaboration And Creativity From Second City," Fast Company.

³ Karen Hough, "'Yes, But' - The Evil Twin To 'Yes, And'," Huffington Post Blog (August 12, 2014), http://www.huffingtonpost.com/karen-hough/yes-but-the-evil-twin-to-_b_5669640.html

“Life is complex and often contradictory, and the religious life invites us to learn to hold seemingly antithetical truths and experiences simultaneously. The example I return to again and again is the capacity to hold gratitude and disappointment in one's heart at one and the same time. Many of our lives are filled with blessing and also with profound suffering. The truth of one does not cancel out the truth of the other. We learn, haltingly, non-linearly, to hold both this and that.”⁴

What if you could look at your partner, your child, your parent -- and say: “Yes...and.” Yes, I see you in all that you are and all that you can be and I love you, and I am a part of you, and we build together. What if we could look at the person next to us -- whether it is someone we have known for years or someone we've never met, and say yes, and. Yes -- you are different from me. And we are here together; here today and here in a shared mission and vision for what our community, what our world can be.

And it is hard to imagine this world because we live in a lonely world, a fractured world. We live in a world of “or.” We live in a world of “but.” A world where it seems more important to be right than kind. A world where it is more important to win than to share. A world where it seems more important to be sure than truthful. A world where it seems more important to be perfect than good. And yet, we are here, looking for a second, or third, or twentieth chance to connect, to live our lives fully, to live our lives differently.

We are currently in an age where instead of actually talking to each other -- that is each person who may be an Other to us because of their political views, their looks or their lifestyle, or because of the person we think they are -- instead of talking to each other, we hide in our echo chambers, and engage in affirmational dialogue, seeking out only those with whom we already agree. In other words, when we talk, we like to talk to people who will agree with us and validate our beliefs and feelings. And too often we cast out those with whom we disagree, choosing to block them out, physically, emotionally, or digitally.

Despite the tone we see all around us, narrow-mindedness is not very Jewish. To be Jewish is to struggle with contradiction, with paradox. Yet, many in our troubled world reflexively reject paradox and hang on to the belief that there is a singular way.

The problem is clear: We do not know how to argue with one another. Watch any political debate, go to a sporting event, go out to eat with a group of your friends who align themselves with different political parties (if you have such friends.) We are experts at yelling over one another, at attacking the person and not their position, at assuming the worst possible motive for any contrary position, and at becoming offended -- or causing offence -- in an effort to shut down the conversation rather than engage with someone with whom we disagree. And yet we often see silence as the only alternative. And we can't keep silent.

We have forgotten the value of disagreement, and of the growth we achieve as individuals and communities when we engage in civil dialogue. This is particularly concerning

⁴ Rabbi Shai Held, Facebook post on September 15, 2019.

from a Jewish perspective, because when we forget how to argue, we leave behind the core teachings our tradition provides us with to build holy, vibrant and peaceful communities.

Judaism has a long and full tradition of embracing debate, and respecting divergent opinions. We even have a special name for it: a *Machloket*. *Machloket*, according to the Talmudic dictionary, (yes, there is a Talmudic dictionary), is a conflict, debate or disagreement where divided opinions are honored.⁵ In the Talmudic tradition and throughout modern responsa literature still published today, one opinion is ultimately followed as law, but minority opinions endure and are studied, expanding our understanding of the ritual or religious subject at hand, and providing us with a multi-faceted understanding of Jewish law. In *Pirke Avot*, or the Ethics of our Ancestors, we learn, “Every *machloket* (conflict) which is *l’shem shamayim* (in the name of heaven) is destined to endure. And that which is not *l’shem shamayim* (in the name of heaven), is destined not to endure.”⁶

"For three years," the Talmud teaches "there was a dispute between the School of Hillel and the School of Shammai. One would assert, “The law is in agreement with our views,” and the other would contend, “The law is in agreement with our views.” (Shocking.) Then a *bat kol*, a voice from heaven, announced, *Eilu v’eilu divrei Elohim Chayim hen*, “These and those are both the words of the Living God.”

A heavenly voice declares to the rabbis -- “you are both right.” And neither of you is right alone. What we each think, at any given moment, is a valid perspective and not the whole truth.

Hillel and Shammai were proto rabbis, ancient teachers whose respective followers spent years arguing with each other. It took a voice from heaven to teach them how to handle this situation. See, the *bat kol* explains, both of you have valid perspectives. Each school of students is not only right, but is speaking the words of the living God, *Elohim Chayim*, the same name for God we use in our high holiday liturgy.

But hold on!

The *bat kol* continues by saying, "But the law is in agreement with the rulings of the School of Hillel.”

You might be thinking, wait a sec! The *bat kol* chose sides! Sounds like a “yes, but.”

The text asks: "If both “*Eilu v’eilu*, these and those, are the words of the Living God,” what entitled the School of Hillel to have the law according to their rulings? Because," the text answers itself, "they were kindly and modest, they studied their own rulings and those of the School of Shammai, and were even so humble as to mention the words of Shammai before their own⁷.”

⁵ Jastrow Dictionary, page 473

⁶ Mishnah Avot 5:17

⁷ Babylonian Talmud, Eruvin 13b

According to this story, Hillel's teachings end up being the law not because they are smarter policies, or more practical or profound. They end up being the law because the students of Hillel listened to the students of Shammai, and were able to explain the viewpoints of Shammai as well as their own. While the text doesn't say so explicitly, I think the students of Hillel were transformed by their encounter with the students of Shammai. Their kind and modest approach would allow their hearts to be open to their rivals such that they could not help but be changed and moved by them. They were “yes, and.” While the rulings of Hillel and Shammai as handed down to us look like opposites, I think that Hillel's teachings were not purely Hillel's anymore. They intermingled with the wisdom and perspectives of Shammai, and they were influenced by the very process of debate itself. This is why the Hillel won the day.

The Talmud records 316 debates between Hillel and Shammai⁸, and there are only 3 issues⁹ where they agree with one another. But Hillel and Shammai participated in these debates for the sake of heaven, they disagreed on trivial issues because they agreed on the significance of Jewish law and ritual as guideposts for Jewish life. They debated one another, in friendship and with a great deal of respect for one another, in order to learn from one another. And as the sun set, they sat down together and shared a meal.¹⁰

This is a model for our community. We need to argue in friendship, so we can learn from one another. Let us come to the table with a set of parameters about how we are going to debate, not how we are going to win the argument or avoid the tough conversations altogether.

Today, we fill this sanctuary, in what is considered the most un-churched city in the country, in a city our size, with only one large Reform synagogue, because we are looking for connection. Given the demise of civil society and the rise of digital communication, this house of worship is one of the few places where democrats and republicans sit together, study together, and pray together. When I was a rabbi in Los Angeles, you could choose from dozens of Reform synagogues based on whatever characteristic you are looking for. Our uniqueness provides an opportunity, a model, for how religious communities can bridge divides, embrace challenges, and celebrate complexities.

And one of my jobs, as your clergy, is to comfort the afflicted -- to bring meaning, connection to tradition, and respite to our community, and afflict the comfortable -- to raise up Jewish values that motivate us to make the world more just.

Of course, not everything is “yes, and.” I believe that some stances, some perspectives, are just wrong. Politics distorts communication, and distorts personal stories. And this current political environment has stretched me to the very edge of my capacity to call all perspectives valid. And, that’s a different sermon ;-).

Look, it’s not always so easy. Sometimes we just can’t accept what another person says. Even Hillel and Shammai had their less amicable moments. There is a terrifying story in the Jerusalem Talmud when students of Beit Shammai brought weapons into the beit midrash and

⁸ Jewish Encyclopedia, Hillel and Shammai

⁹ Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 15a

¹⁰ Babylonian Talmud, Yevamot 13b

actually killed their fellow Torah scholars from Beit Hillel who disagreed with them, in order to make sure that the majority vote went according to Beit Shammai.¹¹ You might say they overreacted!

In other words, it's not always so easy to disagree and remain cordial. Sometimes things get out of hand. That might be an understatement. We, in Portland, know this all-too-well having made the national news this year for all the wrong reasons: the Proud Boys and Antifa facing off just a few blocks from our synagogue. And promises from the Proud Boys that they will return and continue to drain our city resources. There has to be a different way. This can't be the model. What we learn from our tradition and from today is that it's hard to keep the peace when there is so much dissent. And even so with the best of our rabbis. It's one thing to understand *machloket l'shem shamayim* and it's another to practice it. The point is *l'shem shamayim*, for God's honor. When we disagree are we arguing for a higher ideal or for our own self-righteousness?

On Yom Kippur our liturgy includes prayers of confession that we will repeat throughout the day. Confessions that allow us to ask for forgiveness from those arguments that did not go as planned. We will confess, "*al chet shehatanu lefanecha*, For the sin we have committed against you through the words of our mouths. For the sin we have committed against you through gossip and slander." These words weigh on our hearts because we cannot escape their truth. As Rabbi Cahana taught us last night: words wound and heal, destroy or build up. The words that we choose to describe others, to ask questions about issues we disagree about and to begin conversations can either invite others into a dialogue or push them away. Choose your words wisely, especially in discourse with those whose opinions differ from your own. Especially when hiding behind our screens in 280 characters or less.

Rabbi Ilyse Kramer writes, "Sacred Arguing works as a category, when the differing parties agree, not only to disagree; but also, to remain in relationship with one another."¹² Congregation Beth Israel is a holy community because when we filled out our membership forms we signed onto a covenantal relationship with our staff, lay leaders, clergy and members. We were saying in effect that we believe being in community with other Reform Jews is not only important, it is crucial for our existence as human beings. Since I began serving this community over seven years ago, there is nothing I have admired more about all of you, than your dedication to being in partnership with one another, with our staff and with the greater Portland Jewish and secular community. True partnerships take a great deal of work to maintain, yes, and in partnership we are a stronger community together. Especially today, even if we didn't need the reminder, we need community -- strong -- together.

What does it look like to say yes, and, to community? To say -- I am busy: I am parenting, working, grand parenting: and, I need Shabbat. I am overwhelmed: I am building, travelling, teaching: and, I want to learn. I am tired: I am stuck in traffic, I am overworked, I am struggling: and, I want to make time for something beyond myself. Synagogue life offers ways to connect; a place that can bridge divides, embrace challenges, and is wide enough to receive us in all of our complexities: in our loneliness and our love, in our joys, and in our sorrows, in our todays and in our tomorrows.

¹¹ Jerusalem Talmud Shabbat 1:4

¹² Tales of the Talmud, Rabbi Ilyse Kramer

No more “yes, but.” No more “either-or.”

Eilu v'Eilu. These AND those. For my sake the world was created -- *Bishvili nivrah haolam, v'anochi afar v'efer* -- AND I am but dust and ashes.

Here I am. AND here you are. AND here we are: Ready. Willing. Responding: yes, and, TOGETHER.

G'mar Chatimah Tova!