

**Shades of Gray**  
**Rosh Hashanah Morning 5782**  
**September 7, 2021**

I saw a cartoon, once, of a man about to enter a synagogue board meeting, speaking to a woman going in with him. “I don’t know how I feel about the issue,” he said, “but I am prepared to be outraged!”

I recall, as well, the hopefully apocryphal story of a waitress approaching a group of Jewish diners after a meal. Handing them the check, she inquires “was *anything* okay?”

These may be exaggerations, or caricatures. But there is a hint of something here. We are a famously argumentative people. Other than some of the Vedic texts within the Hindu tradition, the Talmud remains the only sacred literature in the world which preserves minority opinions. Often, in fact, the Talmud gets so caught up in debate and discussion that it seems to forget where it started out. It is a wandering text for a wondering people. (I know; I often do the same thing. I believe in the Torah of tangents!)

You know the phrase: “two Jews, three opinions.” That’s kind of spot on. When it comes to something like Israel, it is all so complicated that I am not even sure I agree with myself!

**But one thing is clear. Our training, our education, our acculturation prepares us for a world which is not black or white but filled with shades of gray.**

We specialize in spiritual atheists, we Jews. We cherish patriotic protest. We invented the idea of interfering with each other's lives as an act of love. We are very confused.

Look at the stories we share, the sacred myths of our ancient past. Most peoples envision a noble origin for themselves; we ritually and repeatedly recall our stint as slaves. Escaping, we make the outrageous claim to have gone through an ocean on dry ground. We then share the collective experience of "hearing" a God who has no body. One of the most common verses in the Torah is "*Vayidabbeir A el Moshe l'aimor*, and God spoke to Moses, saying..." This, from a divine being with no vocal cords.

And then there is the *Akedah*, the appointed portion for either this first or, traditionally, the second morning of Rosh Hashanah. What a story! How can we read this? A parent who heeds a call to kill a child? A promise of progeny flirts with the risk of extinction. This is a test no one can pass. Laid bare here is a spiritual relationship we hoped might make us whole, which shatters and leaves us broken instead.

The binding of Isaac is immediately followed by a portion called "*Chayei Sarah*," the "lives of Sarah." The name is ironic; the portion begins with Sarah's death. There is a direct proximity between this mortal threat to her only child and her own demise.

Some say just hearing the news caused a fatal shock. The commentator Rashi notes that on learning her son “was prepared for slaughter, and was almost slaughtered, [Sarah’s] soul flew out of her, and she died.”

Judah Loew, the Maharal of Prague – the same rabbi I mentioned last night in connection with the Golem – focuses on this phrase “*kimat she’lo nishchat*, was *almost* slaughtered.”

*Almost* slaughtered. But he was *not!* He wasn’t! Isaac is alive.

But the thing is, Rabbi Loew observes, the thing is... “it was just a *davar mu’at*, a small thing which kept him from being slaughtered. For this reason she was shocked.” And he continues: “This is the way of humanity: to be shocked upon hearing that only a small thing has kept us alive.”

What is this shock about? The contemporary scholar Avivah Zornberg calls it “theological vertigo.” It is a moment when everything is called into question, when you suffer not a loss, necessarily, but the end of assumptions, a challenge to certainty, shaking the foundations of meaning upon which we live our lives.

Rabbi Erin Leib Smokler, in her outstanding new book *Torah in a Time of Plague*, asks if there is a “medicine for this malaise.” She points to something which I have long believed: basically, that acknowledging reality instead of hiding from it, giving a space and a place to the way we are shaken, but also containing it, allows us to move forward.

What is this? [*Stuffed elephant.*] This, of course, is not a political statement. It is a reminder of an English phrase: “the elephant in the room.”

What is the elephant in the room? It is when everyone is thinking something, but no one mentions it. A groom at his fourth wedding, after his previous wives all died. A Catholic priest, doing marriage counseling. (By the way: some of the best marriage counselors in communities I have service have been Catholic priests.)

I am sure you can come up with your own examples. But think of the tension this produces, the distraction, the inner anxiety.

Jewish tradition *brilliantly* accounts for the elephants in our lives. Look at the Jewish wedding: a time of celebration and happiness. What do we crazy Jews do? We break a glass at the end of the ceremony. Why?

There are, of course, many opinions. The most likely answer, though, is that even at a time of joy we take a moment to remember, to acknowledge, the destruction of the Temple.

So, what? Really? Are we that neurotic? We can't just... enjoy? No wonder we're so messed up.

The tradition is odd. Events of two thousand years ago are hardly at the forefront of our minds most of the time – except for those who are trained, who are inculcated with the sense of being now, and then, here and there. (In a way, by the way, this is what Jewish tradition asks of us, how it wants us to look at the world!)

But remember the disaster, the disjunction! The Temple was Beit El, the house of God! Is the Divine now homeless? This was the way to approach the ineffable, to appease God, to make things right in our lives! Is that link now severed?

Judaism might not have survived – it *should* not have survived by *any* of the expectations or comparable experiences of the time – but it did. And I think that we survived by finding a way to live with the gray, to acknowledge a great loss, and then move on.

There are other Jewish traditions which echo this, customs which are less well known: when you paint a home, leave off a *davar mu'at*, a small part – the same phrase we used earlier. At a full banquet, leave out a *davar mu'at*, a single item. There is even a tradition that when dressing up, when you put on your finest, in adorning oneself, leave off a *davar mu'at*, a single item. And why? What is this conscious but understated incompleteness all about? “*Im eshkahech Yerushalayim; if I forget thee, O Jerusalem.*”

Years ago, and before they changed their policy on issues of inclusion, I was asked to honor a group of Jewish Scouts who had just earned the rank of Eagle. Now, I was an Eagle Scout. This meant something to me.

But I also strongly opposed discrimination. And I was the rabbi of a congregation with many – *many* – gay and lesbian families.

What to do? Here, the elephant served me well. It is a tradition of both/and, of talking about the gray, acknowledgement *and* assertion, giving nod, a small voice, a small place, to what everyone is thinking anyway.

So I honored the young Eagles for being able to strike a balance, to work within an institution that did a great deal of good, but which also sometimes made mistakes. I taught that you do not need to agree with everything that important groups in your life say and stand for, in order to support them.

In that time, and that place, the balance worked. It does not always.

I mentioned Israel earlier. When it comes to Israel, I am tired of sighing and saying, “it’s complicated.” To be a tour guide in Israel you have to be able to do this [shrug], look up and say “*Mah L’asot?* What are we to do?”

But, even here, it is possible to live with nuance. (And look, just look, at the composition of the current coalition: right and left and center, with an Israeli Arab party serving for the first time as well! Gray on top of gray!)

Sometimes it *is* the case that one side is just right, and the other one is wrong. Sometimes, but not that often. It is on us; it is our role and our goal to avoid the easy answer. There is always the impulse to flee from what we do not want to hear. A blizzard or a cold day does not disprove global warming! Crucially, and at the cost of many lives of the simple and the stubborn, the fact that some experts and physicians changed their minds about masks early on *does not mean* that they do not have a clue what they are talking about, and can therefore be ignored, insulted, demeaned, and dismissed.

Adam Grant writes, in his new book *Think Again*, “When it comes to our possessions, we update with fervor. We refresh our wardrobes when they go out of style and renovate our kitchens when they’re no longer in vogue. When it comes to our knowledge and opinions, though, we tend to stick to our guns... We favor the comfort of conviction over the discomfort of doubt, and we let our beliefs get brittle long before our bones... We listen to views that make us feel good, instead of ideas that make us think hard.”

**We can be different.** The very “this/and” rather than “either/or” impulse of our tradition is a great gift, and a powerful tool.

We tell tough tales not because there is always a moral which is simple and easy. We consciously encounter complexity in art and literature and sacred myth because, look, the world is gray.

To hold in both of our hands things which do not fit neatly together, that is an act of maturity. It is an expression of responsibility. It is a sign of health.

**Shades of gray. At a time of great dissent and division, there is so little, it seems, that can help us heal.**

Personally, I am quite caught up in the divisions of our time. I have strong beliefs. I know what I stand for, and I know what I oppose.

**But I also believe – I really do – that our tradition of nuance, our ability to find wrinkles and angles in even the simplest of statements can serve as a guardrail against extremism, a softening of certainty, a reminder that things are not always what they seem to be.**

**The word is gray. It may come across as a curse. But I believe we are, instead, blessed to be able to see it that way.**

People come to synagogue and, sometimes, they expect to find easy answers. I hope, with all my heart, that what we find here is a sense of connection, and community, stepping into an ancient tradition, renewing it in our lives, finding a way to pass it on into the future.

But *easy* answers? It is said that prayer... prayer may be how we talk to God. But study! Grappling, struggling, asking questions... study is how God talks to us.

We thrive with honesty, and openness, and allowing that which throws us off and makes us uncomfortable to have its space. Tragedy, as well as triumph, is part of who we are.

Logically, we should not still be here. But we are. And we will be. As long as we are able to do the healthy thing. To contain our challenges, and not let them overwhelm us. To adapt, to adjust, to rethink, and to move on.

*L'Shanah Tovah.*