

**Embracing the Gray:
The Jewish Superpower of Appreciating Nuance**

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Two people are having a dispute. Because this is a Jewish story, they go to the rabbi, who certainly is a man with a long beard. The first person explains his case passionately, and the rabbi nods thoughtfully and says, “You are right.” The second, enraged, tells her side of the story and the rabbi strokes his beard and says, “You are right.” A bystander pipes up. “Rabbi, they can’t both be right!” The rabbi thinks for a moment and says, “You are also right.”

Of course, we laugh because we don’t think there is any way they can both be right. I mean, that’s just impossible! What is the rabbi thinking?

We’re trained to think in terms of either/or, to divide and judge, to find who’s right and who’s wrong. That’s why the people in the story went to the rabbi in the first place. But the rabbi wouldn’t fall into that trap. He was tapping into the fourth Jewish superpower that I want to discuss this High Holiday season. We covered community and resilience during Rosh Hashanah, and last night I spoke about Shabbat. Today, I would like to explore nuance and how learning to appreciate nuance can help us through hard times. But first, we need to understand the ways in which we are encouraged to see binaries.

Jewish tradition is full of examples of either/or thinking. In the Havdalah blessing we’ll recite this evening, we’ll praise God for distinguishing between the holy and the ordinary and between light and dark. The Torah spends an inordinate amount of time distinguishing between the ritually pure and the ritually impure. You are one or the other. Never both. Simple. Black or white. Light or dark.

In our regular lives, too, we are encouraged to see binaries. The answer to the math problem is either right or wrong. One political party will destroy democracy; no, the other party will end Western civilization as we know it. Our rhetoric has become so hardened that it seems impossible to find a space where we can hold two conflicting truths simultaneously.

Part of this has to do with our fear. We live in frightening times. In the past several years, we have endured a global pandemic, political violence, and dozens of mass shootings, some of which have targeted the Jewish community. October 7th and increasing antisemitism have only heightened our sense of fear. Now, when we see a new person come to services, we may be suspicious rather than welcoming. Why are they here? Do they plan to hurt us? That has not always been the case. In my early years as rabbi here at Temple Beth El, I remember that when a newcomer walked through our unlocked doors our first thought was how can we connect with them and get them to come back.

These fears live not only in our minds but in our bodies as well. As we have been living with greater levels of fear and trauma. Our bodies have responded—it can be harder

for us to be calm; we can have trouble sleeping; we can live in a heightened state of anxiety. Little things can get a disproportionate response. We more often feel we are under attack.¹

October 7th and its aftermath have pushed many of us into fearful, either/or thinking. Some of us believe that we must support Israel, no matter what, because to question Israel's actions means to open the door to those who want to destroy the world's only Jewish nation. Others believe that we should focus on the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, the West Bank, and now in Lebanon, and that Jews need to condemn the actions of the Israeli government and address the plight of the Palestinians. We can't change the situation unfolding in the Middle East and hardening our hearts to others only hurts us. In many ways we are giving into fear.

It is hard to soften our hearts — about Israel, about American politics, about the things we fear. It is hard to see beyond the binary. There is no easy solution or quick fix. We can't solve this today, or even this week. But we can do some things this morning, in these next few minutes together. We can contextualize and understand the importance of seeing nuance within our Jewish tradition. We can also notice and name. Notice when we get trapped into this type of thinking and name the harm it can do. We may not walk out of here ready to fully embrace the nuance and complexity in the world, but we can make a start.

We can take heart in the reminder that comes from the word *teshuvah*, often translated as “repentance,” but which literally means “to turn.” Why? Imagine you are walking along a path and you make a slight turn to the right. After a minute, you won't be too far off your original trajectory. But what about after a day, or a month, or a year? Even a slight turn can lead you to a completely new place; even a small change in our ways of thinking can, over time, yield extraordinary results. Today is the day to make the turn toward appreciating nuance.

While our tradition is sometimes black and white, Judaism is replete with examples of embracing the gray. The Talmud offers many complex discussions about Jewish law. The disagreements are laid out right in the text. And even when the rabbis reach an answer, they preserve the minority opinion. For example, how should we light our Hanukkah candles? Even our youngest Hebrew School kids can tell you that we light one candle on the first night and then light one more each night all the way up to eight candles on the last night. That has been our tradition for centuries. But in the Talmud contains an alternative opinion—thank you Shammai—that we should instead light eight candles on the first night and go down to one on the last night.² Preserving minority opinions reminds us that decisions were not unanimous, that there was disagreement, and that dissent has value. It allows future generations to change their minds and still have tradition behind that choice. The minority opinions invite us to recognize that everyone may not agree with us. They encourage us to have the humility to know that we too may change our minds.

And it gets even better. Because more often than we might think — hundreds of times in the Talmud, in fact — the rabbis spend all that time in discussion and then cannot decide one way or the other. In such cases, the Talmudic passage ends with the Aramaic

¹ <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/coping-with-traumatic-events;>
<https://health.umms.org/2022/06/08/trauma-response/>

² Shabbat 21b

word *teiku*, let it stand. This means that the matter will remain unresolved. In modern Hebrew, *teiku*, refers to a tie in a sporting match.³ Think about that for a moment. Our book of Jewish law not only preserves minority opinions, but often says we just can't decide at all. It's a tie. We're all winners. Really. You are right and you are right, and it turns out that rabbi from the opening joke was right. Our tradition teaches that we can hold multiple truths and that sometimes we need to let a question remain unanswered and live with uncertainty.

It's hard, isn't it? To accept we might be wrong. To live with uncertainty. But that is what today is all about. For Yom Kippur is a holiday of accepting that not only might we have been wrong, we have been wrong in this past year. We were wrong in ways we might not even realize. And that means that something or someone else was right. Or perhaps we were both a little bit right and a little bit wrong. Yom Kippur is a day of dealing with uncertainty. We have no idea what the next year will bring. This day teaches us to learn to live with that uncertainty and to have a little bit of humility. These both necessitate seeing complexity.

Living in the gray is difficult, but living in a world where we are too sure of ourselves is even worse. Another Talmudic story, which you might have heard before, illustrates these pitfalls.

A group of rabbis had a dispute over whether a certain oven is ritually pure — I told you the rabbis were obsessed with those kinds of questions. Rabbi Eliezer argues that it is pure while all the other rabbis, led by Rabban Gamliel, argue it is not. When Rabbi Eliezer cannot convince them, he calls on the carob tree to move, and the stream to flow backwards, but despite these miracles the other rabbis are not convinced. Finally, a voice from the heavens booms out that Rabbi Eliezer is right! Yet the majority will not yield. They insist that the Torah is not in heaven but is theirs to interpret. We usually end the story here. We offer it up as a wonderful reminder that the law is not God's but ours. But that's not the end of the story.

If we read the rest, the message gets more nuanced. The rabbis were not content with just winning the argument. They wanted to punish Rabbi Eliezer for being wrong so they banned him from the community. Grief-stricken, Rabbi Eliezer prays for his tormentors to face retribution. His wife tries to interfere with his prayers so that harm will not come to the others, but she can't do so forever, and eventually Rabbi Eliezer's prayers are answered. The head of the community, Rabban Gamliel, is struck down and dies, a tragedy that hurts Eliezer's family as well because Rabban Gamliel was his wife's brother.⁴

The rabbis were sure that they had been right about Jewish law. But what happened in the end? A great rabbi was ostracized, a the leader of the community died, and a woman lost her brother. They didn't leave any room for uncertainty. They didn't leave any room for a tie. They humiliated the loser. And there were disastrous consequences.

Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai writes

³ Menacham Creditor, "TEIKU: A Meeting of Equals," *The Times of Israel Blog*, <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/teiku-a-meeting-of-equals/>

⁴ The entire story is found in Baba Metzia 59a-b.

*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 plow.
And a whisper will be heard in the place
where the ruined
house once stood.*

Doubt and uncertainty allow growth to happen. Love allows growth to happen. We can open our hearts up to more than one truth. We can understand that acknowledging the pain of one person does not mean we need to dismiss the pain of another.

A story.

A rabbi asks his disciples how they know when to distinguish between day and night. One student answers, “When I look out at the fields and I can distinguish between my field and the field of my neighbor.” A second offers, “When I see an animal and I can tell if it is a sheep or a goat or a cow, that’s when I know night has ended.” A third tried another answer, “When I can see a flower and tell if it is red, yellow, or blue.” The rabbi shook his head sadly. “You only divide! You divide your field from the house of your neighbor; you distinguish one kind of animal from another; you separate one color from the others. Is that all we can do- divide, separate, split the world into pieces? Isn’t the world broken enough? Isn’t the world split into enough fragments? Is that what Torah is for?” The shocked students looked into the sad face of their rabbi. “So what is the answer?” The rabbi responded, “When you look into the face of the person who is beside you and you can see that the person is your sibling, then finally the night has ended and the day has begun.”⁵

In this year to come, we can embrace the Jewish superpower of living with the gray. Because the line between day and night, between black and white, between right and wrong, isn’t the most important thing. The most important thing is learning to live between the binaries. Then we can really look at another person and see the spark of divinity that is within them.

⁵ This story is told by Rabbi Ed Feinstein on Yom Kippur, 2020 and can be found in his book *Capturing the Moon* (2008). <https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/267758?lang=bi>