

**Rosh Hashanah Morning 5775**  
**Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim**  
**Rabbi Stephanie M. Alexander**

**Y e s , A N D ...**

In August, during a tour of the White House, a toddler apparently got loose from his parents and managed to squeeze through the bars of the White House fence. We can picture what happened next, right? A SWAT team comes running; the child is immediately detained. Mortified parents frantically make their apologies while Secret Service and FBI agents put Washington, D.C. on lockdown, explaining – without a clue as to the absurdity of the situation – that "rules are rules" and, when it comes to national security, there's simply no room for exceptions.

Fortunately, this is not what actually happened. Instead, a spokesman for the Secret Service explained, "we were going to wait until the toddler learned to talk to question him, but in lieu of that, he got a time-out." So our crazy scene didn't come to fruition, but we can picture it because, let's face it, in our polarized world – where it seems everything must be all or nothing, black or white, yes or no – it's completely plausible, isn't it?

Consider the following, which actually *did* occur: In order to protect the safety of their neighborhood children, a homeowners association in Florida decided to ban all outdoor play. No skateboards, rollerblades, or bicycles are now allowed on the complex's roads or common grounds. No ball playing, either; basketball, baseball, kickball, soccer – all of it is now prohibited. We all want to keep our kids as safe as can be; at least I hope we do. But this HOA distilled their situation down to two simple values – allow children to play or keep them safe – and then told themselves it could only be either/or.

Friends, what has happened to that oh-so-important of phrases, "Yes, *AND...*" and the common sense that goes with it? Why do we so often feel forced into artificial choices? There are, of course, many contributing factors, but I'd like to explore three with you today.

The first is our **wariness of change**, even when that change brings progress.

In the 1920s, radio was "the wonder of the age." As Bill Bryson puts it: "The ability to sit in one's own living room and listen to a live event in some distant place was approximately as miraculous as teleportation." But not everyone was captivated by the new technology. Many believed that all the invisible energy flying through the air must be dangerous. And, soon, reports circulated that "birds found dead on the ground were there because they had been struck by radio waves."<sup>1</sup>

Similar debates swirled around the pros and cons of the telephone, the television, and – of course – the Internet. As journalist Clive Thompson has written: With every innovation, cultural

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<sup>1</sup> Bill Bryson, *One Summer: America, 1927*.

prophets have always bickered over whether we were facing a technological utopia or apocalypse.<sup>2</sup> And we continue to hear the same messianic or doomsday reports today.

On the one hand, the Internet Age has seen a rise in literacy – not just of reading, but writing – helping us, at its best, to clarify our thinking, improve our memory, and make connections with other thinkers around the world. The United Nations, using new digital tools, is now able to detect and understand economic and social shocks more quickly. By looking at the pattern with which people add money to their mobile phone accounts, they can see early warnings of job loss. Online food prices can be surveyed to help predict price spikes and shortages. Searches for terms like “flu” and “cholera” can signal warning of a pandemic disease.<sup>3</sup> And just this past month, reports of 3-D printers manufacturing medical implants and printable body parts are pointing toward potentially revolutionary advances in medicine.

Yet we see the flip side, as well. With new technology, our conversations are becoming shorter and less substantive. “We’re spending more and more time ‘alone together.’”<sup>4</sup> The nature of memory is changing. With Google ever-present at our fingertips, we’re relying on external memory tools at the expense of developing internal ones. And there are behavioral changes, as well. Emailing, texting, playing games and talking on the phone while driving are all leading to profound distraction. 40% of smartphone owners – or 2.8 billion people worldwide – connect to the Internet immediately upon waking up in the morning, even before they get out of bed. Plastic surgeons offer a procedure, called the FaceTime Facelift, for those who don’t like the droopiness that comes with holding a device at the proper angle for virtual communication. Certainly modern technology has incredible potential, but it can also lead to cyber bullying, loss of privacy, and even addiction. As resident comedian Bill Murray has said: “My iPhone has 2 million times the storage of the 1969 Apollo II spacecraft computer. They went to the moon. I throw birds at pig houses.” So is this really progress?

The answer, of course, is: “Yes, *AND*...” Change can bring progress *AND* peril. It’s up to us to maximize the former and minimize the latter – take the best of what modernity has to offer, *AND* retain elements of the past to guide and inform the process. Fortunately we sit here, as part of the Reform Movement, whose very reason for coming into being was to do just that. Had we ignored the new opportunities of Enlightened Europe and America – secular and scientific study; interfaith and multicultural mingling; modern music, liturgy and literature – had we resisted all change and closed ourselves off to these new opportunities, we would look like the ultra-Orthodox communities of Monsey, Brooklyn and Jerusalem. Yet had we indiscriminately opened our arms to all that lay before us, forsaking the wisdom and merit of our rich heritage and past, we would have gone the way of those who ultimately converted out of the faith, severing any Jewish connection for the generations to come.

We sit here today because our forebears understood the value of “Yes, *AND*...” and tried, as we do today, to embrace the best of what modernity *AND* tradition have to offer.

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<sup>2</sup> Clive Thompson, *Smarter Than You Think: How Technology Is Changing Our Minds for the Better*.

<sup>3</sup> Al Gore, *The Future: Six Drivers of Global Change*.

<sup>4</sup> Sherry Turkle.

The second reason we seem to feel compelled to take a side – to believe it has to be either/or as opposed to "Yes, *AND*..." – is **a sense of urgency**. Something happens – something big, sudden, frightening – and we feel pressured. We read scathing editorials about who's to blame and articles of support for those perceived to be victims – and they don't agree as to who's who. We see facts dismissed as propaganda and propaganda posing as facts. Which are we to believe? Social pressure, and outlets like Facebook in particular, seem to insist we pick a side. Friends and peers post articles and quotes, change their pictures, take a stand. What should we do?

For us in the Jewish community, the pressure really ramps up around Israel. Before, during, and after the war in Gaza, the imbalance and inaccuracies in news coverage was generally infuriating; stories of the rise in anti-Semitic incidents around the world and at home remain alarming; and our hearts and prayers were, and continue to be, with all who had to endure the anxiety, terror, and devastating loss synonymous with war.

Yet – feeling the concern, the pressure, the urgency – North American Jews, have forgotten how to have "a civil conversation about Israel." Rabbi Eric Yoffie (former president of the URJ) travels throughout the world and, as he writes in the most recent issue of *Reform Judaism Magazine*:

I've watched differences of opinion about Israel's policies mushroom into heated exchanges in which reasoned arguments become impossible. Israel – the very subject that once brought Jews of divergent perspectives together as a community – has now become a catalyst for divisiveness.

It's a challenge loving a "vulnerable country in a very bad neighborhood." But too often we make our legitimate wrestling a struggle *between* us instead of providing safe and open places to patiently work through the struggles so many of us feel *within*. We fail to understand that "the intensity of our arguments reflects the depth of our feelings about the Jewish State – which is a good thing for Israel and us all."

When I eventually did finally post a piece about Israel on Facebook this summer, it was these words penned by my colleague, Rabbi Joshua Strom, who managed to articulate what I hadn't yet been able to find the words or the confidence to express on my own:<sup>5</sup>

I support Israel, her right to exist, and her right to defend herself from terrorists aimed at destroying the lives of as many Israeli citizens as possible. And my heart breaks for Palestinian civilians killed in the exchange of fire.

I weep for Palestinian parents mourning the deaths of their children, playing on the beach one moment, gone the next. And I blame Hamas for exploiting them as pawns in their twisted chess match, firing rockets from the most densely populated areas, stockpiling weapons in schools and hospitals, instructing them from their underground bunkers to ignore Israeli warnings of evacuation, in the name of expanding their honor roll of

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<sup>5</sup> "Caring Is Not a Zero-Sum Game" (edited).

martyrs, while continuing to teach those same children in their textbooks that Israel is evil, the sole cause of their misery and misfortune.

I was and am still devastated by the murder of Eyal, Gilad, and Naftali. And I was and am still horrified with every fiber of my being, by the brutal revenge killing, the burning alive of 16-year-old Mohammed Abu Khedair, the most heinous of the so-called "price tag" attacks to date, including, but not limited to, running through Jerusalem, asking random people what time it was so that those with Arabic accents could be subjected to mob beatings.

I wholeheartedly stand by Israel, supporting her soldiers wherever they must go to protect her, praying for their safe return. And I continue to challenge her leaders, criticizing what many consider a series of political missteps that exacerbate an already fraught situation.

I have moments where I throw my arms up, shake my head, and nearly give in to despair, succumbing to the sentiments felt by so many on all sides of this – that it will simply never get better. And I continue to hope, to pray. It's not simply a matter of choice for me. It is a matter of necessity, of who I am, of how I define myself – as a Jew, as a rabbi, as a human being.

Our tradition teaches that, when a sense of urgency leads us to feel we need to pick a side and take a stand, precisely in *that* moment is when we must appreciate a situation's complexity and strive to understand it from perspectives other than our own. As Hillel the Elder so wisely taught:

*"Im ein ani li, mi li? If I am not for myself, who will be for me?  
Uch-she-ani l'atzmi, mah ani? AND if I am only for myself, what am I?  
V'im lo achshav, emmatiai? AND if not now" –  
now, in this multifaceted moment, when so much hangs in the balance;  
if not now – then "when?"*

“Even when – especially when – it is most difficult, when the view of a peaceful future ... is cloudy at best, if not all but completely obstructed, it is precisely in these moments, these darkest hours, where we must have hope, where we must be active in calling for and striving for peace.”<sup>6</sup> Where we must be able to lift up our confusion and doubts and fear, and *talk* about them – because doing so doesn't present an obstacle to peace; it's the only way to ever really get there.

And, finally, the third reason we increasingly replace "Yes, *AND*..." with "Either, or..." is a **growing emphasis on compartmentalization**.

Life is a constant juggling act. And so we come up with ways to make it all work with as much grace as possible. We use the technology at our disposal to become more efficient. We develop routines and schedules that enable us; it sometimes feels, to fit 30 hours into a 24 hour day. And we compartmentalize – carving up our lives into smaller sections and distinct categories.

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<sup>6</sup> Rabbi Joshua Strom.

This typically unconscious skill has its benefits – particularly when it allows us to keep the stress of work from the sanctuary of home; when it permits us to enjoy an evening, or vacation, or Shabbat without feeling the weight of the world. For some of us, if we *didn't* possess the ability to compartmentalize, we might never have a good night's sleep.

But compartmentalization has its dangers, too. We say things like: "If we were taking about friends or family, that'd be one thing. But this is business. It's different." Or we consider attending a service or class, but then don't because we say it's for "religious people" – by which we mean people other than us. I hear students talk about their "temple friends" and "school friends," their "Jewish life" and "regular life." I hear adults deflect wishes and ambitions to a later life stage called "after my next promotion" or "when the kids are grown" or "when I retire." Can we really separate things out this way? Is it healthy? Does Jewish tradition wish us to do so – making such formal and precise distinctions about who we are, when we can do things, and what we do and don't do? I think not.

Judaism's first and greatest innovation was monotheism, the assertion that everything – good and bad, sacred and profane, holy and mundane – *everything* falls under the purview of *one* God. The *Sh'ma* – our liturgical assertion of that oneness – says that Judaism is relevant at all times and in all places: when we lie down AND when we rise up; when we're relaxing at home AND when we walk by the way; when we're at work AND at school AND at home AND at play.

The "stuff" we describe as holy in Judaism is the same "stuff" as the rest of life – Shabbat is simply a day of the week; a Kiddush cup is filled with any old wine or grape juice; even matzah has the same flour and water, and (yes) yeast, as regular bread. What makes them holy and imbues them with sacredness is what *we* bring to it: mindful prayer, intentional usage, and sacred meaning attached by our community.

This is Judaism's gift and our unique heritage: a set of inspirational beliefs, traditions and rituals that aren't kept separate from the workaday world for fear of their contamination. Rather we are instructed to let all the stuff of life commingle – worship and work, mitzvot and money, prayer and politics, virtue and vanity. Because it's just not possible to continually compartmentalize, and they don't cancel each other out. These substantial areas of our lives aren't "Either, OR..." – they're all "Yes, AND...". And the beauty of our Jewish tradition is that absolutely *all* of it has the potential to be elevated to the highest spiritual plane.

Friends, it's *hard* to be making choices all of the time. There are many difficult decisions we *have* to face: Where will I go to school? How will I earn a living in the world? With whom will I spend my life? Where do I want to live? And there are other, excruciating choices, I pray none of us will ever have to make – but the reality is many of us will. So, in this New Year, let's at least resolve to eliminate the false choices we really don't have to make – the ones where fear of change, a sense of urgency, or a tendency toward compartmentalization only lead us *to believe* we have to choose.

I want to leave you with an image, one most of you will see when you return home this afternoon – the image of a mezuzah which, as we know, doesn't hang like this [up & down] or like this [side to side], but like this [on an angle] leading us inside. As it turns out, when we read the text,

no one actually thought we should hang it that way. Rashi taught: Hang it like this [up & down], so they point up to God. And Rabbeinu Tam, his own grandson, taught: Hang it like this [side to side], as the Torah scrolls were then kept in the Ark.

Tradition could have followed Rashi, and we could hang our mezuzot like this [up & down]. Or it could have followed his grandson, and we could hang them like this [side to side]. But instead we hang them like this [on an angle], which is a little bit of this [up & down] AND this [side to side].

This year may we find ever more ways to affirm AND in our lives – as we integrate our individual needs with the needs and concerns of the community; as we weigh and evaluate viewpoints on complex world affairs; as we balance the opportunities of change with the benefits of tradition. And, most importantly, may we each have a happy AND healthy AND sweet new year. Amen.