

Rabbi Benjamin David

Erev RH 2020

We live in a cut and dry world. You're either Jewish or you're not. You're urban or suburban. You're a Democrat or a Republican. You're tall or short, married or not, pro-Israel or not, pro-life or pro-choice. Your kids are athletes or not, social or not, so-called gifted or not. We are optimists or not, rock or country, rich or poor, we are in this group but not that one. We are Eagles fans or...we...are... wrong.

Here in 2020 we are taglines tailor made for Instagram bios and TikTok accounts.

Maybe because of our angst and our busy-ness we let society place us in these easy categories. Why fight it? Seriously, who has the energy for nuance these days? Media outlets lean way this way or that. There's no middle. Our car decals and lawn signs, even clothing, are there to reinforce the simplified boxes we've come to inhabit.

It's true. We like clear, easy definitions. We appreciate exactitude like never before. We want to know when the pizza will arrive exactly and exactly when we can access our grades and exactly what the temperature will be outside and we want to know precisely when the repairman or woman will arrive, not some useless vague window of time as amorphous and unknowable as the ocean itself.

This, my friends, is a sermon on the glory of the gray and embracing the gray. I offer these words not because I have added a significant number of gray hairs this year; I offer these words because gray is the Jewish way.

Actually Judaism has long resisted the oversimplified. We've long resisted putting ourselves or others in pigeonholes. I say this even as one of the most remarkable places you can visit in Israel has you hike into the caves along Mitzpe Ramon and see where our ancestors in fact kept real pigeons in real pigeonholes.

But if the early Israeli farmers kept pigeons to help them with their work, our biblical ancestors before them knew that Jewish thinking has largely resisted putting us in confining categories.

Take, for instance, the *Ger Toshav*, literally a 'resident stranger.' This was someone who was living within the Jewish community, even following many of the Jewish rites, but had not converted to Judaism for their own reasons.

Of course we have many in the *Ger Toshav* camp here at Adath, who bring us perspective and make our community more diverse and more sensitive to the thinking of those of different backgrounds.

We could say they are Jew-ish.

Another place that our Sages resisted pigeonholes was regarding the use of space. We have our private homes. We have our public places. But what about those places that are neither / nor, like a courtyard that borders multiple homes, or a pagoda shared by residents of a town. Such areas were given the name *Karmelit*, a neutral domain that had its own Shabbat rules when it came to lifting, carrying, and working.

Here we are encouraged to re-think our own understanding of home and the responsibility we have for those spaces we all share.

This year we did exactly that as the very idea of home stretched wider than ever, becoming our place of work and school, our new gym, our synagogue sanctuary, our barbershop and so much more.

How might we make our home a place that is more open to others or a place that maybe allows for opinions other than our own?

On the flip side, how can we bring our views and values out into the public so that we can contribute to the conversation on everything from race to reproductive rights to aligning ourselves with the mistreated rather than bringing our ideas only as far as like-minded friends on Facebook?

Another example of Judaism's love of nuance: On the High Holy Days we consider the fact that no one is perfect. The Talmud will argue that almost no one is completely righteous, just as almost no one is inherently evil. Rather we are doing our best, we are human beings, sometimes making great decisions, sometimes making not-so-great decisions.

Tractate Rosh HaShanah of the Talmud teaches us that we are judged by God in the moment, just as God heard the voice of Ishmael 'where he is' in the Book of Genesis.

We are thus not merely a collection of our worst moments, nor are we only our most shining moments. We're a complex, colorful mix. The question, for the Talmud, and for Rosh HaShanah, is: Who are you now?

Author Brad Stulberg writes the following: Some things in life truly are either-or, but many are both-and. Ancient wisdom traditions such as Buddhism and Taoism understand and teach the paradoxical nature of reality. They develop a non-dual mind. Here are a few examples from my own life where I was taught to think in a dualistic, either-or mentality, but the truth is much more of a non-dual, both-and nature.

Hard work and rest.

Self-discipline and self-compassion.

Solitude and community.

Mind and body.

You are enough right now and you can get better.

Happiness and sadness.

Strength and flexibility.

As we consider the new year and mark these holy days, I would encourage us to dive into our own contradictions and own them.

You can still be loudly pro-Israel while heeding the plight of the Palestinian people. You can still be an ardent supporter of our troops while pushing back hard when it comes to anti-Transgender policy. You can still be a virulent defender of asylum seekers while also advocating for sensible immigration reform. You can be so grateful to our police while urging reforms that combat inherent racism. You can still be an environmental warrior and sometimes forget to bring your re-usable bags to the grocery store.

You can still be a terrific parent and sometimes lose your temper. You can still be a great kid and sometimes mess up. We've all been there.

Services like 23 and Me have even muddied our previously straightforward understanding of our genetic make-up. While we once marched around declaring that we are entirely of Russian or Spanish or German heritage, we're now able to parse our lineage with great accuracy.

Actually I got one of these kits and took the test and, as it turns out, are you ready, I'm only 99% Ashkenazi Jewish.

In truth these scientific advancements have further buttressed the notion that no one, aside from Native Americans, is really of outright American heritage. We all came here from somewhere. We are all something, hyphen American, latecomers to this place and thus quite like those who arrived not only five hundred years ago, but those who arrived five months ago, and are now living here.

Both. And.

The very definition of patriotism has also been narrowed due to the polarizing tone of our national discourse: Patriots have giant flags on their pick-up truck. Patriots stand for the National Anthem. Patriots are white heterosexual men who live in the middle of the country and drink Budweiser out of red, white and blue cans on the Fourth of July. They have blond children, a green lawn and blue jeans.

Now, I have nothing against Budweiser (I guess), but you and I know the question of patriotism is far more complex. I can't speak for you but I can tell you that I love this country and I would consider myself highly patriotic, even if it's not the type of Patriotism portrayed by Chevy commercials.

Lisa and I are raising our children here precisely because we believe this is a land of possibility for them as Jews, as human beings, as the great grandchildren of Holocaust survivors.

I will also tell you that a significant part of my patriotism has me speak up when I witness injustice or ignorance, when I want this country to rank higher than 45th in press freedom, 14th in overall happiness, 13th in quality of life, 49th in life expectancy, 25th in education, 27th in healthcare.

Sadly we Americans do rank at the very top of two fateful categories: We have the highest prison population per capita in the world, and we rank first in military spending.

The American narrative itself has long been overstated and often oversimplified as well. We are taught of the nobility and courage of our founding fathers who stood tall in the face of British colonialism.

We learn of wartime heroes, sagacious presidents, from the mountains to the prairies, a land brimming with opportunity for all who came here in search of refuge from the dire straits of foreign oppressors and despots, the downtrodden sailing beneath Lady Liberty with nothing to their name and a flickering glimmer of hope in their eye.

We are taught of athletic and theatric icons, strong and white and proud, Joe Jackson and Joe Dimaggio and Joe Montana, the innovators and educators, the explorers and authors, the legislators and doctors. It's the stuff of postcards, yes, and there's truth to so much of it and, yes, we owe so much to those whose names read like legends: Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, Kennedy.

But it's not the whole truth of course; it avoids so much of the gray and, more than that, the darkness deep within the American story, of prejudice and moving goal posts, of freedom not granted evenly across lines of race and gender, of mythic tales of might that leave out those who suffered in the margins.

If we are to own the inconsistencies and contradictions in ourselves, and in our Judaism, then how could we not also own the inconsistencies and contradictions in our country?

Let's not shy away from those elements of the story that are hard to tell just because they're hard to tell. At this time of year when we speak of the Book of Life, let's work to open the Book of American Life a bit wider precisely because we believe in this place, all of this place, not just parts of it.

And finally, if we're talking about daring to embrace the gray, what could be grayer than our ever-unclear future? If there's any certainty at all on this night it's that the future is terribly uncertain.

By the time we come to the end of the Jewish year now beginning, what will our world look like? What will be of our kids, our health, our jobs, our lives, our planet? What will be in Washington or cities across the country? What will life in Israel look like for our brothers and sisters?

I don't know.

But I do know that there are elements of this coming year we can predict with certainty. No matter what comes, we'll need to laugh. No matter what comes, we'll need to get outside here and there. No matter what comes, we'll hold up the memory of loved ones and allow their character and courage inspire us.

No matter what comes, we'll tell our family members that we love them and we'll make sure they know that we love them. No matter what comes, we'll need to be mindful of how much news is too much and how much social media is helpful.

No matter what comes, the calendar of Jewish holidays will give shape to our emotion and longing.

No matter what comes, we will thank God that we are part of a community that includes us and embraces us for precisely who we are. No matter what comes, your voice matters. No matter what comes, there are reasons to be hopeful. No matter what comes, you and I, and the Jewish people will be guided by the teachings of our beautiful heritage.

But also this: No matter what comes, sports talk radio will be a colossal waste of your time. No matter what comes, we'll find new reasons to strongly dislike the Giants. And no matter what comes, someone will always struggle with Zoom. No matter what comes, we'll have to explain that South Jersey is not at all the same as North Jersey and yes it makes perfect sense that we're fans of all Philly teams.

No matter what comes, people will make mistakes, say the wrong thing, hurt your feelings, disagree.

And no matter what comes, you know you have a strength in you, an inner resolve that is real, and has gotten you this far and will continue to move you forward through this impossible and holy life, call it God, call it faith, call it hope and that you and I are going to be OK. Amen.