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The Wholeness of Humanity: The Necessity of Doubt

It took two days before I was called a racist. One week before my sermon and prayer for Israel was labeled “genocide support.” One month before an email claimed me to be a “terrorist sympathizer” in response to my grief over the deaths of Israeli and Palestinian children. And by the end of November, less than two months after October 7th, I was told I was “destroying Judaism.”

There are innumerable ways to chronicle this year, and each of us is the caretaker of shards of this heartbreaking time. For many of us, this was amongst the most painful, dislocating, fractured periods in our lives. Some of us supported family and friends in Israel, either dead or deployed. Some raised voice at rally or protest. Some swelled with pride or cowered in shame. But nearly everyone, irrespective of identity and ideology, felt a sense of betrayal, on the receiving end of hate, and a sense of society spinning into absurdity.

In the rubble of this year, we name the devastation. October 7th and the ensuing war left ruin and entire generations in trauma. Israeli families receiving phone calls hearing the rape, torture, and execution of their loved ones. Hundreds of thousands of Israelis throughout the country grieving those brutally murdered, killed in battle, and displaced from destruction and rocket attacks. Thousands of Gazan families decimated, nearly 2 million displaced and facing disease and starvation. Atrocity is everywhere, and most of us, we have felt the subtle or overt push to either minimize or magnify the devastation on one side of this year or the other.

As the months progressed, many of us found a recalibrated infrastructure in our lives: changing newspaper subscriptions, the pundits we adhere to, reexamining the direction of donations, and even reevaluating the circle of friendships. Some of us chose to make Jewish community more of a focus, others of us chose distance. Some of us recommitted to support of Israel, others stood in opposition. And we all measured atrocity in our own way. Who by rape, and who by bomb. Who by ignorance and who by intolerance. Who by massacre and who by genocide. As the space for complexity and confusion shrank, most of us existed in a world that told us we could not be in support of something without also calling for the obliteration of another. As college campuses and corporate board rooms were consumed, many of us found ourselves associated with ideas and actions that we neither endorsed nor understood. Zionist or anti-Zionist, Opposer of Genocide or Opposer of Terrorism, Jewish or antisemite. There was no space to discuss and debate ideas. There could be only a battle of belonging. Identity, the inherency of ideology, became a warzone without boundary.

Solomon Asch grew up Jewish in Poland at the beginning of the 20th Century. After immigrating to the United States, he went to City College, and became a professor of psychology at Swarthmore. Shocked by the inhumanity of the Holocaust, he became obsessed with understanding why members of groups so often go along with extreme beliefs or immoral actions. Unable to find an answer in the existing literature, he kept coming back to what he himself had experienced as a young boy. Just how suggestible, he wondered, are human beings?

To answer this question, Asch recruited college students for a simple study. He divided them into groups and gave them a simple visual test which nearly everyone passed with ease. But then he introduced paid actors into the groups, and had them give obviously-wrong answers to see the impact it would have on the subjects.

The results were astonishing. The subjects mostly went along with the wrong answer. The students were shockingly prone to conformity with a group that was obviously making a mistake.[1]

Asch's findings illustrate how whole groups can come to embrace wrong or even dangerous ideas. When idea is linked to identity, we allow our desire to be seen as a “good person” to allow our ideas to move us towards extremism. Our desire to belong is often more powerful than our willingness to doubt. As a result, when groups debate a pressing moral or political issue together, they don't tend to moderate or compromise; on the contrary, they tend to incite one another. The behavioral economist Cass Sunstein calls this "the law of group polarization": after groups with shared identity have a chance to deliberate about some question of morality or politics, the conclusions they come to are more radical than the beliefs of their individual members.[2]

In the aftermath of the Golden Calf, Moses looks at the devastation of the Israelites. In fear and terror, they turn to idolatry, choosing certainty over struggle. Thousands die, God threatens to abandon the entire community, and Moses is tasked with reforging a covenant out of the broken pieces before him. In such a state, Moses struggles in doubt, and himself seeks out certainty. He cries out to God, “Oh God, let me behold Your Presence!” But God refuses, saying that Moses will only be able to see God’s aftermath in the world. Moses is told that he will never have certainty. “For no human being may see Me and live,” explains God.[3] Truly living also means living with doubt.[4]

In the preface to his play *Doubt*, John Patrick Shanley wrote, “I still long for a shared certainty, an assumption of safety, the reassurance of believing that others know better than me what’s for the best. But I have been led by the bitter necessities of an interesting life to value that age-old practice of the wise: Doubt…Doubt requires more courage than conviction does, and more energy; because conviction is a resting place and doubt is infinite – it is a passionate exercise.”[5]

In the midst of the Talmud, we encounter the sage Elazar, known for his zealotry and desire to incinerate the immoral. We find him deepening his studies and expanding his erudition. Riding atop a donkey, he finds joy knowing he possesses intellectual clarity achieved by few. He happens upon a person he deems wrong and lowly and proceeds to castigate the stranger for his worthlessness. He then comes to seek the sparks of righteousness within the person. Seeing the damage of his insults, Elazar descends from his donkey and follows the stranger until he finds forgiveness. Rabbi Elazar then immediately enters a study hall and teaches, “’A person should always be supple like a reed and not rigid like a cedar.’ And therefore, it is taught, the reed and the quill merit the place of being the pliable instrument with which we scribe our Torah and the *mezuzot* on our doorposts.”[6] Certainty and zealotry, are not the path of Torah. It is doubt, the willingness to question not only the character of another but also our own, that elevates suppleness as literally the way we write our tradition. The truth of our Torah begins from our willingness to doubt.

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[1] Simon E. Asch (1952). Group Forces in the Modification and Distortion of Judgments. https://gwern.net/doc/psychology/1952-asch.pdf In the experiment, Asch showed them two cards. One card had a single line on it. The second card had three lines on it. Then he asked them to choose which of the three lines on the second card was equal in length to the line on the first card. It was an easy task, and nearly everyone answered correctly. But then Asch added paid actors. For the first few rounds, both the uninitiated college students and the paid actors gave the obviously correct answer. But in the third round, all of the actors gave the wrong response.

[2] Yascha Mounk, “The Identity Trap,” Penguin Press: New York, 2023, pp. 119-120.

[3] Exodus 33:19-20

[4] For a powerful exploration of this virtue in rabbinic tradition, I highly recommend Moshe Halbertal’s “The Birth of Doubt (2020). In his words, “Vagueness such as this is not the sort of murkiness that the sages are quick to dispel; rather, they tarry in it, develop it, and attempt to characterize its hazy essence. They thus create additional realms of uncertainty that, through the course of history of halakhah, enjoyed their own spectacular development.”

[5] Shanley, John Patrick. Doubt: A Parable. United States: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010, viii-ix.

[6] Babylonian Talmud Taanit 20b

I am haunted every year by our Yom Kippur practice of reading from Isaiah. At the height of our fasting, when annually my energy feels most waning, our tradition asks us to raise up the prophetic words, imaging God asking us, “Do you really think *this* is the fast that I ask of you?!”[7] Do you really believe sitting here in prayer and penitence is doing something of import? In all the conviction, in all the recalcitrance, do you think you are moving the world forward? It is as though our tradition throws us off of our donkeys of righteousness, and drags us into the more honest light of doubt on the holiest day of the year.

I have now spent more than half my life in this congregation. I have grown up here. Celebrated and grieved and learned from thousands. I was married here, celebrated the births of my children here, stood as a proud parent of a Bat Mitzvah and Confirmand. And I have never been more grateful for this community than I have been this past year. And not because of the strength and solidarity, though those have been remarkable gifts. But rather, because of the blessing of doubt. There was never a moment this year when I could exist in the resting place of certainty. You never let me. And I am forever and profoundly grateful. So many of us, we sat together in our doubt. We came to question associations and understandings. We disagreed and challenged. And I want to celebrate everyone who chose struggle over certainty, and chose the complexity of community over the ease of uniformity.

When I received a phone call from one of our college students incredulous that I could call myself a Zionist, he also chose to bring question and was willing to explore our respective understandings of the term. And we sat together and learned.

When a young adult met with me to tell me how much her learning at Rodeph Sholom had failed her, I was invited to hear her experience and learn how we, how I, can do better. And when a family felt unable to sit together over a meal because of the ideological rifts amongst them, each person mustered enough doubt to find one another’s humanity.

Doubt is definitionally difficult. And it is also the only antidote to the potential extremism of groupthink. Indeed, in an era in which we can find information and communities to underscore any conviction, doubt becomes all the more sacred. It is when we feel certain that our warning lights should flash. It is when we feel those with different ideologies are inherently despicable people that we should question the donkey on which we ride.

Let me be clear: this is not a “both sides” sermon. To quote Sir Isaiah Berlin, “I am not a relativist; I do not say…I am in favor of kindness and you prefer concentration camps.”[8] Anyone willing to hold or stand beside signs that read, “Rape is Resistance” or “Glory to Our Martyrs” or “Death to Arabs” has so sacrificed their moral humanity for the sake of zealous certainty that there is no opening for connection until they are willing to walk away from such absurd extremism. But I am a fervent believer in heterodoxy, in true Liberalism, in rabbinic wisdom, in the belief that we are at our wisest when we sit in relationship with those with whom we disagree. When we can walk with enough doubt to believe that there is always more to learn. To reject the hubris that, though every field and discipline and philosophy has changed over time, though our deepest truths of scientific theory have evolved, that somehow we in this present moment have achieved inviolate understanding. To reject the fallacy that moral clarity means moral simplicity.

It takes minimal courage to hold conviction these days. Greater extremism breeds greater attention and draws immediate support. The bravest perch of the present is the willingness to stand in complexity, to feel that the most pressing of moral quandaries rarely have simple answers. Doubt is not spinelessness. Doubt is the willingness to relentlessly strive for greater understanding.

Is it possible to believe in Israel’s right to defend itself against despicable acts of war, and also still constantly question such war to stave off indifference to the high cost of human life? Is it possible to support the call of nationalism and desire for self-determination of one group while also supporting it of another? Is it possible to believe that a nation or ethnic group should be seen as more than its most destructive expression?

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[7] Isaiah 58:5

[8] Isaiah Berlin, “The Power of Ideas,” Random House, 2012, p.37; I first encountered this passage in his essay, *New York Review of Books*, Vol. XLV, Number 8 (1998).

When more than 70 other countries exist whose nationalism is founded in religion, is there space to wonder why Israel's is the only one questioned? When the Reform Movement has spent more of its existence opposed to Jewish nationalism than in support of it, is it possible to imagine some could feel their Jewishness in ways other than Zionism? When we live in a country whose military campaigns over the past 2 decades have resulted in the deaths of more than 3,000,000 people without worldwide calls of genocide and boycott, is there room to wonder why Israel is portrayed as the most vile of nations? When people witness the horrors of this ongoing war and year-long captivity of hostages from two dozen nations, is it permissible to still ask for a long-term strategy in Gaza that will chart a better way forward?

The German philosopher Gotthold Lessing reflected, "Were I to have stood in the presence of God, whose right hand was holding Truth, and whose left had was holding The Search for Truth, and were I to have been given the choice of one or the other, I would choose The Search for Truth."[9]

At first glance, this feels preposterous. If a person offered me diamonds or the prospect of finding diamonds, any sane person would choose certain-diamond over possible-diamond. But there is a deeper insight here. Lessing, in choosing The Search for Truth over Truth itself is suggesting that only a divine being can possess Truth, can see God and live. To choose Truth then is to forfeit our humanity.

This is what makes this place, this Jewish community, so breathtakingly essential. It is here that we choose humanity. It is here that we choose The Search over the certainty. It is here that we are willing to acknowledge a universe created with both Din and Rachamim, both Judgement and Mercy forever in tension.[10] Here we hold enough belief in the goodness in one another that we can struggle and disagree with ideas without demanding uniformity. Here we challenge the dangers of groupthink by remembering the suppleness of quill and parchment. Here we believe that Torah can only be grasped in relationship with those with whom we disagree. Here we choose to be a community of searchers and strugglers and strivers. And, for most of us, there is no other space in our lives in which we can truly do this sacred work.

Writing amidst a period of exile, persecution, and famine, our sages taught the following, "At a time when the community is struggling, no one should say, 'I will go home, eat, drink, and be at peace with myself.'….and anyone who struggles together with the community will merit experiencing consolation with the community. The beams and stones of a person's house will testify [to the shared struggle]."[11]

The beams and stones of the Sanctuary were built in 1930 when the world came apart. Through the decimation of the Holocaust, the wars of America and of Israel, 9/11, and now 10/7, we have chosen to mourn and struggle and rise in resolve as a community. This building testifies to generations who chose the challenge of Jewish community over being at peace with themselves. This is not always easy. And at times it is anguishing. It means being shocked and disappointed in the moments we feel strain in what binds us together. But it also means we are made wiser and stronger, knowing that in the moments of moral disagreement we are a part of a reciprocal relationship of striving. The very person who most challenges us is very likely the person who most saves us from the complacency of extremism.

There is much to mourn. And sadly, I fear the path ahead will still be punctuated with pain. But we will continue to make this a Home whose beams and stones testify to our struggle. And like millennia of our ancestors, we will see in our debates the sacred tradition of Torah. We will embrace the gift of doubt in order to strengthen our resolve to strive.

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[9] As quoted in "Enlightenment and Secularism," ed. Christopher Nadon, Lexington Books: Lanham, MD, 2013, p. 277.

[10] Bereshit Rabbah 12

[11] Babylonian Talmud Taanit 11a

And in our Search,
this is where we hold
the wholeness
and holiness
of our humanity.