



Yom Kippur 5780
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My now-husband and I had been together for a few years when we started talking seriously about getting married. We had talked about it frequently enough and in enough detail that one day Sean asked me, “So if we’re talking about the details of our wedding, does that mean we’re engaged?”

“No!” was my immediate answer, “I still want a story!”

Sean - understandably - was incredulous. Our relationship was – and still is – founded upon egalitarian values. Why would we depart from these important values at precisely the moment we were to publicly declare our intention to commit to one another for the rest of our lives? “What if I want you to propose to me?!” I remember him asking.

There’s another story like this, from the Talmud, about 2 great schools of rabbinic interpretation – Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai. It goes like this:

“For three years there was a dispute between Beit Shammai [the school of Rabbi Shammai] and Beit Hillel [the school of Rabbi Hillel]. These said, ‘The law is in accordance with our opinion,’ and these contending, ‘The law is in accordance with our opinion.’ Ultimately, a Divine Voice emerged and proclaimed: ‘Both these and those are the words of the living God...’”

Eilu v’eilu – these and those – are the words of the living God. *Eilu v’eilu* – both opposing positions have merit. Both contain truth. At a time when we are coming to understand that identity is intersectional, that gender can be non-binary, and when the nature and tone of public debate on the critical issues facing our country and our world has fractured, this is crucial and timely wisdom. *Eilu v’eilu* – there is sacred truth in opposing perspectives.

Sometimes opposing perspectives even exist within a single person. At the time of my wedding engagement, I was committed to a relationship grounded in gender parity and to the idea of having a grand and romantic story of a marriage proposal. *Eilu v’eilu*. I am still grateful to my husband for his willingness to hold both of these truths with me. Ultimately, he woke me up before dawn one morning early in the fall and drove north as the eastern sky changed colors. We exited off 101 at the Santa Rosa airport. There we watched as our private hot air balloon

was inflated, before climbing into the small basket. We were carried over vineyards and orchards as the sun continued to climb into the sky. Sean proposed as we floated there above Sonoma County. In a couple of weeks we will celebrate 15 years of marriage.

The capacity to hold opposing views – to understand that there is truth and validity in more than one perspective – is not hypocrisy. It is also not about not having an opinion or not making a decision. The story from the Talmud, in fact, continues:

"*Eilu v'eilu* – both these and those are the words of the living God, but the law is in agreement with the rulings of Beit Hillel." Since, however, both are the words of the living God, why were Beit Hillel privileged to have the law established according to their opinion? The reason is that they were agreeable and considerate, remaining calm when provoked, and when they taught the law they would teach both their own statements and the statements of Beit Shammai. Further, whenever they taught, they prioritized the statements of Beit Shammai to their own statements, in deference to Beit Shammai."

Yes, there is often truth in both sides of an opposing argument – *eilu v'eilu* – and decisions must also be made. Sometimes our work is to hold both together, while other times we must figure out how to privilege one truth over another. When decisions must be made, the Talmud offers us a three-step process:

First, though we may come to see an issue from a particular perspective, we are reminded to attend to our style of communication. From experience, we likely each know that we have a greater chance of persuading someone to acquiesce to our request – a parent, a spouse, a customer service representative – when we keep our cool. And, though personal frustration or righteous anger may make our passions blaze, if we have any hope of getting what we want, we must take a page from the Beit Hillel playbook – keeping our balance, remaining respectful and showing restraint.

The second step, as outlined by the Talmud, is to become as familiar with an opposing opinion as we are with our own. When we are so familiar with an issue that we could explain it equally thoroughly from both sides, we cannot help but to internalize the lesson that there is sacred truth on both sides. As Dr. Micah Goodman writes, "Ultimately, religious law is determined not by the side that is right, but by the side that is willing to listen."

Which brings us to the Talmud's third and final step: to be in the habit, whenever discussing an important topic about which we have already come to a conclusion, of first presenting the opposing position. The Talmud points to this as an act of deference, but I will add that anyone who has ever been a teacher knows that, in order to be able to teach something, you have to understand it deeply. When one teaches, two learn. If we set out in good faith to teach a perspective that is not our own, we will simply be unable to trivialize it and, perhaps even more importantly, to demonize or demean the people who hold that opinion. And so it becomes quite clear why, if Beit Hillel practiced these three steps in their legal disputes, their views ultimately

carried the day. Practicing these steps surely takes us a long way towards mending major rifts in our relationships and in our wider world.

In this season we turn our attention to both *tikkun atzmi* – repair of self – and *tikkun olam* – repair of the world. The wisdom of *eilu v'eilu* and of Beit Hillel's three steps are critical tools in supporting our work in both dimensions. When applied in the realm of *tikkun atzmi* – repair of self – we focus on how we can better engage in the inevitable conflict that comes from being in relationship with others. If we were better able to hold an awareness of the truth in opposing perspectives, and better able to engage as Beit Hillel did, how differently would these inevitable interpersonal conflicts unfold the next time our sibling, parent, partner or co-worker pushes our buttons?

Of course, just because it's good wisdom does not mean it's easy. On the contrary – all of this is much easier said than done. We all get frustrated and impatient when we feel we've been mistreated. And for those of us who have suffered serious abuse, we might need a different framework altogether. But this is also a new year, a fresh start. An opportunity for us to set our intentions to engage differently with others, whenever possible – to show up with patience and open-mindedness, both in the personal – *tikkun atzmi* – and communal – *tikkun olam* – realms.

In his book, Catch-67: The Left, The Right, and the Legacy of the Six-Day War, author Micah Goodman lays out what's at stake if we were to apply the Talmud's wisdom to discussion about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He writes, "Healing the fractured conversation about the conflict can pave a path toward new ideas that can help heal the conflict itself." Dr. Goodman writes, *eilu v'eilu* – "...both sides have right on their side." Both sides have legitimate claims to the land. Both have suffered. Resolving the conflict, per the Talmud's three steps, requires humility and calm. It demands that the people on both sides delve deeply into the experience and perspective of the other – without defensiveness and with an honest curiosity and desire to understand – so much so that we can and do teach the opposing perspective as fully as our own.

Eilu v'eilu means that there is deep truth both in Israelis' fear of Palestinians and in Palestinians' sense of humiliation at the hands of Israelis. One truth does not render the other less true. Goodman writes, "Tragically, the Israelis' sense of fear provokes actions that deepen the Palestinians' sense of humiliation; and the Palestinians' sense of humiliation provokes reactions that heighten the Israelis' sense of fear – and so on and so forth. When fear and humiliation collide, each becomes stronger." The only way out of this loop is by engaging with one another as the Talmud directs.

In June 2020 we will travel to Israel on our congregation's first-ever family trip. A family trip means that people of all ages are welcome. While there, we will have limited opportunities to do the important work of better understanding the experiences and perspectives of people on both sides of the conflict. We are aiming to strike a balance between this critical work and also our desire to engage with some of Israel's ancient history, its striking geography and its rich and fun tourist destinations. Because applying the Talmud's process to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict can not and should not be crammed into a single trip – especially not one with participants of

varying developmental capacities and needs – we will engage in some of this learning here at home in the coming eight months. That way, by the time we first step off the plane in Tel Aviv on June 14th 2020, we will already be equipped with a variety of lenses through which to view and experience the land, state and people of Israel. I hope you'll join us.

Embracing the truth in opposing perspectives is not always as frivolous or innocent as the story of my wedding engagement. On the contrary, sometimes it involves owning and accepting truth that is personally painful. The Jewish experience with white supremacy in this country is one such example. An online article published in April by the Anti-Defamation League notes that, “The U.S. Jewish community experienced near-historic levels of anti-Semitism in 2018, including a doubling of anti-Semitic assaults and the single deadliest attack against the Jewish community in American history...While the overall number of incidents represents a 5 percent decline from...incidents reported in 2017, the number of incidents last year remained at near-historic levels – 48 percent higher than the total for 2016 and 99 percent higher than in 2015.” This is terrifying, and deeply personal. There's no *eilu v'eilu* – no truth on both sides of this one. White supremacy is a destructive ideology that is rooted in *sinat chinam* – free and baseless hatred. It must be uprooted and destroyed.

But now we have arrived at what is the painful part for some of us here today. There is an *eilu v'eilu* here that most of us in this community and in the wider North American Jewish community need to face and, ultimately, to own. It is painful and challenging enough that I hesitated quite a bit in bringing it before you today as an example of the importance of learning to hold the truth in opposing perspectives. In spite of my trepidation, I am choosing to go forward because of what I believe is at stake. So here it is:

Though all Jews are absolutely threatened by white supremacy because we are Jews, at the very same time those of us with white skin, who can often “pass” in an American culture that privileges whiteness, are also – usually unwittingly – perpetrators of white supremacy. White Jews are both victims and agents of white supremacy. *Eilu v'eilu*. I know these words may sound inflammatory to some of you, both because of the violence and threats you have personally endured as a result of your Jewishness, and because of the time you have spent fighting for racial equity in our country. This is personally painful. So I will ask you to practice, right here and right now, the first two steps of Beit Hillel's approach – remaining calm and open to learning.

Professor Frances Lee Ansley explains that white supremacy does not only allude to the self-conscious racism of white supremacist hate groups. It refers also to a political, economic and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources.

Some of us may feel defensive and reactive around the use of the term ‘white supremacy’ in this way. And while it might be easier to grapple with our role in the perpetuation of these systems if we were gentler with the language, we need to pay attention to the way that this language is used by others who suffer as a result of these systems and biases, and perhaps even do better at owning our own fragility. Author Vann R. Newkirk II notably titled his 2017 article in The

Atlantic, “The Language of White Supremacy: Narrow definitions of the term actually help continue the work of the architects of the post-Jim Crow racial hierarchy.”

The *eilu v'eilu* of white supremacy for Jews who can “pass” as white in many many public spaces means that we cannot only be focused on dismantling racism ‘out there’ – somewhere beyond our Jewish community or this very synagogue; white supremacy lives inside anyone who benefits from white privilege. It is a toxin that lives inside most of us – inside of me – inside of this congregation. Jews of Color and the Jewish adjacent People of Color in our community often feel othered in precisely the space they come – like the rest of us – to feel at home. It happens nearly every single time a person of Color comes to Beth El – it has certainly happened already today to someone in this room.

Nylah Burton, a young Jew of Color, recently wrote, “When black Jews consistently feel exhausted and devalued no matter what Jewish space they’re in, it’s a crisis...When people are called ‘fake Jews’ or threatened with bodily harm for speaking out against racism, it’s a crisis...When black people with Jewish ancestry become anti-Semitic because they’ve grown to hate the community that hates them, it’s a crisis. It’s time for the white Jewish community to stop avoiding this issue, to stop blaming black people for experiencing racism, and to stop playing hot-potato with whiteness to avoid having these conversations. The stakes are too high to continue on this path.”

Eilu v'eilu. If we are going to dismantle white supremacy in this country, we Jews who can “pass” as white have some work to do right here at home. This has been a very quick review of an issue that demands more time. Unfortunately, there isn’t time this morning for an extended exploration of the complexities of this dual truth – that we who can “pass” are both victimized and vulnerable as Jews in the face of white supremacy ‘out there,’ and we are also perpetuating white supremacy ‘in here.’ I bring this case this morning as a real and serious example of the complexity and pain that can come from holding the reality of two opposing truths. It is not easy work, but I agree with Nylah Burton that the stakes are high. To start, we can apply Beit Hillel’s three steps, working non-defensively and open-mindedly to understand and then teaching the ways in which we inhabit these opposing truths.

When we do, not only will we strengthen our own sacred community, we will also most certainly find new allies in the fight against white supremacy, and even specifically the fight against anti-Semitism. Owning the painful truth of *eilu v'eilu* in this area is a meaningful first step towards making this country and our world safer for us and for all people. I look forward to continuing in the next steps of this work together in the coming months and years.

Practicing Beit Hillel’s 3 steps opens tremendous possibility for our relationships and for our world. How many of our personal hurts could be healed if we truly worked to understand one another, and if we felt that we were understood? Goodman concludes his introduction as follows: “While researching this book, I discovered that every side in Israel’s political debate harbors an unspoken desire to be understood. But healing Israel’s national conversation will require Israelis to supplement this wish with a further wish to *understand* as well.”

This is as true of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as it is about the Jewish experience of white supremacy as it is about each of our own interpersonal conflicts. We all know what a relief it is to feel fully understood – what if we worked harder to give this feeling to others?

And if our partner in dispute isn't also engaged in following these 3 steps? If they don't recognize the truth in our side – *eilu v'eilu*? Often, engaging in conflict or debate with someone in this way will feel like taking a risk. We are absolutely not opening ourselves up to be subjects of abuse. If our conversation partner is unable to engage with us respectfully we can and must walk away, perhaps to try again another day. But in most cases, we are more likely to reach productive resolution if we attempt in good faith to model these 3 steps. Avoiding the risk of personal vulnerability when engaged in conflict is tantamount to acquiescing to the status quo. Yes, it can feel like there is a lot to lose, but there is also so much to gain. If we are going to heal the political divide in this country and across the world, if we are going to mend the wounds in our personal relationships, if we are going to create a community and a society in which each one of us feels safe in our authentic self-expression, then we must strive perhaps even more to understand than to be understood. We are now ten days into a new year. It's Yom Kippur. There is no better day than today to begin this sacred work of self-reflection and of opening ourselves more fully to understanding the sacred truths of others. May we find the strength to begin. *Kein y'hi ratson*.