The Talmud teaches, “For three years there was a dispute between Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel, the former asserting that the halakhah, the law, was in agreement with their viewpoints, the latter contending that the law was in agreement with theirs.”

The Talmud goes on to say that a voice (Bat Kol) called out from the heavens proclaiming, E lu ve’du divrei Elohim hayim, “These and these are the words of the living God, and the law is in agreement with Beit Hillel.”

Of course, the question that follows is: if both are the words of the living God, why was the halakhah fixed in accordance with the rulings of the Academy of Hillel?

The Talmud answers: “Because they were kindly and modest, they studied their own rulings and those of Beit Shammai, and were even so humble as to mention the opinions of Beit Shammai before their own (Talmud Bavli, Eruvin 13b).

There is great power in this well-known Talmudic tale, with its dramatic assertion that no one person or school (or people!) possesses the whole truth. Absolute truth belongs only to God, the Infinite One. The rest of us carry partial truths, reflective of our finite nature.

But, perhaps even more poignant is the next piece of the story. Why was the law fixed according to Beit Hillel, if the heavenly voice declared that both schools spoke “words of the living God?” The answer is that the members of Beit Hillel were able to recognize that there are always other possible answers in a dispute, and they embodied this sensibility in their self-presentation and in their interactions with their rabbinic opponents.

Adding to the power of this story is the fact that the Talmud tells us that the members of these rival schools sat together for three years, learning, discussing, and debating in pursuit of truth and goodness. They did not leave the table abruptly, storming out when the conversation became difficult.
Elsewhere, the Talmud tells us that even though the students of Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel were in disagreement about various legal issues, they did not refrain from having their children marry each other (Talmud Bavli, Yevamot 14b). This means that even though these sages disagreed about many important issues, they still considered themselves part of the same community.

This was a very hard summer for so many people throughout the world, with far too much warfare and bloodshed.

I was supposed to travel to Kenya and Israel this summer. My trip to Kenya, through a fellowship sponsored by American Jewish World Service, was cancelled as a result of the political upheaval in the region. Instead, I spent a longer amount of time in Israel. I joked that instead of going to two war zones, I was only going to only one! Every time I made this joke, I felt such a deep sense of sadness.

Truthfully, I was very safe in Israel and I enjoyed my summer. I went camping, swimming, and I got together with family and friends. In fact, for the first part of my trip there was a cease-fire in effect. On the last day of that ceasefire period, as I was walking back from a lovely outing with Alma, I thought to myself, “It is possible to be in Jerusalem without feeling the effects of the war.” That same night we heard our first siren. It was not such a traumatic experience for me. I did not feel unsafe, mostly I felt confused – not only about the immediate logistics of the bomb shelter, but more significantly about the end of the cease-fire and the beginning of yet another round of fighting.

Yes, here I am sharing with you some of my thoughts and experiences about my summer in Israel, a topic of discussion that feels more and more impossible in the Jewish community.

In the last few weeks several articles appeared advising rabbis either to speak or not to speak about Israel during the High Holidays. Additionally, there was a report published last year by the JCPA entitled, “Reluctant or Repressed: Aversion to Expressing Views on Israel Among American Rabbis” (Dr. Steven Cohen and Rabbi Jason Gitlin, October 2013). This study, which surveyed 552 US rabbis, suggests that nearly 40% of my colleagues self-identify as “reluctant and repressed,” feeling that they cannot openly and honestly share their own views about Israel with their congregations. With all the difficulty in our own conversations about Israel I think it is fair to say that TBZ as a community has not allowed the situation to get that difficult.
Among the discussion points in the recent flurry of Israel-related articles, some people argued that most rabbis are not political experts, and should, therefore, not speak about these issues from the pulpit. Frankly, I agree with that assessment: I am certainly not a skilled political analyst, nor do I think that I have special insight into how to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Nonetheless, as a rabbi I believe that today, the most important day of the Jewish calendar, when the sanctuary is filled as on no other day, it is important for us to talk about the nature of our communal discourse on Israel and other sensitive and potentially divisive issues. Today is a day to revisit the teaching of “E lu ve’elu,” asking ourselves how best to apply this core rabbinic teaching to our lives, especially when there is such pain involved in our conversations.

Part of what motivates me to revisit this teaching today is the deep pain I experienced reading many of the opinion pieces about the war by rabbis and public intellectuals. Often I felt alienated and confused by the rhetoric people used in arguing the certainty of their truth claims. It was extremely helpful to speak with trusted friends and colleagues who also felt confused or wanting for answers, but were willing to engage in honest and compassionate conversation.

My abiding question from the summer, which may be different from yours, is how to express my love for, and dedication to, the State of Israel while measuring carefully my responses to particular decisions of the Israeli government and its military in given situations? Further, how do I hold my anger and disdain for Hamas, while grieving the deaths of so many innocent Palestinian people and the massive wreckage in Gaza? Was the only way to stand with Israel this summer to support all of the actions of the Israeli government uncritically? Was it disloyal to express empathy for innocent Palestinian civilians?

We need to be able to have these difficult conversations among ourselves, and perhaps even more emotionally wrenching - we need to be able to have them with the Palestinian and Muslim community. Last July, some members of TBZ including myself joined our Muslim neighbors as we broke fast at the Yusuf Mosque in Chestnut Hill. That day the Jewish fast of the 17 of Tammuz coincided with the Muslim fast of Ramadan (which last 30 days!). We were graciously welcomed and fed with wonderful vegetarian food. Muslims and Jews came together to dedicate our fast to peace and to pray for the end of bloodshed and war.
But this was also soon after the three young Israelis Naftali Frankel, Gilad Shaar and Ayal Yifrach who were kidnapped were found dead and soon after the Palestinian teenager Muhammed Abu Khdeir was murdered. That day eating together in a Brighton mosque felt like a desperate attempt to reach out to see if connection is at all possible through the depth of pain and violence that we continue to encounter. I do not know if or to what extent we succeeded, but for a moment, it felt like I was doing something that I am not willing to give up on. For that same reason, I joined a couple of weeks ago, faith leaders and activists, Muslims and Jews at a meeting where we shared our experiences of the summer in our own communities and our hope for continue dialogue between the Muslim and the Jewish community in America, even when this can be difficult conversations. We cannot stop trying.

In an article called “Israel In Trying Times: Unity Not Uniformity,” Rabbi Sharon Brous wrote the following words: “A false dichotomy has been set up between particularism and universalism. Do you care about your tribe or do you care about the world? But I am a Jew AND a human being. It is precisely because my people knows terror and recognizes the world’s silent complicity that my heart is awake to human suffering”

Rabbi Noah Kushner asked the following question of her congregation: “What does it mean when we here have reached a moment where, when we hear about the deaths of innocents we jump to our arguments rather than stop and weep? Whether or not what happened was justified or unjustified, it should trouble us all”

In a recent essay in the Forward, Rabbi Shai Held reminds us that the according to ancient tradition, the shofar blasts we sound on Rosh Hashanah have their origins in the stories of two biblical figures, two mothers weeping over the fate of their children. One being Sarah, who wept after hearing word of the Akedah, the “Binding of Isaac”; the other being the mother of Sisera, the commander of the Canaanite army and the enemy of the people of Israel. What a powerful lesson our sages teach us about the universal love of parents for children, and the need to empathize with mothers and fathers on all sides of a conflict, even those of our enemies.

Returning to the theme of Elu ve’elu, our liturgy includes a fascinating passage from the Talmud (Bavli, Berachot 64a) about the relationship between Torah study and peace:

Difficult Conversations - Rabbi Claudia Kreiman

Yom Kippur 5775, September 2014
“Rabbi Elazar said in the name of Rabbi Haninah: Torah scholars increase peace in the world. As it says, ‘All of Your children are students of God; great is the peace of Your children’ (Isaiah 54:13). Read this not as banayich, ‘Your children,’ but rather bonayich, ‘Your builders’” – Great it the peace of your builders. (Berachot 64a).

The great Jewish modern mystical teacher, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, asks the following question:

“Considering the vast number of disagreements and differences of opinion among Torah scholars, Rabbi Haninah’s statement seems counterintuitive. Do scholars really increase peace in the world? And why did Rabbi Haninah insist that they are ‘builders?’ What does this text tell us about Torah scholars and peace? People mistakenly believe that peace in the world means that everyone will share common viewpoints and think in the same way. So when they see scholars disagreeing about an issue, this appears to be the exact opposite of peace.”

Rav Kook continues and says:

“True peace, however, comes precisely through the proliferation of divergent views. When all of the various angles and sides of an issue are exposed, and we are able to clarify how each one has its place – that is true peace. The Hebrew word shalom means both “peace” and “completeness.” We will only attain complete knowledge when we are able to accommodate all views – even those that appear contradictory – as partial perceptions of the whole truth. Like an interlocking puzzle, together they present a complete picture” (adapted from E in E yah V ol. II, pp.397-398, ravkooktorah.org).

In light of Rav Kook’s analysis, I want to encourage us as a community to engage in honest and sensitive conversation about Israel, knowing that we are not going to agree about all of the issues. In doing so, we need to keep in mind the fact that none of us holds all of the puzzle pieces, that we need each other to gain insight and wisdom – E lu ve’elu.

Hand in hand with this awareness must come a commitment to uphold the model of the students of Hillel, who argued and debated passionately, but did so in a dignified manner. As the Talmud reports, “they were kindly and modest, they studied their own rulings and those of Beit Shammai, and were even so humble as to mention the opinions of Beit Shammai before theirs.”
Together with Reb Moshe, our Israel committee, and others in the community, I am committed to help create more contexts within our synagogue for such courageous and compassionate conversations. As we return to our tefilot and continue our individual and collective processes of teshuvah, I invite you to consider how we might carry forth this work together with integrity and care in this New Year.

May this be a year of good health, happiness, and increased peace in our world – G’mar Chatimah tovah!