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### Ambiguity

One festive day when we lived in Princeton we joined many of our students to celebrate a *bachnasat sefer Torah* - the dedication of a new Torah scroll that was sponsored by a Jewish organization on campus where we did not work. A Torah scroll, lovingly written by hand, is a time consuming and expensive ritual item to create. It adds holiness to wherever it is housed and enables Jewish life to grow and flourish in ways that are not possible without one. A new Torah scroll is a true cause for celebration.

But at this particular campus Jewish organization, women were not invited to hold the Torah scroll or dance with the Torah scroll as part of the festivities and that gave me pause. Women carrying or dancing with a Torah scroll is not condemned by the overwhelming majority of authoritative halakhic sources, but there are many contemporary communities who have adopted a more restrictive position. On the one hand, contemporary Judaism is extremely diverse and so is contemporary Orthodoxy and it is wonderful when we can celebrate genuine accomplishments together. On the other hand, I could not fully rejoice knowing that so many of our female students were excluded from full participation. On the one hand, different Jewish communities form a mosaic of Jews striving to serve God, each emphasizing different facets of the Torah. But, in a world where time and resources are always stretched thin, it was hard to watch so much of both being allocated to a celebration of Torah that felt alien to some important values of my community.

Fast forward to the first Friday night of the first summer of Sara's fellowship at the Hartman Institute which funded our family's two summer trips to Israel. One of our children desperately wanted me to take him to a Hassidic tisch after our dinner that night. He had heard me describe how powerful and enriching and formative my own youthful explorations of Me'ah Shea'rim on Shabbat had been, our entire family had shopped there during the week for various Judaica and sefarim, and he was a big Shtissel fan as well.

Sara was not enthusiastic about this trip. Whereas I associated the Hassidic tisch with beautiful singing and an exotic practice of a Jewish community not foreign and yet not fully my own, Sara thought of it as just another spiritual opportunity to which women were mostly excluded and that was built upon the unpaid labor of women who remain home with sleeping children while their husbands encounter transcendence at the tisch.

I've come to recognize that, at least in the sphere of flawed human attempts to serve an infinite God, almost nothing is entirely good and almost nothing is entirely bad. Oppression and stigmatization and alienation are part and parcel of cherished rituals and gatherings. Good and holiness cannot be pursued without collateral damage and there is no way to keep our hands entirely clean even when we pursue noble goals. This is the world of Sefer Bereishit after humanity has eaten: מֵעֵץ הַדַּעַת טוֹב וְרָע from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Rambam explains that eating the tree confused our judgment. We were created, in the image of God, with the capacity to know right from wrong. After eating the fruit, Rambam says in the Guide, our judgment of right and wrong is confused by esthetic evaluations.

But we can take this confusion one step farther. It is not a tree that imparts knowledge of good and bad as two distinct categories. Rather it is a tree that burdens us with the awareness that the categories of good and bad are not fully distinct. Good has some bad mixed with it in our fallen world. Evil has some silver linings.

Noach is introduced to us in our parasha with the phrase:

נֹחַ אִישׁ צַדִּיק תָּמִים הָיָה בְּדֹרֹתָיו

Noach was a righteous man who was perfect in his generation.

The Talmud records a dispute between the sages Rav and Shmuel about the meaning of the phrase “בְּדִרְתָּיו” One said that it means that he was even more praiseworthy since he managed to be righteous in a generation where nobody else was even trying. Alternatively, he can only be considered righteous in contrast to the scoundrels among whom he lived. Were he to be compared to a truly righteous person, nobody would have thought much of Noah.

I've shared before the observation of my teacher Rabbi Chaim Brovender that Rashi quotes both of these options without attribution and just acknowledges the existence of the disagreement about Noah's character and in this way Rashi introduces a third option:

יש מרבותינו דורשים אותו לשבח, כל שפן אלו היה בדור צדיקים היה צדיק יותר; ויש שדורשים אותו לגנאי, לפי דורו היה צדיק ואלו היה בדורו של אברהם לא היה נחשב לכלום (סנה' ק"ח):

Some of our sages interpret “in his generation” to be praise and some interpret it as a negative comment.

There are now three positions about Noah, Rav, Shmuel, and Rashi. Noah was either extra righteous. Or he was not so righteous, or he was an ambiguous character with both tremendous accomplishments and contributions to humanity and to all animal life, and some real shortfalls. This third approach has always seemed more profound to me and I believe it more accurately summarizes Noah, the person to whom we all owe our lives, and a person who failed to convince anyone else to see the world as he did. Noah did not recruit followers as Avraham and Sarah did and Noah did not transmit his decency and piety to his children as our patriarchs and matriarchs worked so hard to do. Noah, a good man with failings, or a failed man with accomplishments is a perfect exemplar of someone we can recognize in a world in which good and bad are mixed together somewhat.

This is the significance as well of the confusion of languages that erupts when God interrupts the construction of the Tower of Babel in the final section of the parsha this morning. The name Babel - Babylon, means “confusion” or “mixture” and for a strain of rabbinic tradition, the land of Babel, the location of our first and longest diaspora, exemplifies the confusion of a world where categories of good and bad and light and dark can be mixed with one another.

What connects the two stories in Parashat Noah? They are both stories of human beings struggling in a world of confusion. Noah struggles to do good, and the builders of the tower are stymied in their attempts to do evil, by the very same mixing and merging of good and evil.

Rav Nachman of Breslov was paralyzed by doubt and uncertainty and confusion and composed moving prayers for deliverance from his lack of certainty about how to pray. But to avoid becoming incapacitated by living in a world in which almost nothing is fully good or fully bad. I humbly submit three rules for serving God and living with integrity in a world of confusion.

The philosopher John Rawls suggested that inequality in a political or economic system could be just if and only if the inequality benefited those least well-off. It is just, he argued, for an economic system to allow some to become wealthy, only if that inequality resulted in objective benefits for those who were poor. I thought of Rawls this week when I read that boys at the high school that two of my sons attend were invited to join one of their teachers yesterday morning for a special outdoor Shacharit minyan on the lake that coincided with sunrise. What an inspiring way to take advantage of the time of year when the sun rises late over the lake and it is still warm enough to daven comfortably outside. And there is no reason why a Modern Orthodox school couldn't include their female students and faculty in this inspiring tefilah experience. But, it is still clear to me that Modern Orthodox high schools provide Jewish girls with the education that most empowers them for a lifetime of Torah study and ultimately the capacity to shape Judaism itself for the next generation.

The second rule is to pick a side, and then always remember the distinction between one's essential commitments and extra-curricular enrichment. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks zt'l wrote that he hated the label "Modern Orthodox Judaism." Jews are a small minority of people. Orthodox Jews are a small minority of Jews. And Modern Orthodox Jews are a minority of Orthodox Jews. And so to claim to be a Modern Orthodox Jew was to take on the identity of a minority of a minority of a minority. Rabbi Sacks wrote that he was interested in shaping the world, not being a minority of a minority of a minority. Rather than investing in the label of Modern Orthodoxy, Rabbi Sacks encouraged us to invest in our identities as Jews. Which means, I believe, that we should understand our Modern Orthodox commitments (to religious humanism, feminism, the study of general wisdom, and religious Zionsim) not as the customs of a small faction, but as the most authentic expression of Judaism as we are able to understand it. Do not be Modern Orthodox as a compromise between your frum parents and your non-Orthodox friends. Pick a side in the ongoing debate about how to observe mitzvot in the best possible way, and then do so with pride. I hope it is not a surprise to you that in my family women having physical access to a physical Torah scroll is something that is crucial to our ability to practice Judaism. I know that about myself and that knowledge informs when I do and when I do not join other Jewish communities for tefilot or celebrations and it determines when and how I can feel at home at a Jewish event.

Once you have clarity about the community that you are a part of, then there are a myriad of ways to supplement our experiences and enrich our lives by visiting other communities, to learn from them and engage in fruitful dialogue with them without yielding to confusion about core allegiances and without throwing anyone under the bus.

And the final rule is to be humble about our capacity for distinguishing right from wrong and to understand that for everyone here today because he or she believes that the Modern Orthodox commitments of this congregation most align with an authentic expression of "Judaism" there is someone else who is here to supplement some other commitment that for them is primary. For every way that a community represents a vision of an ideal to rally around, it also represents a compromise between irreconcilable values and irresolvable disputes.

The good news is that flawed human beings, like all of us, are capable of supporting one another and finding support and acceptance from one another, and building community together, not despite our flaws, but because of them. To be a confused and flawed human being, is to be a human being in this confused reality that we inherit from our ancestors in Gan Eden. Just as we are grateful this Shabbat to all that Noach accomplished we can try, in small ways, to make decisions that will allow us and our families and humanity as a whole to survive whatever storms come our way.