

Living Life with Complexity
Rosh Hashanah Morning 5783
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When did you leave the house for your first errand? Was it 10? 12? I don't think I did any errands until I could drive, but then again I grew up in the suburbs. Anyone here run their first errand at the age of three? No surprise. That is part of what makes 'Old Enough' on Netflix so intriguing. If you haven't heard of it, it's a long-running Japanese tv show that presents a typical three year old on their first trip to the store. Everyone I've spoken to has been floored by this. How is this safe? What kind of country do they live in? Could this ever happen in America, a place where not too long ago a woman was arrested for letting her nine year old daughter play in a park while she worked across the street?¹ So how is it possible that an ocean away, children go on errands as young as three years old?

The answer is: it's complicated. There is no one single answer, but rather a totally different societal approach to cars, children and community in Japan. To start, there is no residential zoning in Japan: everything is mixed use, so while here in America, most of us need to get into a car to get to a store: that's not true in Japan. In addition, the streets are much narrower, and have no sidewalks in most predominantly residential neighborhoods. In America: that often means it's more dangerous for pedestrians, but the Japanese norms require cars to defer

¹ [Working Mom Arrested for Letting Her 9-Year-Old Play Alone at Park - The Atlantic](#)

to pedestrians and cyclists: the roads are for them not for cars. Cars are also not allowed to park on the street overnight, ensuring greater visibility for crossing pedestrians. Children are also expected to walk to school by themselves, or in groups of other children.² All of these factors and more combine to create an ecosystem where children can go on a first errand at three years old. There is no one reason: rather a series of factors that come together just right to allow for this dramatically different experience. There is no one simple answer, even if we would like there to be.

We live in an age that constantly encouraging simplicity, searching for that one simple answer. Most of us engage with more headlines than articles, thanks to the notifications on our screens that give us snippets of information designed to create outrage or excitement. Even though the full articles are often far more nuanced and thoughtful, many of us don't read them. I thought of this immediately when I heard about a protocol on Twitter. If the algorithm recognizes that you haven't read the article, it asks people if they really want to share it. They call it "read before you retweet."³ If we give ourselves the time to actually engage with the material, we often come away with a far more nuanced and thoughtful viewpoint that a headline cannot provide, versus hubristically believing that we already know the content of the article from the incendiary headline.

² [First Errand - 99% Invisible](#)

³ [Twitter is bringing its 'read before you retweet' prompt to all users - The Verge](#)

Rarely is the world that straightforward. If we want to understand something we need to ask more questions, probe more deeply, think through all the possible issues. We need to focus on deeper discovery and not shallow suppositions, because the world is far too complex for any of us to possibly understand it all.

Consider our Torah portion this morning, the Akeidah, or the binding of Isaac. Is it a story about faith in God or child sacrifice? Did Abraham pass the test or fail it? Was the angel calling Abraham to tell him to use the ram instead, which is the reason we just blew shofar, or was that a test in and of itself?

The depth and complexity of this pericope has inspired generations of our people to dive deep into every word, mining it for meaning through celebrating its complexity, and not accepting a single simple answer. Our Tradition has been built on a celebration of multiple voices and reveling in complexity.

So, can we be ok with complexity? Can we accept the fact that there won't be clear right and wrong answers? Because if we continue to look at the world as if it were simple, we leave no space for facts that we haven't considered. If we look at the world as if it were simple, we are guilty of Job's hubris that lead the Divine to respond:

38:4 Where were you when I laid the earth's foundations?

Speak if you have understanding.

5Do you know who fixed its dimensions

Or who measured it with a line?

6 Onto what were its bases sunk?
Who set its cornerstone
7 When the morning stars sang together
And all the divine beings shouted for joy?

Everything is far more complicated than we can easily fathom, and this is one of those many moments where we are being asked to live counter culturally. Because in a world that only has black and white, we are certain to miss the necessary nuance. Or ruin a relationship because the person we're speaking with feels unheard. There is a powerful teaching based on the following line from our tradition:

Make yourself a heart of many rooms and bring into it the words of the House of Shammai and the words of the House of Hillel, the words of those who declare unclean and the words of those who declare clean.⁴ Rabbi David Hartman taught "...In other words, become a person in whom different opinions can reside together in the very depths of your soul. Become a religious person who can live with ambiguity, who can feel religious conviction and passion without the need for simplicity and absolute certainty."⁵

Living with ambiguity is far more challenging than the ease of certainty, because people will look for easy answers to their problems. Certainty is enthralling which is why conspiracy theories are replete. But they cannot stand up to complex questions and argumentation. If you

⁴ Tosefta Sotah 7:7 (2nd century C.E.)

⁵ Rabbi David Hartman (z"l), "A Heart of Many Rooms,"

take the time to question the veracity of the lie before you, it folds like a house of cards. But you have to want to challenge the simple lie at the center, the lie that provides a reassuring sense of security and comfort.

Consider the lie at the heart of replacement theory: a horrifyingly simple idea that Jews are trying to replace white people by encouraging immigration. It's based in Anti-Semitic tropes and has had horrific consequences. The March in Charlottesville, where the chant of "Jews will not replace us" still echoes painfully. The massacre in Pittsburgh, where Tree of Life's support of HIAS, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, drew the gunman to violence. It is this heinous lie that spurred the murderer in Buffalo, New York to kill innocent people in a grocery store. This was all based on the simple belief that Jews and People of Color are the real reason for all your problems. This type of thinking is best referred to as Single Factor Theory: the fallacious approach to the world where answers coalesce around one single factor. The much more accurate and complicated world view is to look at everything as an ecosystem: with many different inflows it's not a singular moment that causes the change but a series of connected experiences and influences. We need the willingness to look at Israel with that same mindset: to understand the ecosystem and not to be lured into the simplicity of trying to name the Single Factor.

For 11 days in May 2021, every moment I looked at the news, I heard about Israel. My frustration was magnified time after time, as the situation was simplified into a mirror of American problems that were

being projected onto an entirely different situation. America continues to have a public conversation about police and racism. And those are serious problems, but those aren't Israel's problems. As Matti Friedman insightfully put it:

“Western observers are often tempted to see foreign countries as mirrors of their own, because it makes a story more compelling for members of their audience, who are interested—who isn't?—mainly in themselves. And it means they can analyze other societies without going to the considerable trouble of studying them, learning their language, or even visiting. So Narendra Modi of India is Donald Trump, and France's problem is racial inequality, and Dutch conservatives are Republicans.”⁶

Consider for a moment the last round of violence between Israel and Gaza, Operation Breaking Dawn this past August. If you were to watch American news, the most important Single Factor was the death toll in Gaza. Which is horrific and tragic. What you wouldn't have heard was that many of those deaths were caused by Palestinian Islamic Jihad, a terrorist organization backed by Iran, because they shot missiles indiscriminately into population centers in Israel and the Gaza Strip. You wouldn't have heard that Hamas, the terrorist organization that runs Gaza refrained from the fighting because of hard diplomatic work in the region. In so many ways, the message around Israel, and so many things, lacks the nuance about the complicated ecosystem needed to understand it.

⁶ [Israel's problems are not like America's](#)

Two years ago, I was lucky enough to travel with AIEF, the American Israel Educational Foundation on a Liberal Rabbinic mission to Israel. That was my tenth trip to Israel over the past twenty years. This mission mirrored the itinerary offered to freshmen members of congress every two years. The purpose of this trip was to explore as many facets of the complicated ecosystem in Israel and the Palestinian territories as possible. To showcase all the things that are going on in Israel and the West Bank on a daily basis, and challenge participants to grapple with why we are drawn to the simple explanations of the conflict. To go to the Gaza border, the Syrian border, and the Lebanese border and appreciate the different dangers which are all funded by the Islamic Republic of Iran, that calls for Israel to be wiped off the map. To go to Jerusalem and Ramallah and meet with the people who are trying to negotiate a better path forward, but are stymied time and again. To meet with everyday Israelis and everyday Palestinians, and hear their stories. To recognize that Israel is a minority majority society: about 30 percent of the population is originally from Europe, the majority of the Jewish and non-Jewish citizenship come from the Middle East and North Africa. To appreciate so much that can't fit into this sermon, and for seven nonstop days, have nuanced conversations with every sector of Israeli society, as well as the leadership of the PLO and Palestinians who live in the West Bank. To appreciate that Israel has problems, and no one has a good solution.

That doesn't fit into a 5 minute news clip, a meme on Facebook, or a pithy quote, and is part of why the conversation around Israel is so toxic: the situation in Israel is far too complicated for soundbites. But we live in a world where the tweet and the meme are the totality of some people's news consumption. As lovers of Israel, our work is to encourage the ecosystem approach to Israel. This does not require us to check our critiques, or hide our praise. Rather, it is diligently looking at all the facets of the issue to understand the full ecosystem. To let listening to real people take a front seat, and to avoid echo chambers like social media that simply further one sided narratives that lack the nuance needed. Any good conversation around any complicated topic should end with far more questions than answers. Any rigid, dogmatic approach, either on the right or the left, does a disservice to everyone, and changes no minds, rather it further entrenches people in their own positions and camps.

Creating a heart of many rooms, a heart that can welcome and accept complexity, is not easy. Doing the right thing rarely is. But by pushing for simplicity we are doing a disservice to everyone. Everything we engage with: our Torah, our friends, ourselves is far more complicated. As we enter this new year, may we all have the strength to go beyond the headlines, to go beyond the surface understanding, to go deeper into an idea and find the real truth in the complexity.