

**ROSH HA-SHANAH MORNING 5776 / 2015
FROM ORTHODOX TO PARADOX**

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Picture this: A cat is placed inside a steel chamber along with a small lump of nuclear material—let's say, enriched uranium—and a glass vial filled with cyanide gas. There is a 50/50 chance that one atom of the uranium will decay, releasing an electron. If that happens, a relay mechanism will trip a hammer which will, in turn, break the glass vial, release the poison and kill the cat.

We, the observers, cannot know whether or not an atom of the substance has decayed, and consequently, whether the vial has been broken, the cyanide released, and the cat killed.

Here comes the crazy part. According to the laws of quantum physics, so long as the box is sealed and we cannot observe the

results, the cat is simultaneously dead *and* alive, in what is called a superposition of states. Only when we break open the steel chamber does the cat become one or the other, dead *or* alive.

This famous thought experiment, proposed in 1935 by the Nobel-prize winning Austrian physicist Erwin Schrödinger, one of the pioneers of quantum physics, derives from the fundamental quantum principle that, at the atomic level, a particle can actually exist in multiple nuclear states, or multiple locations, simultaneously—a phenomenon that becomes paradoxical when applied at the macroscopic level, for instance, to cats.

Now picture this: Isaac is bound upon the altar, the firewood directly below him and the knife, clutched in his father's outstretched hand, directly above him. The Torah tells us that God's angel stops the sacrifice at this critical moment. But in the 12th Century, the Talmudic scholar and poet Rabbi Ephraim of Bonn, told an alternate version. In his poem "The Slaughter and Resurrection of Isaac," Abraham actually goes

through with the sacrifice and Isaac dies upon the altar, but is then spirited away to the Garden of Eden, from where he eventually returns, safe and sound and very much alive, to Abraham's understandable bewilderment.

The 12th Century was not particularly kind to the Jews of Christian Europe, marked as it was by episodic violence, organized pogroms, daily humiliations and subjugations, and even occasional expulsions. The same Ephraim of Bonn wrote about the infamous burning at the stake of over thirty Jews in the Northern French town of Blois in 1171, victims of the notorious ritual murder charge that the town's Jews had kidnapped and murdered a Christian boy, evacuating him of his blood as part of the secret recipe for Passover *matzos*. Nineteen years later, Rabbi Ephraim would testify in writing to the massacre of 150 Jews of York, England, noting that during the pogrom, some Jewish officials commanded the townsfolk to slaughter their only sons and accept martyrdom rather than submit to the marauding hordes.

Against this backdrop, Ephraim's unconventional reading of the *Akedah* makes sense. We should note also that Ephraim did not invent the idea of Isaac's death and miraculous revival. The Torah itself hints at Isaac's fate by noting, in the last line of the story, that Abraham returned *alone* to Be'er Sheva; so, where was Isaac?

By the twelfth century, legends of Isaac's death and revival had been around for ages, dating, perhaps, to around the time of Jesus, when resurrection traditions found their way both into early Rabbinic Judaism and the nascent Church. This also explains why Christians to this day refer to our story not as the *Binding* but as the *Sacrifice* of Isaac and find in Isaac a prototype of their own lord and savior.

Taken as a whole — the Biblical story and its subversive Rabbinic literary offshoots — and you end up with a Schrödinger-like situation, an Isaac who is simultaneously alive and dead.

What these two thought-experiments have in common is a profound capacity for **paradox**—the ability to contain seemingly contradictory conclusions.

The word paradox comes from two Greek roots, *para*, meaning “distinct” or “contrary” and “*doxa*,” meaning “opinion.” With this understanding I’d like to offer, this morning, *paradox* as the opposite of *orthodox*, meaning “[the] correct opinion,” and suggest that what we need as Jews today is to shift our perspective from *orthodox* to *paradox*.

I say *orthodox* with a lowercase “o,” not referring to any particular stream of Jewish thought or practice, but rather a mindset that presently afflicts Jews and non-Jews of all denominations: the inability to see the possibility for multiple correct opinions, that is, a failure to live with *paradox*.

The great Rabbi David Hartman who spoke at WRT on a number of occasions and who died in 2013, shifted, over the course of his life and career, from orthodox to paradox. His

upbringing was Orthodox, uppercase. While he never abandoned his affiliation, he pushed the boundaries of Orthodox Judaism to make room for a Judaism of paradox.

He was fond of citing an early Rabbinic teaching of which the punchline became the title of one of his books. The passage depicts the rival academies of Hillel and Shammai sharply disagreeing on matters of Jewish law. “If the Torah is given by a single God, provided by a single Shepherd,” it asks, “then how can there exist such differing interpretations?” “Make yourself a heart of many rooms,” answered the Rabbis, “and bring into it the words of the house of Shammai and the words of the house of Hillel.”¹ In other words, Hartman explained, a Jew must become a “person in whom different opinions can reside together in the very depths of your soul.... a... person who can feel religious conviction and passion without the need for simplicity and absolute certainty.”²

¹ *Tosefta, Sotah* 7:12.

² *A Heart of Many Rooms*, p. 21.

So many times I have seen us fail to live up to this ideal. I remember nine years ago, during the height of the Second Lebanon war in Israel, when two banners greeted us at WRT — one sign, green-and-white, on the front lawn, sponsored by American Jewish World Service, the inspiring organization that bases its international relief work in Jewish values, imploring, “Save Darfur,” and the other sign, blue and white, declaring, “We Stand With Israel.”

Angry calls came in, insisting that so long as Hizbollah-launched rockets were raining down on Qiryat Shemoneh, a synagogue had no business reminding us about responsibilities to a bleeding world beyond the doorstep of the Jewish people. Take down the Darfur sign, they demanded.

For these angry callers, the world is a binary proposition. Either Isaac is alive or dead. Either you are with us or against us. Either you are our friend or our enemy. It’s a zero-sum game.

Since 2006, I have seen, time and again, this mindset manifested and magnified, but nothing in recent memory has set the Jewish community against itself like the so-called “Iran Deal,” formally, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). For the remaining minutes of this sermon, I want to share with you my approach to the JCPOA and why I believe that our collective conversation about it necessitates a shift from orthodox to paradox, the theme of today’s talk.

Above all, I want you to know *why* and *how* I intend to talk about the Iran Deal. I am not a politician, a pundit, or a non-proliferation expert. I have no particular expertise in military strategy or international negotiations. When it comes to analysis of the deal, I see myself as one of you, the Jews in the pews—and this is a congregation of smart, passionate, informed people perfectly capable of forming their own opinions.

I *do* feel an overriding rabbinical obligation to address publicly matters that affect the Jewish people. As one cannot address

the Iran Deal without considering its effect on Israel, and, in turn, on global Jewry, I view it as not only *permissible* but in fact *necessary* to speak about the Iran Deal today.

However, my intention is to frame my remarks as only a rabbi can—that is, to bring Jewish values and my understanding of the Jewish tradition into the conversation. If you were hoping, therefore, for a straight “yes” or “no,” like or dislike, up/down vote on the deal, I am sorry to disappoint you.

For those of us who are not legislators—and for them this really has come down to “yes” or “no”—we have an opportunity to bring more nuance and a healthy embrace of paradox into the conversation. As a rabbi, I am constantly asked to evaluate questions whose answers resist a flat yes or no. Questions like: “What does Judaism teach about abortion?” “Is it permissible to tell a lie?” and “May one disconnect a loved one from a ventilator?”

Why should a matter of potential existential importance for an entire people be any different?

At the time the agreement was reached on July 14th, shortly before 1:00 PM Vienna time, I was aboard a jumbo jet bound for Tel Aviv with seventeen other Reform and Conservative rabbis, participants selected for an educational mission to Israel and the West Bank. I learned the news immediately upon landing, about two hours later. Our trip was about to get very interesting.

Over the course of the next week, the American Israel Education Foundation, the educational charity affiliated with the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), brought us into intense conversations from across the spectrum of Israeli society: Israeli Jews, Palestinian Muslims, Knesset members, journalists, social activists, human rights advocates, international negotiators, civil engineers, military experts, rabbis. We met leaders of the West Bank settlement movement and some of their most prominent critics. We learned about

Ethiopian Jewish immigrants' and Arab Israelis' struggle for acceptance against entrenched racism. Because the Iran Deal was so fresh at the time, we heard unvarnished opinions, not polished preaching. I was relieved that no one on our itinerary had been conscripted to speak specifically about the Deal—no so-called “experts” on Iran or nuclear proliferation. We heard real Israelis' real reactions.

Israelis across the political spectrum share a socially unifying anxiety about the Iran Deal. A vocal minority on the far left does support the Deal, but my conversations with representatives from the left-wing Meretz political party and the left-wing NGO *Shalom Achshav* (Peace Now) revealed that even their views skewed toward apprehension.

Overwhelmingly we heard Israelis speak about their feelings of isolation on the world stage and alienation from America.

Blame for such a lamentable condition deserves to be laid at the feet of both the American and Israeli administrations. But

the fact that there's blame to go around does little to assuage my distress. Watching the rift between America and Israel widen into a yawning chasm, a situation which neither President nor Prime Minister seems to have had much interest in curbing, has only exacerbated my heartbreak.

I understand Israelis' trepidation. Much has been made of the pro-Western sympathies of a possible majority of Iran's citizens, but the fact remains that the Islamic Regime persists as a serial abuser of human rights and religious freedom, the foremost anti-Western, anti-Semitic bully in the Middle East whose naked desire for regional hegemony has manifested in recent, alarmingly successful power grabs in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen, maneuvers that have dramatically enhanced Iran's ability to sponsor terror on or close to Israel's borders.

The combination of Iran's nuclear ambitions, the dramatic enhancements to the conventional arsenals of Iran and its allies that sanctions relief will bring, and Iran's oft-stated intentions

to see Israel destroyed, understandably have put Israelis on edge, together with millions of us in Diaspora who realize that our fate as a Jewish people is inextricably intermingled with the fate of Israel.

For these reasons, in my heart, I have built a room — a large room — to contain my opposition to this deal.

But — and this, I suppose, is the essence of paradox — my heart has two more rooms on the subject: smaller rooms, perhaps, but rooms nonetheless. The second room has been built to contain thoughtful opinions in support of this Deal.

I built this room because of the opinions of respected nuclear non-proliferation experts and Israeli military analysts who tend to agree that the JCPOA stands as one of the strongest nuclear accords ever reached and who note that a ten-year delay, maybe more, looks a whole lot better than where we were before the deal, with Iran only two months away from compiling enough enriched uranium to pose a threat.

I believe that the option to forestall Iran's nuclear ambitions forever and ever was never really on the table, or, at least, that the opportunity to halt Iran's progress passed several years ago without any decisive action from the US or Israel. Our leaders have further betrayed us by suggesting that the frightening prospect of a nuclear Iran was just that, a prospect, rather than an eventuality.

Given this unfortunate reality, I like the idea that Israel and the US may now have more time to collaborate on deterrence methods through technological innovation and investment in Israel's defense mechanisms.

You may have heard the one where NASA scientists announce that a comet is headed directly for Earth. It will land in the Atlantic Ocean in three days and flood 95% of the earth's landmass. The Pope immediately goes on TV and announces, "People of the World, there is still time to repent and accept the Lord into your hearts, so that you will live life eternal."

The Dalai Lama goes on Twitter and tweets, “All life is suffering. But through reincarnation you can live again and ultimately reach Nirvana.” The rabbis of the world convene and miraculously agree to publish a unanimous statement: “Jewish People! We have three days to learn how to live underwater.” Perhaps the Deal gives us an opportunity to adapt to the new reality, grim though it may be.

As of this Rosh Ha-Shanah we have every reason to believe that, like it or not, the Deal will go forward. And so I’ve made room in my heart for a third room. This room contains one thought: “It’s time to think about the Day after the Deal.”

This treaty will foster a new Middle East balance of power in which Israel stands to incur added risk. Consequently, I would like to see us reunite as a Jewish people around a renewed focus on Israel’s security. We will need a bipartisan effort to prevent a flow of arms to Hizbollah and Hamas, to amplify Israel’s defensive capabilities against Iran-backed militants, and to double down on ensuring that the treaty’s inspec-

tion provisions — flawed though they are — are rigorously enforced.

Today we sit, supporters of the deal praying alongside those who oppose it. Will we let partisan politics come between us? Between Washington and Jerusalem? Will we add insult to injury?

When Dan Shapiro, U.S. ambassador to Israel, is subjected to death threats and compared to Jewish SS guards for championing the deal, we have failed. When Chuck Schumer, who opposes the Deal, is accused of “dual loyalty,” a euphemism for *treason* that reeks of Anti-Semitism, we have failed. When “fascist Nazi pig” becomes an epithet that Jews feel comfortable using against other Jews — congregants against their rabbis no less, as a number of my colleagues have reported — we have failed.

Above all, when we mistake Jewish *unity* for Jewish *unanimity*, we have failed. Jewish unity has *never* implied unanimity.

God forbid! Our tradition privileges probing questions and robust debate over glib platitudes and pat answers. We even have an honored tradition called *machloket l'shem shamayim*, meaning a dispute with a heavenly purpose. We believe that engaging with opposing perspectives constitutes meaningful, even sacred, work. Come back tomorrow and together we will unpack the textual sources behind this concept.

Our ability to construct, in our literature, in our religious practice, in our philosophy and ethics, a heart of many rooms, our ability to hold and metabolize conflicting views, counts among the great contributions of the Jewish People to human civilization.

We have to pivot from orthodox thinking to paradox thinking.

There, in the paradox, only there, can we become whole again.

“*Shalom*, our word for peace, really means completeness, wholeness. What is the secret of peace?” asks Rabbi David

Aaron. “Peace is not when everybody agrees.... Peace is the ability to realize that all the various perspectives are *only partial perspectives of the whole picture*. The truth is greater than the sum of all those parts.”³ The path to peace is the *definition* of paradox.

But today there is no peace. We have devolved from sacred debate, *makhloket l’shem shamayim*, to vileness and vituperation, from a willingness to see the other side to the willful turning of a blind eye.

Picture this: today we are, paradoxically, both Abraham and Isaac — the father who could end up causing irreparable harm, *and* the terrified child who could end up the victim of a rash word or violent gesture.

Choose wisely and we, the Jewish people, will live and heal and return to wholeness. Choose poorly and we may end up

³ Rabbi David Aaron, *The Secret Life of God: Discovering the Divine Within You* (Boston: Shambala Publications, 2004), p. 130.

like the paradoxical Isaac of lore, alive and dead simultaneously: survivors, perhaps, in body, but soulless, desolate.

For the sake of *shalom* I implore, this Rosh Ha-Shanah, Day of Judgment, that we turn back from the brink, unlash the ropes, put down the knife, and find our way back home together.