

**Temple Israel 2009 – Rabbi David J. Fine**

**RH II**

**Ambiguity**

A young Israeli couple living in New York go to a fertility clinic. The husband says, “My wife is impregnable.”

“I’m not sure that’s exactly what you mean,” says the clinician.

“Okay, okay,” says the Israeli. “My English is good. My wife, you see, is inconceivable.”

“That’s still not exactly what you mean,” says the clinician.

The Israeli man thinks, then says, emphatically, “My wife is unbearable!”

Language can be ambiguous, and ambiguity is the nature of the world we live in. Things are not always as clear as we might like.

Ambiguity is a message often difficult to swallow. As Americans we like things simple. All things should have clear solutions. A commercial I remember growing up was the person getting dressed in the morning who suddenly, looking at a shirt with great horror and distress, exclaims: “Oh no! Ring around the collar!” But never fear. Just get the right detergent and overnight the disgraced housewife wins back the esteem and love of her family. Or there was the commercial of the poor *nebbishe* teenager who scared away all the girls until he bought the right mouthwash and then, suddenly, he was the prom king. There are many other examples we could come up with and they would all follow the same pattern. We are presented with a problem, be it lack of success, shyness, an unexciting or non-existent love life, and all you have to do is get the right toothpaste, the right adhesive, the right mouthwash, the right soap, the right detergent,

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shampoo, or pill, and presto! Success in business, popularity, a love life the envy of all your friends---your life transformed—if *only* you use the right soap.

This pattern is so pervasive in our culture that we perhaps don't realize how it undermines the ability to cope with the *real* problems of life. Because real problems rarely have such simple solutions. As H.L. Mencken said, "For every problem that is a simple solution, which is usually wrong."

Authentic Judaism does not offer simple solutions. Judaism recognizes life's dilemmas and the difficulty of knowing how to handle them. Instead of simple solutions, Judaism offers us a process, a process for questioning, probing, struggling, striving, and with no guarantees. Judaism requires us to live with the ambiguity of things. Because the truth is that for most significant issues there are no simple solutions. It is not always clear what God's will is, what God would have us do. True, we have the Torah as a guide. But our tradition teaches us that *HaTorah dibrah b'lashon bnei Adam*, that the Torah is written in the language of human beings. The ancient rabbis did not understand the Torah to be a human document in its origin as we do. They believed that it was God's word transcribed by Moses. What then did they mean that it was written in human, rather than divine, language? They meant that Torah must be read and interpreted by human beings. Yes, the broad strokes are clear enough, but the majority of the innumerable pages of Jewish literature over the millennia is devoted to arguments over what the Torah means. An ancient midrash teaches that God is like an icon that never changes, yet everyone who looks at it sees a different face. Frequently, then, whether on an international level, or with political or social issues, or in the dilemmas of our personal lives, it just isn't clear what we should do.

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But of one thing our Jewish tradition is certain, that the way to attain the closest approximation of God's will, to attain truth, is not through the easy fix, the simple answer, but rather through questioning, study and debate. Through argument. While we joke that if you have two Jews you have three opinions, that is indeed the Jewish way. This is why the Talmud always records dissenting opinions. The Talmud is actually more interested in the give-and-take of argument, in discussion for its own sake, than in reaching any particular conclusion or answer. Even the Passover Haggadah focuses more on the Four Questions than on any particular answers. Truth, in Judaism, is to be found not in the answer but in the process of reaching that answer.

Our authentically Jewish approach to questioning, our acceptance of ambiguity, gives us direction in how to function in the world. The State of Israel must remain a free, open, democratic and argumentative society, that is, where public policy, even in the midst of war, is openly and publicly debated. Israeli society is based on the root Jewish conviction that the free flow of information, of dissent, of argument, will ultimately lead people of good will to conclusions based on truth and justice.

But things don't always work that way because the world we live in is so complex and most people are incapable, or unwilling, of coping with that complexity. That result is that people flee the confusion, seek the quick fix, the simple solution. If only we could find the right soap for the Middle East. If only Washington would use the right aftershave. The inability to cope with ambiguity, the search for the simple answer, is what feeds totalitarianism in politics and fundamentalism in religion.

While I used to think that we Jews were immune from that type of extremism, I am no longer so sure. And yet I still believe that the root value of Jewish tradition, the cultivation of

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healthy skepticism, is what keeps intolerant extremism on the fringes. We do not enshrine certainty as a value. We prefer the questioning spirit.

And yet, our appreciation for skepticism is pushed from time to time, like when the United Nations publishes a fact-finding report that suggests that Israel may have committed war crimes in its military actions against Gaza last winter. That report was released last week, referred to either as the Gaza Report or the Goldstone Report after Richard Goldstone, the head of the UN Fact-Finding Mission on the Gaza conflict and the former chief prosecutor for war crimes tribunals on Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia. The report found that Israel could have done more to reduce civilian casualties in its assault in response to Hamas rocket fire into southern Israel. At the same time, it also blamed Hamas. In his Op-Ed in the New York Times on Thursday, Goldstone wrote: “Unfortunately, both Israel and Hamas have dismal records of investigating their own forces. I am unaware of any case where a Hamas fighter was punished for deliberately shooting a rocket into a civilian area in Israel—on the contrary, Hamas leaders repeatedly praise such acts. While Israel has begun investigations into alleged violations by its forces in the Gaza conflict, they are unlikely to be serious and objective.” This report, and the threat of bringing Israel to the International Court of Justice, has caused a stir in Israel where President Shimon Peres called it a “mockery of history” in failing to distinguish between Hamas, “the aggressor,” and Israel, a state exercising its right of self-defense. The Israeli government complained of the “equation” of Israel and Hamas in the report. And in this country, not only have there been notes of concern from the State Department and Congress on the anti-Israel bias of the report, but a full-scale panic has been circling within the organized Jewish community. But at the risk of being misunderstood or misinterpreted here, I must point out that the reality is of course more complicated, as it always is. Israel and Hamas are actually in complete

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agreement with each other in fully accepting half of the findings of the report but in rejecting the other. They are just referring to different halves! Which is really to say, that both sides were unhappy with how they were portrayed, which is usually a sign that an evaluation is fair, except, perhaps, when we are ourselves involved. And I too am bothered by how Judge Goldstone can seemingly equate what he claims to be non-objective Israeli internal investigations with praise and parades for the rocket launchers in Gaza. But yet, the complete rejection of the report as anti-Israel and anti-semitic supports a “them vs. us” view of the world that, while typical of much or most of organized Jewish public discourse, is not necessarily helpful in resolving existing conflicts.

Looking a little closer will reveal the ambiguities, like how ten independent human rights organizations in Israel have cosigned a letter to the Israeli attorney general demanding that there be an independent investigation into the matters alleged by the UN report. I myself have been receiving emails from the Rabbinical Assembly, from UJA, and other sources advising me on how to reject the report, and then I read comments out of Israel itself, albeit from the liberal newspaper, HaAretz, like: “The Goldstone Commission's findings are in line with what anyone who didn't shut his or her eyes and ears to witness testimony already knows.” That Israel surely did act in ways that caused civilian deaths, and that: “There is only thing worse than denial - the admission that the IDF indeed acted as has been described, but that these actions are both normal and appropriate.” Those words from HaAretz actually made me cry. In a sense, because part of me disagrees so strongly. I was brought up in the post-1967 American Jewish community, taught that Israel was a “light unto the nations,” a paragon of virtue amidst a hostile world. And then, as the support for Palestinian plight grew, we were led to believe, even taught to argue, that the whole world has it wrong and cannot understand Israel’s situation. That is a very

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unambiguous perspective. But after spending time in Israel, after living there for a couple years as a student, my love for Israel changed into something deeper. Yes, Israel is imperfect. But its imperfections, its mistakes, its problems, are the realization of the Zionist dream, for they show that Israel has become a real nation, like all other nations.

So yes, I agree with those who point out that the United States would not do very well were the UN to investigate its conduct in Iraq, or Vietnam for that matter. Most countries would not fare well if investigated for war crimes during wars that they fought. That is because wars are messy. And because the young commanders who have to make quick decisions make decisions to save lives that sometimes also cost lives. But that is not to say that we either, on the one hand, say that there is nothing that can or should be done to correct this, or on the other hand deny any wrongdoings. So yes, I agree with the opinion in HaAretz that we should not accept such things as normal, but at the same time I am glad that I have a country in Israel that is a normal country like other countries, if anything is a war can be described as “normal.” I, for one, would never be able to equate an Israeli soldier with a Hamas terrorist. But neither do I think that our soldiers are all saints. I know that things are more complicated.

I also must point out that just as the defenders of Israel look to the Holocaust as proof of our mission to be ever vigilant against an anti-semitic world, so too does Judge Goldstone recognize the lessons of the Holocaust as the spark that has fired him to devote his career to the establishment of an international system of justice where sovereign nations can be held accountable to an international standard. Both may be correct lessons to be learned from the Holocaust, and here we have more ambiguity.

We cannot resolve here the problems of Israel and the Palestinians. My point is simply that, that there is no simple solution, and there is no simple way of looking at the matter. In this

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area as in others, we can take solace in the teaching of Judaism that things are not simple in the world.

In our tradition, paradise is described as the Yeshivah shel Ma'aleh, the Heavenly Academy. Paradise is not a garden of sensual delights or mystical contemplation of divine splendor. Rather, paradise is pictured as sitting and arguing all day and all night over the meaning of a particular text. Think about Tevye the Milkman in "Fiddler on the Roof" dreaming about if he were a rich man. After singing that he wouldn't have to work hard, and all day long he'd biddy biddy bum, he then reflects that he would have the time to sit in the synagogue, and: [*sing:*] *And I'd discuss the holy books with the learned men, several hours every day. That would be the sweetest thing of all!* The sweetest thing of all. To spend the time figuring out how we can't quite figure things out!

I want to share with you something. I have a poster of Albert Einstein that I keep in my study [*show poster*]. His desk is cluttered with books and notebooks, pens and pencils, and he is standing, looking out into space, perplexed. The words on the side are taken from a letter that Einstein wrote in response to a little girl who wrote to him about problems she was having in math: "Do not worry about your difficulties in mathematics," wrote Einstein. "I can assure you that mine are still greater." While my discipline is not mathematics or science, these words from one of the greatest Jews of the twentieth century, inspire me.

The *moral* value in intensive study is that it teaches us to recognize that things are never certain, that ambiguity must be recognized, and that questions rather than answers are the most sophisticated response to things around us. Study provides for us the tolerance for ambiguity, a sanctuary where we can study for its own sake, and the ability thereby to keep our balance and survive in this confusing world.

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The story is told about the minister, the rabbi and the two chimneysweeps. A minister goes to a rabbi asking about the Talmud. “The Talmud is not just a book you can pick up and read,” the rabbi says. “You have to have what we call a *gemara kopf*, a head for it.”

“Try me,” says the minister.

“Okay,” says the rabbi. “Let’s say that two men come out of a chimney. One is clean and one is dirty. Which one, in your judgment, washes?”

“Well,” says the minister, “clearly the one who is dirty!”

“I see what you mean,” the rabbi says. “But you could look at it differently. The one who is dirty sees the one who is clean and figures that he too is clean, so he doesn’t wash. But the one who is clean sees the one who is dirty and figures that he too is dirty, and so he washes.”

“Interesting,” says the minister. “But I see now that that must be the answer.”

“But is it?” asks the rabbi. “Wouldn’t you say that once the clean one, who decided to wash, sees himself in the mirror he would then realize that he is clean, whereas the dirty one, once he looks in the mirror, would go and wash?”

“Yes, that makes sense!” responds the minister. “So that is the answer.”

“Maybe,” says the rabbi. “But a Talmud student would ask, ‘How is it possible that two can come out of a chimney, and one is dirty while the other is clean?’”

The beauty of the story is that it demonstrates not only that there can be no one answer, but also that the best answer to a question is, in the Talmudic tradition, another question.

There are those who criticize Conservative Judaism for being too ambiguous, too uncertain, about what we believe. Perhaps that critique is apt, but that is why I love Conservative Judaism, because ambiguity, through the healthy skepticism of study, is the heart and soul of Judaism.

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May God grant us the strength to not require certainty at all time, and to be able to live with ambiguity. That is our best hope of preserving Judaism, and our best defense against the simplistic tendencies of our times.