

The Space Between Opposites

Rosh Hashana 2025 (5786)

A young lady approaches a congregant serving as an usher at synagogue and whispers urgently, "Please, I need to sit as close as possible to the Rabbi. I don't want to miss a word he says." The usher, impressed by her devotion, whispers into her ear: "No problem, I can find you a front-row seat. But are you sure that's what you want? You might not be aware, but our Rabbi isn't that great." She looks at him with a furious expression and says, "Do you know who I am?" The usher says he doesn't, and she tells him that she is the Rabbi's daughter! The usher looks perplexed and immediately asks her, "Do you know who I am?" To which she answers, "No, I don't." The usher takes a deep breath and says, "Thank God." I share this story with you because today I am honored to have my twin daughters here with us, so at the end of services when you share your opinion about our services, just watch with whom you are sharing your opinion. When my children were little and we moved to the States, one of my favorite ways to help them study English was to play the "opposite game" - black, white... day, night... pretty simple. Since they are here today, I thought it would be nice if we all played that game together, on a deeper level.

Ready? I'll say a word - try to answer intuitively.

What is the opposite of love?

The first thought many of you probably had was hate. And I can't blame you for that. The idea that hate is love's opposite is so deeply ingrained in our language and culture that we rarely question it. But in truth, the opposite of love is not hate - it's indifference.

I say that because both love and hate require enormous emotional energy and investment. When you hate someone, you're still deeply engaged with them - you think about them, react to them, let them affect your mood and decisions. In a twisted way, hate keeps people connected. But when you truly don't care about someone... when someone no longer matters to you... when you invest no energy, no emotion, when you give them no thought, when they no longer occupy space in your mind or heart - then you know you truly don't love them anymore.

This brings me to the next question: What would you say is the opposite of courage? Are you thinking of cowardice?

Think again. Courage isn't about not being afraid - it's about acting despite fear. The opposite of courage is paralysis. When there's danger, you can run toward it or away from it, but these are two actions. Not doing anything - that's the true opposite.

Here's where it gets even more fascinating: What about chaos? What is the opposite of chaos? Are you thinking... order? Think again. Scientists will tell you that chaos leads to new forms of organization. Chaos is actually the first step in creating order, and entropy - gradual decay - is actually the opposite of order.

The opposite of faith? Many would probably say doubt. To which you've heard me say before - NO. Doubt is a central component of faith. It's natural to have faith and yet have doubt. The opposite of faith is absolute certainty, just as the opposite of knowledge is not ignorance, but false certainty.

One more: What is the opposite of tuna fish salad? Remember that Seinfeld episode where he argues it's not chicken salad but rather salmon - because tuna swims with the current and salmon against it?

Friends, do you see what's happening here? We live in a world where binary thinking is hardwired into us. We constantly sort the world into either-or categories - black or white, good or bad, right or wrong - when most of life actually exists in the vast middle spaces, in the gray areas, in the place where we're forced to hold onto more than one emotion at the same time.

Think about this: We talk about being either happy or sad, when we all know that most of our lives are a constant, complex mix of the two. We divide people into introverts and extroverts, when most of us are ambiverts who adapt to different situations, needing both social interaction and quiet space. We think of success and failure as opposites, but every successful person will tell you that the road to success was paved with failures.

In life, we often find something both meaningful and exhausting... freeing and binding... healing and painful. I think we can all relate to simultaneously loving someone AND being frustrated by them. And in politics - oy - we used to be so much better at not holding extreme positions, at being able to appreciate aspects of competing ideologies.

Now, anthropologists will tell you that from an evolutionary perspective, this kind of thinking served us well for survival. It gave us the ability to quickly categorize danger from safety, friend from enemy. Binary thinking helped our ancestors survive. But here's the problem: this same thinking that once protected us now imprisons us. It oversimplifies complex realities, forces nuanced situations into rigid either-or categories. It leads to polarization and doesn't allow for solutions to complicated situations that require compromise. It blinds us from understanding that many things exist on spectrums rather than as absolute opposites.

For the rabbis of antiquity, this was an even bigger problem, because binary thinking was associated with dualism - a philosophical position claiming that reality consists of two fundamental, distinct realms that cannot be reduced to each other. For dualists, the source of evil and good differ, as do light and darkness, body and soul. For the rabbis, this was unacceptable. For them, One God was the source of all.

The need to fight this form of binary thinking is infused time and again into our prayer book. Earlier today we praised God: "*Yotzeir or ve borei chosech, oseh shalom ve borei et hakol*" - We praised the One God who creates both light and dark, good and evil, peace and war - the God who creates HAKOL - everything - including that vast space between the opposites.

Many years later, F. Scott Fitzgerald captured it beautifully: "The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function."

The tragedy is that our culture punishes this nuance. We're pressured to pick sides, to be consistent, to have clear positions. But reality is messy, contradictory, and full of gray areas.

How many of you have lost a friendship over politics? Arguing about Israel? How many have stopped talking to family members about important issues? How many of you sit in groups of friends where you can no longer speak about things that truly matter because you fear these conversations will end relationships?

When we stop talking, we don't just lose arguments - we lose each other. Silence isn't peace; it's the death of a relationship.

I share all this with you this morning as we enter a new year because I feel that more than ever, we all need a reminder about equanimity, about balance, about perspective, and about how not to drown in the gushing river flowing between two banks - one of hope and one of despair.

For if there are two things we define as exact opposites, these are hope and despair. Despair says, "nothing will get better," while hope says, "things can improve." Which leads to the joke about the difference between a Jewish optimist and a Jewish pessimist: The pessimist says, "Things can't get any worse!" The optimist says, "Oh yes they can!"

Hope and despair are natural opposites, and yet our human experience is that we often find ourselves moving between these states rather than existing purely in one or the other.

This coming year, so many of us need a reminder of the great teaching by the Hasidic rabbi Simcha Bunim of Pshiskha, a master known for his approach claiming that people cannot understand God if they do not first understand themselves. And the key to understanding ourselves means constantly finding balance between the contradicting feelings and emotions we experience every day.

And so, he teaches: "People must have two pockets, with a note in each pocket, so that they can reach into one or the other, depending on the need. When feeling low and depressed, discouraged or melancholy, one should reach into the right pocket, and there find the words: 'For my sake the world was created.' But when feeling high and mighty, one should reach into the left pocket, and there find the words: 'I am but dust and ashes.'"

If you were here ten years ago, this might sound familiar - I shared this teaching on Yom Kippur in 2015. I even handed out cards with this teaching, which some of you might still be carrying. I struggled with teaching this again, but given that about seventy percent of you weren't congregants ten years ago, and that our memories tend to fail us, I've decided it's fine to recycle a teaching! It's good environmental practice - we don't want an overflow of rabbinic words clogging up the atmosphere.

But I bring this teaching again today because so much has changed in the last ten years in our world, and so little has changed in our human condition. The world in which we're celebrating today is so much more complex, divided, violent, and dangerous than it was ten years ago.

Can you believe that ten years ago we worried about whether Netflix would have enough content to compete with cable? Whether oil prices would rebound above thirty dollars a barrel? Whether Greece's failing economy would collapse the world economy? Ten years ago, we worried that selfie culture would destroy society - we might have been right about that. We worried whether the Chicago Cubs would ever break their 108-year curse - they did the following year. Whether people would trust drivers enough to enter Uber rides. We worried that millennials would stop eating cereal and collapse the industry, and whether Jeb Bush would be president.

Ten years later, we're still recovering from a pandemic that changed the world. We're facing one extreme climate event after another. We've gone through elections that tore our country apart from within. We're witnessing an era of war in Europe we thought ended after World War II. And we're still living in the trauma of October 7th, now 717 days later.

Ten years ago, I used this teaching to help us control our egos - to help control our ego when it goes awry in either direction. When we feel worthless, we reach into one pocket and remind ourselves of our uniqueness and divine potential. When our narcissism overwhelms us, when we behave as if the world revolves around us, we reach into the other pocket and remember we are nothing but dust. These teachings are as true today as they were ten years ago and will be a hundred years from now. But today, I want to address this teaching from a different angle. I want to offer it as part of our mission this year: **Conversations That Matter.**

In the next year, we will engage in a task many of you have given up on - the ability to truly love your neighbor as yourself by engaging in meaningful conversation with them. I find myself saddened every time someone tells me that in their group of friends, they no longer speak about things that bother them because they fear these conversations will end relationships. I'm saddened when grandparents and grandchildren can no longer have meaningful conversations, can no longer learn from each other, because they've fallen into the trap of binary thinking about issues. "I'm right, you're wrong." Or worse: "I'm right, you're stupid." Or even worse: "I'm right - you're evil."

Just two weeks ago, we witnessed the violent silencing of Charlie Kirk, someone who devoted his life to debating, to engaging in serious debate with anyone who wanted to debate him. You didn't have to like him or what he had to say to learn from him - not only about his ideas but about the ability to talk, to engage, to disagree without demonizing.

How far we have moved from the amazing example that our sages Hillel and Shammai gave us. For we are taught that in the 2nd century when the schools of Hillel and Shammai debated - and they disagreed about almost everything - the Talmud declares: "*Eilu v'eilu divrei Elohim chaim*" - "These and these are the words of the living God."

Think about that for a moment. Two groups completely opposed positions, yet both are considered divine truth. Not one or the other - both. The rabbis understood that truth itself could hold contradictions, that wisdom often emerges not from choosing sides but from the tension between opposing views.

This wasn't relativism - they weren't saying all opinions are equally valid. They were saying that sometimes reality is so complex that it requires multiple, even contradictory perspectives to approach truth.

So today I want to send you home with this card again. And I ask you to use it as a meditation before you start a conversation this year with someone you know disagrees with you. Before you try to prove them wrong, look at the side that says, "I am nothing but dust." Remind yourself that maybe you're not as right as you think you are. Maybe it's you who has been fed facts that aren't true. Maybe it's you who has closed your ears, mind, heart, or soul to the pain of the other person. But then also look at the side that says, "The world was created for you," and remember that your voice matters, that your words have power - but only if you use them in a way that encourages the other side to listen. Remember that you have a purpose in this world, and maybe that purpose is to help the person beside you change their mind about one thing.

That won't happen if we stop speaking. That won't happen if we don't engage with each other in meaningful conversations. That definitely won't happen if we vilify everyone who doesn't think like us.

This week, I challenge you: Have one conversation with someone you disagree with. Before you speak, pause and ask yourself: "What if I'm wrong about this?" Listen - truly listen - not to respond, but to understand.

And here's the key: Start with something small. Don't begin with Israel or politics. Start with why you prefer tea over coffee, or why you think morning workouts are better than evening ones. Practice holding space for different perspectives on things that don't threaten your identity. Build the muscle of curiosity before you tackle the heavyweight conversations.

Because here's what becomes possible when we embrace nuance: Relationships are restored. Understanding deepens. Communities heal. The space between our opposites becomes not a battlefield, but sacred ground where we can meet each other as human beings created in the divine image.

In that space - between love and hate, between hope and despair, between "I am everything" and "I am nothing" - that's where we find each other. That's where we find God. That's where we find ourselves.

Shanah Tovah - May this be a year of meaningful conversations, of holding complexity with grace, and of finding the divine in the beautiful, messy middle of human experience.