

## Living in the Gray - RH Morning 2025

When I was a young rabbinic student, I was hired to teach at Temple Rodeph Sholom on the upper west side in their Hebrew High school program. My first year there I taught a class on the process of studying the Torah which is different from how we study science or history. We study Torah looking for morals and meaning, not historical or scientific facts. The question is not, “Did the Red Sea really part” but rather, what do we learn from the story about the Red Sea parting? On that particular day, near the beginning of the school year I had this lesson plan which I have used many times since where I give the students a verse of Torah from the story of Noah. “These are the generations of Noah, Noah was a righteous man, he was blameless in his age, Noah walked with God.” That’s a lot packed into one verse. The idea of the lesson was to teach them how to ask questions about the text. What does it mean that Noah was blameless in his age? Would he have been blameless in another age? Did he literally walk with God? You get the idea. Then once we had the questions we started to talk about some possible answers. There were a lot of different ideas. As I was wrapping up the discussion and getting ready to move on to something else, one of the students, Ariel, said, “So, what’s the right answer?” I was a little surprised but I said, “Well, there are a lot of possible answers depending on how you look at things.” Clearly uncomfortable and a bit irritated at me he said, “No, what is the **right** answer?”

What is the right answer? For Ariel that was the most important question and for many of us we find a lot of comfort in finding the “right” answer. In fact, as human beings we are wired to seek clear and right answers.

According to a variety of research our limbic system, or our lizard brain is wired to protect us from harm. When that part of our brain perceives danger it sets off our “fight or flight” response. A few thousand years ago, this system was necessary for our survival. Our brains needed to perceive physical danger quickly and cause us to react or we would get killed or eaten by something. Most days we are not in that kind of danger but the responses are still wired into us. Ambiguity, uncertainty, etc. can trigger the same stress response and cause us to react with anxiety or even fear. When our lizard brains are in this state of high alert, it shuts down our ability to do higher level thinking and forces us to stay in the survival mindset.

There is one more factor that adds to our distaste for uncertainty. Our brains are also wired to be efficient. Spending time wrestling with a variety of choices or trying to sort out something that is unclear requires a lot of energy (as we all know) so our brains look for the quickest, easiest answer. Both of these factors make us naturally averse to ambiguity and uncertainty. We want clear answers. We are naturally inclined to want to see the world through binary glasses where everything is black or white rather than live in a world that is gray. Today, more than ever, wherever we look – in our politics, in

our educational systems, in social media, wherever we look, people are seeing the world through that black and white lens. What they know to be true is right and that makes those who disagree with them wrong. There is no gray, no possibility that there is common ground or that there is some truth in each side's vision for the world. This has made our country and our world more and more toxic and more and more dangerous. Either you love gun culture or you hate it. You are either pro vaccines or an antivaxxer. I could go on and on – you get the idea.

Dr. Adam Grant shares, “Psychologists have a name for this: binary bias. It’s a basic human tendency to seek clarity and closure by simplifying a complex continuum into two categories. To paraphrase the humorist Robert Benchley, there are two kinds of people: those who divide the world into two kinds of people, and those who don’t. (Adam Grant, Think Again, 2021 p. 165). While this is funny we must acknowledge the damage that binary bias can cause. Binary bias allows no room for middle ground, no room for compromise and no room for understanding the other side’s positions, feelings or reasons for what they believe. This thinking makes our lizard brains kick into high gear “protecting” us from perceived danger. Sadly, the danger is not the people on the other side of the argument, the danger is seeing the world in black and white.

One could argue that in Judaism there is a lot of black and white – follow the rules of the Torah or don’t. But that is not the case. The rabbis of old, found ways to be comfortable living in a world where reinterpreting and reunderstanding Torah and Jewish law was necessary in every generation. When the Temple was destroyed in the year 70 CE by the Romans Judaism easily could have died. The Temple, the center of Jewish worship was destroyed and the Jewish people were sent into exile from the land God promised to Abraham. That could have been the end of us....but it wasn’t. It wasn’t because the rabbis were able to see that it wasn’t black and white – sacrifice animals at the Temple in Jerusalem or nothing. They were able to rethink their certainty and pivot. Maybe there was a way to be Jewish without the Temple in Jerusalem and maybe there was a way to worship God without animal sacrifices. They made prayer the way we worship God instead and they came up with a system where we could take Judaism on the road. A system where Jews could continue to be Jewish no matter where they lived. They ignored their lizard brains and started to think creatively. To face the uncertainty in front of them head-on and they saved Judaism in the process. 2,000 years later....we are still here.

But the rabbis of old did more....they baked questioning, and embracing the process of wrestling with answers into Judaism. Just take a look at a page of Talmud. The first part of the Talmud was written down around the year 200 and the later part was written down around the year 600. If you look at a page of Talmud you will see constant arguing. “Rabbi so and so said that the chicken is kosher under these circumstances. But Rabbi such and such did not agree and said that the chicken would be kosher under

different circumstances. Some of the rabbis agreed with the first rabbi and some rabbis agreed with the second rabbi. Often, we don't know who won the argument in the end. Determining when the chicken is kosher or not is up to each generation of rabbis to fight about.

Many of us have heard the stories of Rabbi Hillel and Rabbi Shammai whose disagreements in the Talmud are famous. Rabbi Hillel argued that the Hanukkah candles should be lit one way and Rabbi Shammai argued for a different way. The other rabbis usually sided with Rabbi Hillel. Why? According to the Talmud (Eruvin 13:b:11) Hillel usually wins because he not only shares his side of the argument but he is willing to share the other side's argument. His respect for others and his humility cause him to be open to sharing both sides of the argument, a kind of generosity and openness we can all learn from.

When I was in High School I had a wonderful history teacher, Mr. Thomas. I learned so much of what I know about teaching and thinking from him. When we were studying the American Civil War, Mr. Thomas assigned me to the debate team that had to argue for the south. I asked him to move me to the other team....how could I possibly argue for the position of the south which was centered on slavery? With a big smile on his face he told me that not only would he not move me to the other debate team but he told me how important it was to understand all the sides and all the positions – whether we agreed with them or not. Mr. Thomas never let on what his position was on any issue and he loved playing Devil's Advocate and pushing us to think deeper and question harder. Lizard brain thinking would not get good grades in his classes.

Doubt, uncertainty, ambiguity, living in the gray....it's uncomfortable, it's hard but without it, we cannot be like the rabbis who were able to pivot and save Judaism. Psychologist, Adam Grant, in his book, Think Again says the following: "...we prefer the ease of hanging on to old views over the difficulty of grappling with new ones...Questioning ourselves makes the world more unpredictable. It requires us to admit that the facts may have changed, that what was once right may now be wrong. Reconsidering something we believe deeply can threaten our identities, making it feel as if we're losing a part of ourselves...We refresh our wardrobes when they go out of style....When it comes to our knowledge and opinions, though we tend to stick to our guns.....We laugh at people who still use Windows 95, yet we still cling to opinions that we formed in 1995. We listen to views that make us feel good, instead of ideas that make us think hard." (Grant, Think Again, p. 4).

Now I can hear some of you thinking, "Aren't there certain things that we know to be true that we should not be flexible about? Trying to eradicate poverty from our world is not something to be flexible about, right?" Adam Grant has an excellent answer to this question. He says, "Who you are should be a question of what you value, not what you

believe. Values are your core principles in life – they might be excellence and generosity, freedom and fairness, or security and integrity. Basing your identity on these kinds of principles enables you to remain open minded about the best ways to advance them....” (Grant, Think Again, p. 64)

I would guess that every American would agree that they want a healthy and bright future for future generations. How we get to that goal ....we obviously don’t all agree on. Nevertheless, if we focus on our core values, we can still see that there are other perspectives on how to achieve those values. We can also see that my beliefs about how to achieve those values today might have to change tomorrow. There are so many examples of this but I will share what is probably an obvious one. Israel – most of us share the value that Israel should be a Democracy where Jews and other people are able to live in peace and security. Of course, how one understands Democracy and how one creates the reality of peace and security in Israel under the current conditions are certainly not agreed on. Not only that but supporting Israel does not mean accepting what the Israeli government does without question and our feelings about what is happening in Israel and in Gaza may shift and change as the situation shifts and changes. There is so much gray there.....I find myself constantly saying about Israel, “It’s complicated.”

Frank Bruni, New York Times op-ed columnist and professor at Duke University describes what he tells his students at the beginning of any course:

“I’m going to repeat one phrase more than any other: “It’s complicated.” They’ll become familiar with that. They may even become bored with it. I’ll sometimes say it when we’re discussing the roots and branches of a social ill, the motivations of public (and private) actors, and a whole lot else, and that’s because I’m standing before them not as an ambassador of certainty or a font of unassailable verities but as an emissary of doubt. I want to give them intelligent questions, not final answers.” (Bruni, The Age of Grievance, , 2024, p. 247).

Whether it is Israel, or our own country, our city, our communities, our families....if it isn’t complicated it means your lizard brain is in control. Living in the gray is really, really hard but honestly, if we want our world to be a better place, we have no choice but to live there.

About a month ago I was fortunate to be on a webinar with Cara Raich. Cara Raich, is a former attorney who is now a conflict consultant and facilitator who works with many different kinds of institutions and organizations. Cara outlined 5 important steps to help us move in a more comfortable way through the gray. Here they are:

1. Dialogue and advocacy are in tension with each other. When we are out there fighting for a cause we are not listening to the other side’s position. Both are

important and there is a need for both but not at the same time. When we dialogue we need to step away from advocating and really listen.

2. Empathy is possible without agreement. In my day to day life I do not encounter that many Trump voters. But I often wonder about why they voted for him and try to feel empathy for what is happening in their lives that made them reach to him for answers. Empathy is really hard right now but there are actual human beings on the other side of whatever position we hold. I'm not talking about violent, radical people. There are thousands of others who are just plain struggling.
3. Cara also argues that we are winning wrong. We are more interested in winning the argument than we are in having a healthy constructive relationship with those we are arguing with. That could be people we don't know or people we know and love – family and friends. It is about understanding each other – not winning the argument.
4. We need to get out of our bubbles and connect with people we don't agree with. Our tendency is to only want to be with people who we agree with – that's much easier but it only fuels our lizard brain.
5. We think about the risk of doing the thing but we don't think about the risk of NOT doing the thing. I'll let you ponder that one.....

Something which I heard from both Cara and from Dr. Adam Grant was that we need to lean into our curiosity and our humility. And I would add that we should lean into being willing to be wrong. After all, once a year we have a whole holiday season in which we admit we are wrong and try to set things right. Dr. Grant says, "Psychologists find that admitting we were wrong does not make us look less competent. It's a display of honesty and a willingness to learn." (Grant, Think Again, p. 73)

The Torah portion we read this morning is full of complexity and ambiguity. What was going on with Abraham? Is he really about to sacrifice his son? How could he do that? There are hundreds of interpretations, dozens of poems that have been written about this story. Some find Abraham to be a hero for being so loyal to God while others believe that he failed God's test by being willing to sacrifice his child.

Living in the gray means accepting that there might not be answers to our questions. Living in the gray means being able to learn from our mistakes. Living in the gray means being able to hear other voices, other ideas. Living in the gray means being able to pivot and change direction when we need to. Living in the gray means living with the fact that "it's complicated." Everything is complicated. While living in the gray can be hard, living in the gray also means that the possibilities are endless, that everyday can be a new day, that our creativity can flourish, that we can learn and grow

throughout our lives. Living in the gray means that we can repair our relationships with others.

The great Israeli Poet, Yehuda Amichai, wrote, "From the place where we are right, flowers will never grow in the spring. The place where we are right is hard and trampled like a yard. But doubts and loves dig up the world like a mole, a plow. And a whisper will be heard in the place where the ruined House once stood." Today I challenge you to live in the gray...to open your mind and your heart.