

# The Right, The Left, and the (Jewish) Center

- Basil Herring.

For a change, today I will share with you some selected stories and experiences that have, so to speak, crossed my desk and preoccupied my mind in the past 2 weeks or so. I do so because, firstly, it might help some of us to answer the question “what does the rabbi do all day?” But secondly, and more importantly, I hope that in sharing these anecdotes with you, we will all be more acutely aware of the ever-widening chasm that is splitting our people. And perhaps from that heightened awareness, we might, through the study of Torah, particularly of our parshah, point ourselves in the direction of a solution.

But before I share these events with you, rest assured that I will change or omit some of their details, so as to protect the privacy and the dignity of those involved. Thus only those who were themselves directly involved, will know whereof I speak. Nonetheless the events in their essence, and the lessons that they teach, are, I believe, preserved in what you are about to hear.

It is a weekday morning davening in our chapel. I look up from my siddur, and across the room I see two men standing in prayer. One wears a black suit and black hat, he is wrapped in a well-worn tallis and tefilin, his eyes shut, his whole being deeply immersed in saying the amidah, long after every else is finished. Next to him stands another man: he is there because of a death in the family, and clearly he is uncomfortable in his borrowed pair of tefilin that sit on his head and arm like an alien contraption, his own pair probably having disappeared soon after his Barmitzvah. He is barely able to mumble the Kaddish. I think to myself: “what an incongruous pair, seated right next to each other, yet worlds apart, so diametrically opposed in their experience of Judaism, Torah, and prayer as experienced right here in our synagogue.”

Another pair of opposites presented itself to me that same day, an hour or two later. My phone rings, and it a member explaining to me that she has been going through her elderly father’s possessions, and recently came across a whole bunch of Hebrew books that he loved to study, but can no longer use. Neither she, her husband or her children read Hebrew, so would it be OK if she drops them off at the synagogue. I tell her to bring a few samples so I can see just what she is describing. As I put down the phone, it rings again, and this time it is the special projects coordinator for the group called Agudas Yisroel. He explains that he is organizing the Siyyum Hashas program to take place simultaneously at Madison Square Garden and the Nassau Coliseum, this coming September, in which thousands of men and boys will gather to mark the completion of the study of the entire Babylonian Talmud, that will have been accomplished by tens of thousands of Jews around the world, one page a day over the course of many years. He wishes to invite the members of our synagogue to that event, and asks me to (a) put my name on the event’s special stationery, and (b) nominate a synagogue member to be the liaison to the committee to ensure a good synagogue turnout. I say yes to the first request and no to the second, as I do not believe our members will in fact attend. As I put down the phone, I find myself wondering whether my congregant’s father, who so loved his Hebrew books, would have dreamed 50 years ago that MSG and the Coliseum would be filled with Jews and their children who study the Talmud on a daily basis. Two worlds in opposition.

A day or two later I get two other phone calls in quick succession. One is from a rabbinic colleague who asks me to help constitute a Bet Din at the local mikveh, to convert a pregnant woman and her 2 young children. She herself is Orthodox, indeed she uses the mikveh on a monthly basis, and her children attend a local yeshiva. But her mother had not been born a Jew, and had gone through a Reform conversion. The woman we were about to convert had been raised as a Jew in a small Jewish community, but before marriage she had gone through a Conservative conversion. In recent years she and her husband had become Orthodox, so she wanted to make sure that her conversion was 100% kosher. Hearing this story, I agree to co-officiate at the mikveh. But I do not tell my colleague about my own current rabbinic quandary that stands in sharp contrast to his story. For in our community we have a non-observant family that also has a grandmother who was not born a Jew. In order to marry a Jewish man, that grandmother had gone through a Reform “conversion” without any immersion in a mikveh, thereafter raising her children (one of whom is now our member) as Jews. When this fact came to my attention quite by accident, I met with the couple concerned, and explained to them at length that neither the wife nor the children are Jewish, not even by the tenets of Conservative Judaism, insofar as there has never been a mikveh immersion or assumption of the yoke of mitzvot. I asked them to consider a solution to their problem, whereby she and her children would (a) go to the mikveh, and (b) agree to study and then observe the fundamental laws and rituals of the Torah, including shabbas and kashrus. Their response? They explained that going to the mikveh would pose a problem, and changing their lifestyle to accommodate my religious expectations was really an issue. But they indicated that they would think about it. Since meeting with them, months have gone by, and no response has been forthcoming. Soon I and the synagogue will have to make a decision, as to how we are to handle this family. After I agree to attend my colleague’s ceremony, I am asked on two separate occasions in quick succession to help in converting two adopted babies, one Korean, the other South American. Neither party is Orthodox or Sabbath-observant. Again I am confronted by the reality of one people that is deeply divided and fundamentally split, unable to reconcile incompatible standards and identities.

A couple of days later I get two calls, within minutes of each other. One is from a woman who is a new summer resident, and has been told that we have an Eruv here. But she is very particular, has looked for the Eruv wires, and cannot see any. She doesn’t mean to question the rabbi, however, (she asks) “how can there be an Eruv without wires.” I explain that our Eruv uses existing wires, as well as the sea wall on the Bay, and the fence along the beach. This puts her mind at rest. The second call is from another member, on the opposite end of the religious spectrum: her family cemetery plots are in a mausoleum, where the caskets are permanently deposited in above-ground receptacles. “Rabbi, we like you very much, will you officiate at a parent’s funeral?” Slowly, carefully, I explain that I cannot do that, since tradition dictates that burial must take place in the ground. She says she understands, but I can hear the hurt in her voice. Again: 1 synagogue, but two extremes—one on the far right, and the other located somewhere on the end of the left.

I could go on. For these are not unusual events or anecdotes in the daily life of the centrist Orthodox rabbinate, at least not in my experience. But they should suffice to illustrate the emerging reality of the brave new world that we face as a people and religious community, a world where the unifying center is increasingly at risk, given the large majority of Jews, perhaps 90-95% of the total, who are rapidly moving further and further away from traditionalism,

Jewish knowledge, and a life of Torah and mitzvot, towards assimilation and disappearance from Jewish history—while a small minority, perhaps 5-10% of the whole—is becoming ever more intensely committed, knowledgeable, and punctilious in its adherence to law and custom, observance and ideology, retreating into its own shell. At this rate, and unless something radical occurs, a mere ten or twenty years from now there will be little indeed that these camps will have in common, as each goes off in its own direction, with the fragile center, that which would hold us together, threatened with losing its potency and impact.

And yet, there is another scenario, another vision, that might yet emerge. And, paradoxically, it might be our very division that could provide an antidote to our problem. To explain, I would refer to the ritual of the Para Adumah, the red heifer, as encountered in this morning's parshah. The contradictory nature of the procedure is of course well known. A Jew who was tamei, impure, would be purified by the solution of water mixed with the ashes of the heifer; but the kohen who administered the "mei niddah," these waters of purification, would himself end up impure, defiled. This antithesis of effect, has of course baffled commentators throughout the ages, including the wisest of men, King Solomon himself.

But in the 17th century Rabbi Efrayim Lunshitz, author of the Kli Yakar, offered the following explanation of this puzzling double effect: he said, "kol davar mitpael me-hofcho"-- everything is impacted by, and responds to, its opposite. This is why, he explains, the holy people Israel is especially subject to the enticements of the yetzer hara, or evil inclination; and why the more knowledgeable a Jew the greater the possibility of his being attracted by, and subject to, moral failure (as stated by the Gemara Sukkah 52a); and why the darkest time of the night is precisely the hour before sunrise, as if it is the darkness per se which brings about the light. So too, he explains with the waters containing the ashes of the Red Heifer: the water itself represents purity, cleansing, life force; the ashes represent impurity, moral/spiritual pollution, death and demise. Each of these two elements of the combined solution, impacts upon its opposite: the mayyim chayyim impact upon the impure, bringing life force and purification, whereas the ashes, eifer ha-para, bring impurity and defilement to the kohen.

This, says the Kli Yakar, is the deeper meaning of the statement of the Sages that a Jew who repents of a particular transgression, can only be fully rehabilitated and forgiven after he has been in the identical circumstance in which he failed in the first place, but this time to withstand the enticement. Standing opposite that negativity, his very nemesis, the sinner becomes positively charged, impacted, and redeemed in body and soul. It is the very tum'ah, that is metaher, the confrontation with his opposite, that propels him to final rehabilitation.

I believe that in this concept of extremes impacting upon each other, of each being confronted with, and attracted to, the power of the other side, there lies the paradoxical potential for the two extremes in Jewish life drawing closer to each other. The more they move in opposing directions, the more they drift apart, the more possible, indeed likely, it will be that each will see the other as possessing something positive and of enduring value that each needs and desires. For example, even now it is much more common for individual Jews who are completely alienated from their Judaism to rediscover their heritage, to become baalei teshuvah, to function within the Orthodox community, than it is for those who are semi-attached or half-committed to a diluted Judaic identity. And on the other side, it is not unusual to find strictly Orthodox institutions and

groups establishing partnerships with completely non-religious, even non-believing, Jews, alliances of mutual support and understanding, that recognize each other's needs and priorities. This is much more so than in the case of competing Orthodox, or for that matter non-Orthodox, groups and institutions.

So too when it comes to communities such as ours, and individuals such as those I have described. It is the realization of the gravity of Jewish divisiveness and extremism that represents the greatest potential for reconciliation and a drawing closer to each other. Just as the shocking news of 52% intermarriage shocked the Jewish Federations into redirecting its priorities into strengthening Jewish life and Jewish education, so it is to be hoped, on an individual level, more and more of us, here and elsewhere, will come to realize that it is both necessary and desirable to avoid the extremes and the absolutism that threaten to destroy our people, and our communities, by reaching out to our opposites with understanding and tolerance; to build a symbiosis of mutual support and instruction. For the Orthodox, for instance, in many cases to learn from the non-Orthodox the virtues of moral behavior and social responsibility, a concern for the welfare and support of the larger society and the Jewish people in all of its expressions, while the non-observant in turn acquire from the Orthodox the dynamics of Jewish continuity, the profundities of Torah learning, and the inspired beauty of the halakhic way of life, as experienced through the prism of a living, all-encompassing Judaism.

But it will require communities such as ours to redouble our efforts to strengthen that crucial center of Jewish life, to ensure that we become and remain the linchpin unifying the Jewish people and its faith, by strengthening our own allegiance to Torah and mitzvah, menschlichkeit and civic responsibility, so that from the darkness of the night, will come forth a new day bright with promise of renewal and redemption, unity and respect, opposites finally united in purpose and in resolve, blessed by God, He Who reconciles all opposites in heaven as on earth, bringing strength to His people, and blessing them with peace—as it is said  
Hashem oz leamo yiten, Hashem yevarekh et amo ba-shalom!  
He will give strength to His people, and He will indeed bless His people with strength!