

Own your contradictions
Second Night - Rosh Hashanah 5784
Temple Kol Ami Emanu-El - Rabbi Uriel Romano

Jewish tradition has long regarded the Torah as a perfect and divinely revealed text. We sing in the Psalms, "Torat Hashem Temimah" - "The Torah of the Lord is perfect." However, starting in the 17th century, first among Christian thinkers and later among Jewish scholars in the 19th century, questions arose about the "perfection" of the biblical text. These questions brought various contradictions within the biblical text to light. There were different accounts that repeated with slight or significant differences, names that didn't match, stories from other cultures or technologies that didn't align with scientific discoveries, and commandments with varying laws in different Torah books, among other inconsistencies. Some argued that a divine text must be perfect, with no room for contradictions or differences among its books or passages.

Rav Kook, in the early 20th century, offered a mystical counterargument, suggesting that "The nature of prophecy is not yet known or completely understood, and we do not know whether contradictions cannot be a part of the Torah as they cannot be part of formal logic, or perhaps the divine reality transcends all of these variables, and all its contradictions make sense there without any need for a logical resolution. Because reality does not fear contradictions, unlike science" (Igrot HaReiah II, Igeret 478, p. 108). In other words, we assume that the Torah, God's word, must be free of contradictions, as we've learned from Greek formal logic that contradictions indicate a problem in thinking. In the divine realm, what if the contradictions that we can't reconcile here on Earth can coexist? What if God, and His Torah, can encompass both the one and its opposite? Don't we say that the Torah is Min Hashamaim, from the Heavens? Don't we say that the Torah comes from the Heavens, and according to Midrash, the word "Heavens" (Shamaim) is a combination of Esh (fire) and Maim (water)?

In more recent times, one of the great biblical thinkers from the perspective of modern orthodoxy, Rabbi Mordechai Breuer, emphasized that we should leave the contradictions in the Torah, the differences between its books and perspectives, as they are, without attempting to harmonize them or find a resolution (cited by Micah Goodman, Neum Hacharon Shel Moshe, p. 96).

The Bible is riddled with contradictions: characters who don't act in accordance with the Torah's laws, stories with opposing versions, contradictory philosophical ideas among different biblical texts, theological contradictions between prophets and other wisdom texts, prophets who contradict the Torah's laws, and so on. The Bible isn't "the book" but rather "the books." The Bible is a library, a collection of texts from various authors (divine, inspired by God, and "mundane") with differing ideas. The Bible, a foundational text of Jewish culture, can internally accommodate contradictions without the need to harmonize them in many cases.

However, Jerusalem encountered Athens. Greek philosophy, its logic, and its thinkers entered the Jewish world around the 4th century BCE. Judaism, always open to external influences, also adopted during the Talmudic era (primarily) the principle of formal logic's "non-contradiction." Aristotle was the first to formulate this proposition, which asserts that something and its negation (A and -A) cannot both be true at the same time and in the same sense. Talmudic rabbis (from the 3rd century CE) often could not accept contradictions in the world of Halakha (law) or Aggadah (narrative). Therefore, they cite multiple "apparent contradictions" from the Torah or rabbinic texts on almost every Talmudic page and seek to find a resolution; they attempt to find a Teirutz. Centuries later, Rashi, the preeminent Torah commentator, stated that his goal was to "harmonize aggadot with the simple meaning of the Torah." When he encountered an "apparent" contradiction, he sought a biblical explanation to resolve it.

In a way, thinkers like Rav Kook and Breuer sought to free Jerusalem from Athens, where contradictions shouldn't be resolved but appreciated in their dichotomy. Each voice should be able to speak from its place, with its truth, without one voice dominating the other, without silencing one or making one voice say something it didn't truly mean.

With your permission, I'd like to use this example not to discuss the contradictions in the Torah but our own internal contradictions. How do we coexist with contradictions? Can we hold fire and water in the same place, as in the Heavens? Can we entertain opposing thoughts in our minds? Can we bear to think one thing and do another? Can we tolerate our own contradictions?

I don't want to speak in the third person; I want to open up to you and present my own contradictions that I deal with daily. Here are some of them, and I invite each of you to think about your own:

- I want to be a citizen of the world and open to modern society, but I also want to be proudly Jewish and form a Jewish family.
- I'm very rational, but there are moments when I turn to God and the mystical or ethereal aspects of our tradition.
- I want everyone to have a good income, but even though I earn more than some of my coworkers, I don't share my earnings with them.
- I know the environmental damage caused by some of my actions, but I continue to do them.
- I really want to lose weight, but I love my fast food!

And many more... I contradict myself between different thoughts, and many times I contradict myself between what I think (or even feel) and what I do. I can't follow the famous Stoic principle of Plutarch that says one should live in "perfect agreement between the maxims of men and their conduct." I'm more like Alfred Adler when he said, "It is easier to fight for one's principles than to live up to them."

For a long time, I was influenced by the Greek spirit of non-contradiction, Talmudic hermeneutics, and Rashi's interpretation... However, I decided some time ago to free myself from the yoke of Athens and return to Jerusalem, to continue the spiritual legacy of Rav Kook,

and accept the contradiction between ideas and among ideas and actions as an inherent part of my life. Not out of laziness or convenience, but because I understood that humans, created in the image and likeness of God, must also be able to hold opposing and contradictory ideas in their hearts. It's demanding the impossible to always maintain harmony between thoughts and actions. We are divine in one sense and very human in another.

The Tosefta says we should make our hearts a house with multiple rooms where those who permit and those who forbid, those who declare something pure and those who declare something impure can coexist. What if we do this with our own thoughts? What if we accept that we won't think the same tomorrow as we do today? Or that today we can have two contradictory ideas and see both sides of the same coin? What if we acknowledge that we're human and accept that we won't always live up to our ideals?

It was Ralph Waldo Emerson who, in the mid-19th century, said, "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines. With consistency, a great soul has simply nothing to do. He may as well concern himself with his shadow on the wall. Speak what you think now in hard words, and tomorrow speak what tomorrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradicts everything you said today" ("Self-Reliance," *Essays: First Series*, 1841).

This year, I would like to invite you to liberate yourselves from the Athenian thought of non-contradiction and return to the biblical Jewish spirit where contradiction has its place. How many times have we agonized over having two opposing ideas? How many times have we felt bad because we have a noble ideal but often fall short in practice? I invite you to free yourselves from that yoke, to embrace contradictions as an inherent part of our humanity, to welcome your own contradictions, to accept them, not to hide them or try to solve them. We shouldn't fight our contradictions; instead, we should find a place and time in our lives for both of them. We shouldn't fight the contradictions between our ideas (or sermons) and our practices but always strive to improve ourselves.

It was writer Walt Whitman who wrote in "Song of Myself" (1855): "Do I contradict myself? Very well, then, I contradict myself, (I am large, I contain multitudes.)" Normally, in gossip shows or news, we see politicians saying something 10, 20 years ago and something very different today. Many want to paint them as hypocrites (and some truly are). Still, can't we change our minds after 10 years? After 5? After one? Can't we think something and then realize it was an incorrect position or that there was another way of doing things? No politician can withstand the archives, but none of us can either, and that's okay. We must avoid hypocrisy, accept our changes of mind, our contradictions between what we thought yesterday and what we hold today, with humility, accept that we change, but thinking that we will always think the same is a mistake that forces us to be prisoners of an ideology we no longer profess. We are not hypocrites for contradicting ourselves; we are humans.

The main point of critical (and self-critical) thinkers is not to avoid contradiction by always adhering to the Greek principle of non-contradiction. Instead, it's about the ability "to point a finger at contradictions." Education should give us the ability not to live a life free of contradictions but the capacity to point out where there's a contradiction between our values and our practices, between what a politician says and does, between what our religion teaches

us and what we feel. But not to then try to find a theory that explains everything or to compartmentalize (a common practice to avoid cognitive dissonance). We should learn to live with contradictions, not to fight them but to find a place for each one in our lives.

David Berliner, in a wonderful article, writes the following: "Building on the poet John Keats, the psychoanalyst Adam Phillips in *Promises, Promises* (2000) describes three 'negative capabilities' indispensable to growing into a mature human: the experience of being a pest, of getting lost, and of being powerless. I would add one more to that list: the ability to discover and accept our contradictions, even if, at times, we struggle to renounce them."

We are celestial beings; we contain the heavens within us. We are rational and mystical, optimistic and realistic, universalist and particularist, wanting the common good and personal success, wanting to help everyone and every cause but also to enjoy a moment of peace and tranquility. We want to achieve the noblest goals but also watch TV without worries. Many news articles concern us, but then we quickly turn to the entertainment or sports section. We inhabit these contradictions. That's why every year, we open the Yom Kippur prayers with Kol Nidre, asking God not for forgiveness for last year's transgressions but for those we will commit in the coming year. We already know we're human, all too human.

This is my invitation this Rosh Hashanah and in this new year, to not overcome contradictions but to discover them, to embrace them, and learn to live with them.

Shana Tova u'Metuka.
Rabbi Uri