

THE WEXNER FOUNDATION

**Wexner Professional
Leadership Network**



**Alumni Institute 2026
Beit Midrash**

**Polarities as Illustrated in
Jewish Texts**

Sources

Polarities as Illustrated in Jewish Texts - Sources

- In this packet you will find a series of Jewish texts that contain several polarities, including:
 - Confidence and Humility
 - Halacha and Aggadah
 - Justice and Mercy (Din and Rachamim)
 - Stability and Spontaneity (Keva and Kavanah in prayer)
 - Work and Life/Family
- You and your study partners are free to use this packet as you see fit. Choose the text or polarities that resonate for you, skip the ones that don't, or have fun suggesting other sources that embody both/and thinking.
- These texts, like all texts, can be viewed in any way you want, but they were specifically chosen as texts that illustrate the polarity thinking that you learned with Rabbi Shoshana Gelfand in the last few sessions.
- You can look at them for the original intent of the text, as metaphors for how you are managing these polarities in your life or work, and/or as a springboard for thinking about how you navigate complexity in your leadership.
- Use the guiding questions, or don't.
- Sketch a polarity map to go along with the text, or don't.
- Discuss which way you naturally lean on a particular polarity, or don't.
- This session is intended as an opportunity to go deeper into polarities and Jewish wisdom AND to get to know other alumni through Jewish learning.

Have fun!

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for preparing this source sheet

Source 1 – Humility and Confidence

Below is an oft-quoted text that Shoshana mentioned in her presentation, but which you may want to delve into more deeply or explore in a more personal way:

It was said of Reb Simcha Bunem, a 18th century Hasidic rebbe, that he carried two slips of paper, one in each pocket. One was inscribed with the saying from the Talmud: *Bishvili nivra ha-olam*, “for my sake the world was created.” On the other he wrote a phrase from our father Avraham in the Torah: *V’anokhi afar v’efer*, “I am but dust and ashes.” He would take out and read each slip of paper as necessary for the moment. (Oral tradition)

Pocket 1 Source: Genesis 18:27

וַיַּעַן אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר הִנְהִיָּא הוֹאֲלִיתִי לְדַבֵּר אֶל-אֲדֹנָי וְאַנְכִי עֹפָר וְאֶפֶר:

Abraham spoke up, saying, “Here I venture to speak to my God, I who am but dust and ashes.”

Pocket 2 Source: Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5

וּמְלֶךְ מַלְכֵי הַמְּלָכִים הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא טֹבֵעַ כָּל אָדָם בְּחוֹתְמוֹ שֶׁל אָדָם הָרִאשׁוֹן וְאִין אָחַד מֵהֶן דּוֹמֶה לְחֵבֵר וּלְפִיכָהּ כָּל אָחַד וְאָחַד חַיֵּב לוֹמַר, בְּשִׁבְלֵי נִבְרָא הָעוֹלָם

But the Ruler, the Ruler of Rulers, The Holy One (blessed be) strikes every person from the die of the First Person, and yet no person is quite like another. Therefore, every person must say, “for me the world was created.”

Guiding Questions:

- Which pole are you leaning towards right now? Why?
- Which pole do you lean towards normally? What does that suggest about your personal values/fears?
- What are your early warning signs that suggest you might want to recalibrate to experience the positives of the other pole?
- Do you have any practices to help you calibrate yourself within this polarity?

Source 2 - Halakah and Aggadah

Below is a text from Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel in which he poetically distinguishes between these two Jewish concepts:

- **Halacha:** Jewish law. The legal teachings that guide religious practice and daily life.
- **Aggadah:** Jewish lore. The stories, theology, and moral teachings that give meaning and spirit to the law.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel from *Between God and Man*:

Halakhah represents the strength to shape one's life according to a fixed pattern; it is a form-giving force. Aggadah is the expression of man's ceaseless striving that often defies all limitations. Halakhah is the rationalization and schematization of living; it defines, specifies, sets measure and limit, placing life into an exact system. Aggadah deals with man's ineffable relations to God, to other men, and to the world. Halakhah deals with details, with each commandment separately; aggadah with the whole of life, with the totality of religious life. Halakhah deals with the law; aggadah with the meaning of the law. Halakhah deals with subjects that can be expressed literally; aggadah introduces us to a realm that lies beyond the range of expression. Halakhah teaches us how to perform common acts; aggadah tells us how to participate in the eternal drama. Halakhah gives us knowledge; aggadah gives us aspiration. Halakhah gives us the norms for action; aggadah, the vision of the ends of living. Halakhah prescribes, aggadah suggests; halakhah decrees, aggadah inspires; halakhah is definite; aggadah is allusive.

Guiding Questions:

- To which pole do you tend to lean in your own life? (Feel free to answer using halacha and aggadah literally or how these concepts might metaphorically apply to you)
- What choices/priorities/practices/values in your life have led you to lean in that direction?
- Can you make the case for the one you don't lean to?
- What are the benefits of each?
- Can you share a personal example of a time when you leaned too far to one pole? How did you correct for that?

Source 3 - Din and Rachamim (Justice and Mercy)

Bereshit Rabbah 12:15

ה' אלהים, למלך שֶהיו לוֹ כוסות ריקים, אמר המלך אם אני נותן לתוכן חמין, הם מתבקעין. צונן, הם מקרסין, ומה עשה המלך ערב חמין בצונן ונתן בהם ועמדו. כך אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא אם בורא אני את העולם במדת הרחמים, הוי חטייה סגיאין. במדת הדין, האיר העולם יכול לעמד. אלא הרי אני בורא אותו במדת הדין ובמדת הרחמים, והלאוי יעמד

God is like a king, who had some empty glasses.

He said, "If I pour hot water into them, they will burst; if I pour cold water into them, they will contract and crack."

What did the king do? He poured a mixture of hot and cold water into them, and they remained unbroken.

So, too, the Holy One of Blessing said, "If I create the world with the attribute of mercy alone, its sins will be too many; if with justice alone, how could the world endure? So, I will create it with justice and with mercy, that it may endure."

Guiding Questions:

1. In what way does the image of mixing water work as a metaphor for creating the right mixture of justice and mercy? In what way is it not a good metaphor?
2. Managing polarities is not about finding the "average" or the middle path between the two poles, it's about honoring the distinct/unique benefits that come from each pole on its own. How might this text be in tension with that idea?
3. Can you think of another metaphor to describe the need to embrace both justice and mercy as fundamental values for a good society?
4. How do you embrace both justice and mercy in your family/community/leadership?

Source 4 - Keva and Kavana (Stability and Spontaneity)

Keva and Kavanah can be defined in different ways. Traditionally these terms refer to Jewish approaches to praying, but you can expand upon the texts, using them as a polarity, that refer to how you live your life, if you want.

Brachot 40b (Babylonian Talmud)

רבי יוסי אומר: כל המשנה ממטבע שטבעו חכמים בברכות – לא יצא ידי חובתו

Rabbi Yose says, “Whoever changes the phrasing which the sages determined for blessings has not fulfilled their obligation (of reciting the blessing).

Mishnah Berachot 28b (Babylonian Talmud)

רבי אליעזר אומר: העושה תפלתו קבע, אין תפלתו תחנונים

Rabbi Eliezer said: For one who makes their prayer fixed, their prayer is not an (authentic) supplication.

Berachot 29b (Babylonian Talmud)

מאי קבע? אמר רבי יעקב בר אידי אמר רבי אושעיא: כל שתפלתו דומה עליו כמשווי. ורבנן אמרי: כל מי שאינו אומר בלשון תחנונים. רבה ורב יוסף דאמרי תרניהו: כל שאינו יכול לחדש בה דבר

What is (the meaning of) "fixed"?

Rabbi Yaakov bar Idi said in the name of Rabbi Oshaya: Anyone whose Prayer is like a burden on him.

And the Rabbis say: Anyone who does not recite [his Prayer] in a supplicatory (authentic?) manner

Rabba and Rav Yosef both say: Anyone who is unable to innovate something into their prayer.

Guidening Questions:

- How do you define keva and kavanah?
- What is the value of routine in prayer and/or life? What are the risks?
- What authority determines routine in your life (work? family? God? community?)
- What is the value of being spontaneous (kavanah)? What are the risks?
- How do you leverage this polarity in your life? Is there a time that you got stuck in the downside of one of these poles? How did you recalibrate?

Source 5 - Study and Action

Kiddushin 40b (Babylonian Talmud)

וְכָבֵר הָיָה רַבִּי טַרְפוֹן וְזִקְנִים מְסוּבִין בְּעֵלִית בֵּית נִתְזָה בְּלוֹד. נִשְׁאַלָה שְׂאִילָה זֹאת בְּפָנֵיהֶם: תִּלְמוּד גָּדוֹל אוֹ מַעֲשֵׂה גָדוֹל? נִעֲנָה רַבִּי טַרְפוֹן וְאָמַר: מַעֲשֵׂה גָדוֹל. נִעֲנָה רַבִּי עֲקִיבָא וְאָמַר: תִּלְמוּד גָּדוֹל. נִעֲנּוּ כּוֹלִם וְאָמְרוּ: תִּלְמוּד גָּדוֹל, שְׁהַתִּלְמוּד מְבִיא לַיָּדִי מַעֲשֵׂה

And there already was an incident in which Rabbi Tarfon and the Elders were reclining in the loft of the house of Nit'za in Lod, when this question was asked of them: Is study greater or is action greater? Rabbi Tarfon answered and said: Action is greater. Rabbi Akiva answered and said: Study is greater. Everyone answered and said: Study is greater as study leads to action.

Guiding Questions:

1. In the text above what is the relationship between study and action?
2. Do Rabbi Tarfon and Rabbi Eliezer resolve the polarity by agreeing that study is greater?
3. If one is greater than the other is this pairing really a polarity?
4. What are the risks of having action without study and study without action?
5. Can action lead to study?
6. Could study be a form of action according to this text or to you?
7. How might one say the last line differently, so it honors both study and action as equally valuable and make it a true polarity?

Source 6 - Work and Life/Family

The Mishna (Ketubot 5:6) establishes that a husband may travel to learn in a specific beit midrash, house of learning, for up to thirty days without his wife's permission. Beyond that amount of time, permission would be required. The Talmud (Ketubot 62b) cites several cases regarding Rabbis who fully dedicated themselves to their study, having to travel to a distant house of learning for extended periods of time. This dedication to excelling at Torah created a tension between what could be viewed as the occupation of these scholars and their responsibility to their partners and families. One of these stories reads as follows:

רבי חמא בר ביסא אָזיל יתיב תרי סרי שני בבי מדרשא. כי אתא, אמר: לא איעביד כדעביד בן חכינאי. עייל יתיב בןי מדרשא, שלח לביתיה. אתא רבי אושעיא בריה, יתיב קמיה. הנה קא משאיל ליה שמעתא, על לביתיה, על חזא דקא מחדדי שמעתתיה, חלש דעתיה, אמר: אי הואי הקא, הנה לי זרע כי האי. בריה, קם קמיה. הוא סבר למשאיליה שמעתתא קא בעי, אמרה ליה דביתיה: מי איכא אבא דקאים מקמי ברא

Rabbi Hama bar Bisma went and sat for twelve years in the study house. When he planned to return home, he said, “I will not do what Hachinai did.” (A previous story regarding Hachinai who arrived unannounced and caused his wife to die of shock). He stopped at the local study house and sent a letter to his wife. Rabbi Oshaya (his son) came to sit before him (but Rabbi Hama did not recognize him). He asked him questions of law. Rabbi Hama bar Bisa saw that he was a brilliant student and he grew faint. He said: If I had stayed here, I could have had a son like this. He made his way to his home. Rabbi Oshaya entered behind him. Rabbi Hama bar Bisa stood before him, thinking that he must be coming to ask me further questions of law. His wife said to him: Does a father stand before his child?

Guiding Questions:

1. What is the tension between work and family in the text?
2. By ending the story at that point, what do you think the Talmud is attempting to convey regarding the tension between the years he invested in himself and what his son achieved without his father?
3. What is the tension for YOU in your life between work and family (friends, etc.)?
4. How do you manage this polarity? Are you happy with how you navigate this tension in your life?
5. If Rabbi Hama bar Bisma asked your advice, how would you advise him?