



Four Examples of Both/And Thinking in Jewish Text and Philosophy

Core idea: *living in paradox is not new. The challenge of doing so is exacerbated in this complex world requiring us to go back to age old and specifically Jewish wisdom about how to do so.*

1. Keva/Kavanah - Received structure/personal meaning (Heschel)
2. Eloheinu v'elohei avoteinu/emoteinu – **Our God and** God of our Ancestors (Ba'al Shem Tov)
3. Chadash yamenu k'kedem – Renew our days as in days of old (siddur, shacharit service)
4. Na'aseh v'nishmah – we will experience directly and we will learn about/indirectly (Exodus 24:7)

1. Keva (received structure) & Kavanah (personalized direction)

Kavanah comes from a Hebrew root meaning “direction” and refers to one’s own unique interpretations: namely, the personal meaning a person or group directs or devises by themselves. Keva refers to a fixed framework, as in templates that people receive from tradition, such as the canon of the liturgy and the prescribed order of the prayerbook.

Channeling generations of classical rabbinic insight, the great 20th century Jewish philosopher Abraham Joshua Heschel knew how to hold on with all his might to both sides of an interdependent persistent contradiction. He understood possibly better than anyone ever has the losses and distortions caused by overuses or neglect of either side. As of the mid-1950s, Heschel was observing a tendency for the principle of *keva* or regularity (a subset of Transmission) to be stronger than *kavanah* or spontaneity (a sub-set of Translation). Heschel died in 1972. Had he lived into the next few decades, he might have been shocked to see the pendulum begin to swing far away from Transmission almost all the way toward Translation. But he wouldn’t have been happy about it. For that would merely allow for the reverse imbalance, for *kavanah*, the thrust for contemporary and personal meaning-making and relevance, instead to dominate *keva*, preserving the templates of our tradition over time and space. So, Heschel would be charging us today to grapple with the very same question that he was asking then, namely: “How are we to maintain the reciprocity of tradition and freedom; how to retain both ... without upsetting the one or stifling the other?” (Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, p.341) **Heschel warned that the “body without the spirit is a corpse,” but immediately added, “and the spirit without the body is a ghost.”** Through the dynamic interaction of the two, we can sustain a living, thriving, generative entity.

2. Present (Our God) & Past (God of Our Ancestors)

We can also turn to Jewish textual tradition for a sample navigation of the tension between the value of the present and of the past. For example, the Ba'al Shem tov, founder of the Hasidic movement, sought to explain the apparent redundancy in the core Jewish prayer, the Amidah (the “standing” prayer). He asked, “Why does it say Eloheinu V'Elohei Avoteinu?” “Our God and the God of our ancestors?” Surely there are not two different gods, he reasoned and explained that there was a deeper meaning at work. He interpreted the apparent redundancy to mean that there were two kinds of Jews in the world: “Eloheinu” or “Our-God” Jews, who prioritize the wisdom and values of their own time and place, and “Elohei

Avoteinu” or “God-of-our-Ancestors” Jews, who prioritize what past generations have taught and thought. Critically, his commentary does not end there; he concludes by explaining that, ideally, Jews should balance being both, because learning is strongest when one combines the wisdom inherited from the past with current wisdom that is derived from contemporary investigation.
(Ba'al Shem tov, Noach 141:1, in Schochet, Kesser Shem Tov HaSholeim, 19c.)

3. Innovation & Preservation

Chadesh yamenu k'kedem: Renew our days as in days of old, from Lamentations/Eicha 5:2 that is included in our siddur and sung when we return the Torah to the ark after the Torah reading. The line paradoxically asserts that we can somehow make change while simultaneously remaining grounded in our received culture, norms, tradition. In a sense, this is the quintessential leadership challenge.

Weekday Shacharit, Returning Torah to the Ark:

וְהִנֵּחָהּ יֹאמֶר שׁוּבָה יְהוָה רַבְבוֹת אֵלֶיךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל: קוּמָה יְהוָה לִמְנוּחֶיךָ אֶתָּה נֶאֱרֹן עֲנֵךְ: כְּהִנֵּיךְ יִלְבָּשׁוּ אֲדָם וְחִסְדֶּיךָ יִרְגְּנוּ: בְּעֶבֶר דָּוִד עֲבָדְךָ אֵל תֵּשֵׁב פָּנַי מְשִׁיחֶךָ: כִּי לָקַח טוֹב נִתְּתִי לָכֶם תּוֹרָתִי אֵל תַּעֲזֹבוּ: עַץ חַיִּים הִיא לְמַחְזִיקִים בָּהּ וְתוֹלְמֶיהָ מְאֹשֶׁר: דְּרָכֶיהָ דְּרָכֵי נֵעִם וְכָל נְתִיבוֹתֶיהָ שְׁלוֹם: הִשְׁיבֵנוּ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְנִשְׁוֹבָה **חֲדָשׁ יָמֵינוּ כְּקֶדֶם:**

And when it rested, he would say: Return, Adonai, to the myriads and thousands of Israel. Arise, Adonai unto Your resting place, You and the Ark of Your strength. Let Your priests clothe themselves in righteousness, and let Your devoted ones sing in joy. For the sake of David, Your servant, do not reject Your anointed. For I have given you good instruction, do not forsake My Torah. It is a tree of life to those who grasp it, and those who support it are fortunate. Its ways are ways of pleasantness and all its paths are peace. Cause us to return to you, Adonai, and we shall return; **renew our days as of old.**

4. Unmediated & Mediated

Na'aseh (“we will do”) and Nishma (“we will hear”)

This is a reference to Exodus 24:7, in which the People of Israel declare, literally translated, “we will do and we will listen.” This phrase has spurred rabbinic commentary about why doing and listening are both listed. Today, Na'aseh/we will do is often used to distinguish between experiencing something unmediated through one's own senses directly, while Nishma/“we will hear” refers to learning about something indirectly, or mediated, with the help from someone else, often an expert, as in receiving information, talking about it, but not through first-hand discovery.

וַיִּקַּח סֵפֶר הַבְּרִית וַיִּקְרָא בְּאָזְנוֹ הָעָם וַיֹּאמְרוּ כָּל אֲשֶׁר-דִּבֶּר יְהוָה **נַעֲשֶׂה וְנִשְׁמָע:**

Then he took the accounts of the covenant and read it in the ears of the people.

They said: “All that Adonai has spoken, **we will do and we will hearken!**”

Additional Sources

**“Interdependent *Persistent* Contradiction”:
How Both/And Wisdom in Jewish Tradition Makes the Case for the “P” in “IPC”**

Why Persistent?

Although scholars have in recent years turned to study the complexity but also the power inherent in IPCs in the hopes of learning how to manage our highly polarized and polarizing contemporary landscapes, it is not a new concept. In fact, study of the paradox dates back thousands of years. In the two-thousand-year-old Jewish classical rabbinic legal text the Mishnah, for example, we read many cases of counterbalancing values and principles whose tensions must be counter-intuitively *maintained* rather than resolved, lest we lose the benefits and wisdom of each line of thinking. The very fact of a conflict’s perpetuity served as a sign for the rabbis that something positive and productive was taking place. The Mishna (2nd C rabbinic text) refers to these enduring dilemmas as *machloket l’shem shamayim*, or “arguments for the sake of heaven.” The first recorded instance of an “argument for the sake of heaven” was between two great Jewish rabbinic thinkers, Hillel and Shammai, who lived around 50 B.C.E., in the classical rabbinic legal source of the Mishna, in Tractate *Avot*/Ancestors, 5:17.

Mishna Tractate Avot 5:17

(3rd C., Land of Israel)

Every “*machloket l’shem shamayim*” (argument for the sake of Heaven)

will continue to exist; but one that is not in the name of Heaven will not continue to exist.

What is considered an argument that is for the sake of Heaven?

Such as the disagreement between Hillel and Shammai;

What is considered an argument that is not for the sake of Heaven?

Such as was the disagreement of Korah and his entire congregation.

משנה אבות ה:יז

כָּל מַחֲלֶקֶת שֶׁהִיא לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם,
סוּפָהּ לְהִתְקַיֵּם. וְשֶׁאִינָהּ לְשֵׁם
שָׁמַיִם, אֵין סוּפָהּ לְהִתְקַיֵּם.

אִיזוֹ הִיא מַחֲלֶקֶת שֶׁהִיא לְשֵׁם
שָׁמַיִם, זֶה מַחֲלֶקֶת הֵלֵל וְשַׁמַּאי.
וְשֶׁאִינָהּ לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם,
זֶה מַחֲלֶקֶת קֹרַח וְכָל עֲדָתוֹ:

Interdependent Persistent Contradictions

Elu v’elu divrei Elohim chaim/these and these are the words of the ever-living God.

It is in the 6th century text from the Babylonian Talmud (Eruvin 13b) where we encounter an example of the same Houses of Hillel and the Houses of Shammai disagreeing with one another, and there is a Divine intervention. The text teaches us that there can be contradicting positions, but we learn that “both can be the words of the living God, literally, “*These and these* are the words of the ever-living God.” Both schools were deemed valuable and having truth. In that case, it doesn’t even matter what the specific disagreement was, the point is that both approaches to a question at hand are valued, necessary, and preserved.

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Eruvin 13b

R. Aba stated in the name of Shmuel: For three years there was a *makhloket* between Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel, the former asserting, “The Halacha (Jewish Law) is in agreement with our views,” and the latter contending, “The Halacha is in agreement with our views.” Then a heavenly voice announced, “**Both these and these are the words of the living God**, but the Halacha is in agreement with the rulings of Beit Hillel.” Since, however, both are the words of the living God, what was it that entitled Beit Hillel to have the Halacha fixed in agreement with their rulings? Because they were kind and modest, and they taught their own rulings as well as those of Beit Shammai. Even more, they mentioned the rulings of Beit Shammai before their own.

You may also enjoy [this additional commentary](#) on this text, by Dara Steinberg.

תלמוד בבלי, מסכת ערובין יג:

אָמַר רַבִּי אָבָא אָמַר שְׁמוּאֵל:
שְׁלֹשׁ שָׁנִים נִחְלְקוּ בֵּית שַׁמַּאי
וּבֵית הֵלֵל, הִלְלוּ אוֹמְרִים: הִלְכָּה
כְּמוֹתֵנוּ, וְהִלְלוּ אוֹמְרִים: הִלְכָּה
כְּמוֹתֵנוּ. יָצְאָה בַּת קוֹל וְאָמְרָה:
אֵלוֹ וְאֵלֵּי דְבָרֵי אֱלֹהִים חַיִּים הֵן,
וְהִלְכָּה כְּבֵית הֵלֵל. וְכִי מֵאַחֵר
שָׁאֲלוּ וְאֵלֵּי דְבָרֵי אֱלֹהִים חַיִּים,
מִפְּנֵי מָה זָכוּ בֵּית הֵלֵל לְקַבּוּעַ
הִלְכָּה כְּמוֹתֵנוּ? מִפְּנֵי שְׁנוּחִין
וְעֹלְוִין הֵן, וְשׁוֹנִין דְּבָרֵיהֶן וְדְבָרֵי
בֵּית שַׁמַּאי, וְלֹא עוֹד אֶלָּא
שֶׁמִּקְדִּימִין דְּבָרֵי בֵּית שַׁמַּאי
לְדְּבָרֵיהֶן. כְּאוֹתָהּ שֶׁשְׁנִינוּ: