Nothing is Black and White—Not Even Tisha B'Av

Politics seems to be always pulling to extremes. Is that a Jewish approach?

Complexity

A German Jewish tourist visiting Me'ah She'arim entered one of the small restaurants there and asked if they accept credit cards—in Germany, many small shops don't accept them, and he wondered if the same was true in Me'ah She'arim.

The cashier replied, "It depends."

The tourist asked, "What does it depend on? Do you accept them or not?"

The cashier explained, "If the card goes through, we accept it; if it doesn't go through, we don't."

This answer reflects the Jewish approach to many aspects of life.

Recently, during a discussion about "*tzaar baalei chaim*" (according to most opinions, a Torah prohibition of torturing animals), one of the participants in my class, who happens to be a vegetarian, sarcastically remarked, "We can eat them, but we can't hurt them?!"

I replied that in American society, everything tends to extremes. If something is allowed, then everything should be allowed, and if it's forbidden, then we forbid it to an extreme. However, in Judaism, nothing is black and white; everything is more complex.

Eating meat is allowed by the Torah; after the flood, G-d said to Noach that living things may serve as food like vegetables (Genesis 9:3). Why did the Torah permit eating meat? The Rebbe explains that after the flood, human beings became increasingly weaker, and therefore,

people needed meat to stay healthy. It is also permissible to conduct medical experiments on animals to advance medicine that can benefit humanity. Why? Because animals were created by G-d to serve humans.

However, causing unnecessary distress to animals for entertainment and amusement is forbidden! This is evident in the story of Bilaam, where the angel asked him, “Why did you hit your donkey?” (Numbers 22:32), and other instances in the Torah as well.

We find this complexity in other laws as well.

For example, since the Supreme Court overturned the ruling that allowed abortions, there’s been a heated debate on the topic, and people tend to take extreme positions. Conservatives argue that abortion should never be permitted under any circumstances, while liberals believe that every woman has the right to decide about her body and should be allowed to choose to have an abortion whenever she sees fit, without interference.

In Jewish law, it’s more complex; abortion is generally forbidden, but like in any rule, there are exceptions. In rare cases, under the guidance of a knowledgeable rabbi, it may be permitted.

Celebrate or Mourn?

On Wednesday evening, we will commemorate Tisha B’av with a twenty-four hour fast and the recitation of lamentations. We will sit on the ground and mourn the destruction of the Holy Temple—a tragic event that has caused the Jewish people to grieve for over two millennia. It’s a very solemn day.

But a verse in the book of Psalms says the opposite.

Psalm 79 begins, “*Mizmor l’asaf*, a song by Asaf,” and goes on to speak about the destruction of the Holy Temple, describing the desolation of the Temple and the ruins of Jerusalem. The Midrash asks: Why does the psalm begin with the word “Mizmor” (a song), suggesting a melody and joy, when it is meant to describe the destruction? Wouldn’t it be more fitting to start with the word “Kinah” (a lament)? The Midrash answers that we are grateful that G-d’s anger was expressed on the wood and stones—of the Temple—and not on the people of Israel (Lamentations Rabbah 4:14).

Now, a person who sees everything in black and white might ask, “So, what should we do on Tisha B’av? Mourn the destruction or be glad

that God's anger wasn't directed towards us?" The answer is both. We mourn the destruction of the Temple while also rejoicing that the Jewish people have survived and endured throughout history.

The Lesson from Aharon

We see a similar theme with Aaron, the High Priest.

On the first of Av, we commemorated his passing—the only person whose date of passing is explicitly mentioned in the Torah.

Aaron was deeply involved in resolving marital conflict. According to the Midrash, when Aaron learned of a separated couple, he would approach the husband and say that his wife deeply regrets their recent dispute and wishes to reconcile with him. At the same time, he would approach the wife and tell her that her husband regrets his recent inappropriate behavior and humbly asks for her forgiveness, and promises to be on his best behavior.

During my recent class, someone asked me how it was permissible for him to lie.

Now, it is true that the Torah tells us to distance ourselves from falsehood. In fact, of the 365 prohibitions in the Torah, only one commands us to (not only avoid trasgressing it, but) *distance* ourselves from it, and that is the prohibition of falsehood (Pele Yoetz, erech "sheker").

On the other hand, our sages teach us that it is allowed for a person to alter the truth for the sake of peace (Yevamot 65b). In Genesis, when the angels tell Abraham that he will give birth to a son, Sarah quietly laughed, thinking that Abraham was too old to bear a child. But when G-d mentions her reaction to Abraham—"Why did Sarah laugh"—He says, "she said that *she* is too old…" Rashi points out that G-d changed her words to avoid causing offense to Abraham from his wife (Lech Lecha 18:13). So, the Torah itself teaches us to alter the truth for the sake of peace.

It Wasn't Falsehood At All

However, the case of Aaron can also be looked at differently.

In a talk, the Rebbe argued that when Aaron mentioned that the husband regretted his actions, it might not have been a lie at all, based on a unique ruling in Jewish law:

The halacha concerning the giving of a get states that it must be done

willingly. If the husband gives the get against his will, it is not considered valid, and the woman is not divorced. However, if the Beit Din determines that the husband is obligated to give the get, they can apply strict sanctions to encourage him to comply. These may include excommunication, exclusion from the community, and other measures which will pressure him until he says, “I want to give the get.”

But if someone is compelled to say, “I want to do it” when they actually don’t, what’s the point of the charade? Let’s just force him outright!

The Rambam explains that we only consider a person as being coerced when they are truly forced against their will to do something that is not required by the Torah. However, if their evil inclination tempts them to shirk a mitzvah and they are pushed until they fulfill their obligation, it is not considered coercion—because every Jew sincerely desires to fulfill the will of the Almighty. The evil inclination merely confuses them with various temptations, so when we compel a person to perform a mitzvah, we are, in fact, helping them do what they genuinely want deep down.

Imagine if you are told by your doctor to avoid all cakes and candy. Then, you are at a party, and you spot a delicious cake. It looks tempting, and you are about to take a piece, but your wife gives you a sharp look and scares you away. In that moment, it feels like coercion, but in hindsight, you will appreciate her care for your well-being.

Similarly, the Rebbe says, when Aaron informed the woman that her husband regretted his actions, it wasn’t a lie. It might have been Aaron revealing the husband’s true internal desire—even if the husband himself was not yet aware of it (Sichos Kodesh 5741 v. 1 p. 164).

This Halacha was the foundation of the Rebbe’s approach to every Jew. When we approach a Jew and offer them to put on tefillin and the person vehemently declines, we aren’t alarmed. Deep down in their heart, they do desire to wear tefillin; they yearn to connect with the Almighty. It’s just his evil inclination that convinces them that they are too tired, not interested, and so on. Once freed from the clutches of their evil inclination, they will willingly embrace the opportunity to fulfill the mitzvah.