**ROSH HASHANAH 5783**

*Embracing ‘THEY’ and the gift of non-binary thinking*

My childhood home had many rules – make your bed every morning, don’t put your backpack on the dining room table, turn out the lights when you leave a room – lots of rules! But none were enforced as strictly or frequently as the Rules of Grammar!

My parents might be upset if I broke a glass, but I’d really be in trouble if I said “It was me” instead of the correct “It was I.” I knew the difference between further and farther long before I was allowed to ride my bike farther than the stop sign. And when my friends’ parents were teaching them about the birds and bees, mine were teaching me about the Oxford comma.

And so, you won’t be surprised to learn that I have struggled with using the word ‘they’ as a singular pronoun. I don’t struggle philosophically. I believe that the spectrum of gender identity is broad and diverse, and ranges between and outside of the categories of male and female. And, I understand the importance of using language correctly. Not doing so causes pain, disrespect, and marginalization. Debates on this issue are about more than personal preferences; they are about culture and privilege and power. The stakes are high. Despite all of this, I get people’s pronouns wrong too often, for which I am truly sorry.

I so admire my kids and their generation who are fluent in the language of gender pronouns. Recognizing that there are more gender identities than the male-female binary is second nature to them. Along with my grammar lessons, I would have benefited from some instruction on how language changes. What seems strange or awkward to one generation, becomes accepted, even preferred in another.

While this sermon is not entirely about grammar, nor entirely about gender, allow me to remain here for one more moment to share an important breakthrough, a revelation that has enabled me to overcome my adherence to the grammar rules of my childhood and embrace ‘they’ in a new way. And, no surprise, it came from our Jewish tradition. Actually, it came from God! Not in the form of some divine epiphany, but in a simple grammar lesson.

God is our most sacred singularity! And yet, In Hebrew God is Elohim and Elohim is a plural word. We say, Shema Yisrael Adonai Elohaynu, Adonai Ehad! Adonai Ehad - God is One. And yet grammatically God, Elohim, is a plural, a multiplicity, God is a they.

This certainly aligns with my personal beliefs, as I have never imagined that there is only one concept of God. Regularly, people come to speak to me about their theological struggles and we usually end up agreeing on all the God ideas that we don’t believe. Once given permission to abandon the God who sits in the clouds or thunders from the mountain, we can imagine so many possibilities, a spectrum of realities, an array of characteristics – loving, just, warm, wise and even frustrated, jealous, disconnected – and God, like an individual who does not fit into a limiting label, becomes a ‘singular they.’

And there is more.

Take the creation story. Genesis chapter 1 tells us that on the sixth day God created Ahdam, the first person.

וַיִּבְרָ֨א אֱלֹהִ֤ים ׀ אֶת־הָֽאָדָם֙ בְּצַלְמ֔וֹ בְּצֶ֥לֶם אֱלֹהִ֖ים בָּרָ֣א אֹת֑וֹ זָכָ֥ר וּנְקֵבָ֖ה בָּרָ֥א אֹתָֽם׃

Listen to the translation and the interplay between singular and plural, male and female:

And Elohim created Adahm in his image, in the image of Elohim was the first person created, male and female God created them.

Two features are significant here. First, humanity is created, B’tzelem Elohim, in the Divine image. Second, this first person, a singular entity, is referred to as both male and female, a multiplicity, a they.

To its credit, our tradition, including scholars from thousands of years ago, not today’s rabbis, the ancients, have embraced the complexity of this story. Our rabbis explain that it is not just that males and females were created in God’s image equally and at the same time, rather they say: “the first human being was half male and half female and later split into two separate beings.” In the same midrash, other sages say that the first person was created as an androgynous being with a mixture of gender, a spectrum, referred to in the Torah as ‘otom’ – them.

Returning to the original text, if we embrace the ancient rabbinic idea that the first person was created with two genders or as a blend of genders, and we also embrace that this first person was created in God’s image, then we might reason that God also must possess both male and female qualities. Now the ‘singular they’ is moving from my mind to my heart. Thank you, Judaism!

If this is difficult for you to wrap your head around, you are certainly not alone. Our brains, even younger ones, are biologically hard wired to binary thinking. This dates back to our earliest existence – fight or flight, good or bad, safe or dangerous. Binary thinking was lifesaving. Over time our genetic love affair with this way of processing the world has helped us to make quick decisions, it simplifies complexities, it reduces the anxiety that comes with complicated situations. Right/wrong, in/out, public/private, chocolate/vanilla! This is the clarity we need and crave. Reducing the chaos in our minds, this saves time. It gives us a sense of control and it makes us feel safe.

But ‘they’ and ‘Elohim’ and so much more, show us that when we fall back on binary thinking too often, we fail to engage with the complexities of our world. We leave people out. We miss a spectrum of ideas. We lose nuance. The fertile middle ground becomes invisible.

I don’t know about all of you, but I feel uncertain and uneasy and even scared about our world right now. It’s fast changing, filled with complicated problems, bifurcated by growing polarization about everything – the environment, technology, gender, politics - including our rights and our freedoms. Binary thinking – this or that, with or against – is not serving us well right now. Don’t get me wrong, we need discernment, and some things are absolutely right or absolutely wrong, just or unjust. We each have our personal list of issues we will go to the mat for and so we should. Especially now I hope your list includes the rights of transgender kids in our Virginia’s schools!

As members of the Jewish community, we have only to look at our own experiences to know that the us/them divide leads to ‘them’ as different and ‘them’ as lesser. We see the vilification of one group against another all around us – this binary thinking is a root cause. We feel great separation from others – this is its foundation. Intolerance and detachment are saturating our public discourse – this is why!

We can and must move beyond binary thinking in order to change ourselves and our community for the better. And today is the day to do that! Rosh Hashanah translates into New Year – Rosh –literally head, Shanah - year. But shanah has a second meaning; it is also the word for ‘change.’ In this word’ and its two meanings, Judaism reminds us that every new year presents an opportunity for new things, for change. The liturgy and rituals of today invite us first to take stock of where we are, individually and communally. But then they also invite us to envision how things might be different. They encourage us to take steps in new directions, to commit to new ventures, and this year, to think in a fundamentally different way, about our world and the challenges within it.

Having begun by exploring gender, something that was once so obvious and binary, on this day we are invited to question what else we may be taking for granted. What are we oblivious to? What might we erroneously consider complete.[[1]](#endnote-1) I am asking myself, what possibilities have I neglected, or closed down, by continuing to stay in my binary comfort zone?

This summer I experienced what it feels like to journey beyond a usual two-sided conversation. I listened to a panel discussion sponsored by the Hartman Institute about the Israeli Palestinian Conflict. The first presenter, Nimrod Novik, spoke about the importance of continuing to work for a pathway to a two-state solution. Questions and comments followed – two states! - one state! – pluses! – minuses! A debate we’ve been hearing for years. Personally, I’m absolutely clear about where I stand in this discussion.

Or I thought I was until the next presenter, Dalia Scheindlin, began to speak about a hybrid situation, an Israeli-Palestinian Confederation. She described a situation where Israelis and Palestinians create a shared central authority with some limited power, but each group also retains considerable independence in many realms. For example, there could be shared sovereignty over security and healthcare, but each community oversees its own social services and education.

Apparently, Israeli Jews have been in conversation about this much longer than American Jews, but I hadn’t heard a lot about it. It's complicated, it’s different, I’m not jumping over to this camp. But after her presentation, the questions, the comments, the ideas from the participants took on an entirely different tone. It was as if she’d opened a portal to variations on themes much less known. Plenty of people questioned this approach but the energy was positive and the new ideas plentiful. Whether this is a viable solution or not, Dalia brought us into the often-scary gap between our usual binaries and helped us to be comfortable in this new and unknown place.

Within minutes I could feel the atmosphere in the room shift. Finding their way into this other space, the participants, while cautious, were also curious. The connections among everyone in the room, even while they disagreed, felt stronger – perhaps the compassion for one another, deeper. Individuals seemed to be moving from being ‘right’ to being ‘in relationship.’

Have you ever experienced this? Have you ever been firmly planted in one spot with someone else equally fixed in a space across the way? Politics might be the forum that comes to mind, but I’ve been locked in this rigid pattern about many things – views on Judaism, parenting, vacations, and the right way to make a pie! There are times when I am sure that I am the enlightened, rational person, the true expert, and the other, my polar opposite, is not.

It can be easier to be ‘right’ rather than to be ‘in relationship.’ It can feel safer to remain in a binary, a one-dimensional paradigm where the only things visible are two distinct points. But our lives are far from one dimensional or linear. And we cannot exist, nor thrive, without relationships.

So, we must learn to tolerate, even seek out, the space between our hardened views. Dwelling in the gap requires figuring out how to hold the paradox of some things being both right and wrong, and some people being strong and loving and also angry, uptight and stingy. A spectrum of realities. An array of possibilities. To put yourself in the non-binary-in-between requires courage. But the reward is great. Ideally, the gap is a place of learning and discovery. But even when the gap becomes a place of conflict, there is a benefit because conflict can be understood as a fundamental part of intimacy. It is often through conflict that we can get to know each other – our full selves, all the things we hold inside, our multiplicity, our personal ‘singular they.’

Allow me to end by returning us to the rabbis and our Judaism. Reading the thousands of writings that came after the Torah, it is clear that our sages loved categories – what we can and cannot eat, milk and meat, forbidden mixtures such as wool and linen, shabbat and the rest of the week, everything that is pure and impure. They loved to classify. They were drawn to the binary.

But our rabbis were also fascinated with the non-binary, the liminal – the times and places that are in the gap, the in-between. They understood that not all of God’s creation can be categorized. In a groundbreaking article on understanding binary and non-binary thinking in Judaism, Rabbi Elliot Kukla writes: “It was the parts of the universe that defied binaries that interested the rabbis…the most. Pages and pages of sacred texts are occupied with the minute details of the moment between bud and fruit, wilderness and domestication, innocence and maturity, the twilight hour between day and night.” [[2]](#endnote-2)

Twilight is a time of great power for the rabbis. And like gender and God, is a multiplicity of colors and shades of light and darkness. It is the gap between the polarities of day and night. And the rabbis suggest that this is the time when our prayers are most likely to be heard. The space in between, that is at times scary and disorienting, is the place where miracles happen, and transformation is possible. It was in the desert, after all, the land between Egypt and Israel, that we experienced God’s wonders and received God’s Torah.

On this Rosh Hashanah, which gifts us the opportunity to change, won’t you meet me in this space? Won’t you join me in embracing the ‘singular they’ in the many dimensions of our lives? It can be confusing and uncomfortable, murky, and disconcerting; but, as many in our community have taught us, it can also be rich with creativity and possibility, and a place where we experience compassion and connection.

At the moment of creation, by not wholly defining Adahm, humanity, us - Elohim endowed us with infinite possibilities of identity and destiny, each of us entrusted with the capacity and responsibility to reflect Elohim’s boundless self. Surely, we have already embraced this gift. Do we not hold a spectrum of beliefs and ideals? Are we not in-process rather than fixed or complete?

I believe we are all a ‘singular they’ and in our discovery of our unique multiplicity, we are given the sacred opportunity to discover the Elohim within us and to more clearly see and feel and know the Elohim within all others.

Ken Y’hi Ratzon – May this be God’s Will.

1. Rabbi Rachel Timoner [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. A Created Being of Its Own: Toward a Jewish Liberation Theology of Men, Women and Everyone Else. Rabbi Elliot Kukla [↑](#endnote-ref-2)