

אלו ואלו

*Elu v'elu* / These and those  
are the words of God

How do we hold paradoxical moments?

## Alive in Paradox

Erica Brown

As I thought about *elu v'elu*, I rather quickly turned to Ecclesiastes, perhaps the most enigmatic and unsettling book of the Bible, riddled with paradoxes. The book's absurd contradictions read like an existentialist's stream-of-consciousness on nearly every question of purpose: marriage and money, work and play, love and hate. Even the famous poem of chapter three, popularized in the song "To Everything, Turn, Turn, Turn," suggests polar swings of emotion and activity. Should there really be a time to hate and a time to make war? Is there any occasion on which one should throw stones?

*Kohelet*, as the book is known in Hebrew, is the gatherer of aphorisms and opens with a complaint: All is futile; all is vanity. Professor of Hebrew and comparative literature Robert Alter translates the Hebrew word *hevel* not as "vanity" but as "breath." A breath, if it can be seen at all, soon vaporizes. And while this involuntary mechanism is our life-force, it leaves no residual impact and barely a sound. Even breathing becomes a paradox. It is no surprise that the paradoxes of Ecclesiastes led to a talmudic debate: Should the book even be included in the biblical canon? (*Mishna Eduyot* 5:3)

One of the chief paradoxes of Ecclesiastes is in its attitude to wisdom. Everyone has a worthy idea to be shared, and yet there is rarely a novel idea to be uncovered. *Kohelet* strikes this theme in its first chapter: "Sometimes there is a phenomenon of which they say, 'Look, this one is new!' — it occurred long since, in ages that went by before us." (1:10) We believe we've hit new ground only to find it was discovered long before us. These turgid thoughts lead the author (traditionally credited to King Solomon) to several thought experiments that "resolve" in contradictions. "I said to myself: 'Here I have grown richer and wiser than any that ruled before me over

Jerusalem, and my mind has zealously absorbed wisdom and learning.' And so, I set my mind to appraise wisdom and to appraise madness and folly. And I learned — that this too was pursuit of wind. For as wisdom grows, vexation grows; to increase learning is to increase heartache." (1:16-18) Is wisdom worth it? Yes and no.

Wisdom itself is a paradox. In my own life, how many times has scholarship raised me up and how many times has it brought me to the brink of despair? Study can bring joy, relief, status, and meaning, but it can equally create a tangle of insecurity, frustration, and futility. But wait. Just when we are brought low in Ecclesiastes, the writer seems to change his mind: "Wisdom, like an inheritance, is a good thing and benefits those who see the sun. Wisdom is a shelter." (7:11–2)

We all wrestle with the kinds of contradictions implied by the Jewish sensibility *elu v'elu* — sometimes both rather than one or the other can be valid positions and even achieve holiness. Some of us, however, use a lot of psychic energy trying to eliminate these distinctions, which rarely works. Sometimes, it's best to lean into the discomfort of a paradox, taking time to reflect on what makes us uncomfortable with uncertainty, with the rough edges of contradiction. Can we learn to live with the fact that not everything can be made whole and contradiction-free — to live with the inner noise of a self that is inherently inconsistent? Yes. And when we do, we just might find that living with paradoxes makes us more compassionate, more interesting human beings. Rousseau wrote that he would "rather be a man of paradoxes than a man of prejudices." Prejudices make us overly certain. Paradoxes help us stay humble and attuned to the changes within.

Dr. Erica Brown is an associate professor at the Graduate School of Education and Human Development at the George Washington University and director of its Mayberg Center for Education and Human Development.

**Jewish sensibilities** are approaches to living and learning that permeate Jewish culture. The ideas, values, emotions, and behaviors they express — emanating from Jewish history, stories, and sources — provide inspiration and guidance that help us to respond creatively and thoughtfully to life's challenges and opportunities. Sensibilities are culturally informed senses or memes. This month, *Sh'ma Now* examines *elu v'elu* — the words declared by a heavenly voice on hearing the heated arguments between the houses of Hillel and Shammai. The voice called out, "These and also those are the words of the living God..." So, how do we hold paradoxical positions and how does that stance deepen Jewish life?

## Smuggling Dynamite

Ariel Burger

Two-hundred years ago, the Hasidic master Rebbe Nachman of Breslov said: "There is no despair at all."

But I see the faces. I see the faces of school-children gunned down by a human avatar of evil with an AR-15. I see the faces of Israeli victims of terror. I see the faces of refugees caught between their devastated homes and a closed border. I see the faces of Rohingya Muslim survivors of unspeakable acts of genocide. No despair?

We are caught in a toxic repetition of violence and inhumanity. Even after the Holocaust, genocides continue. Even after previous unfathomable school shootings, our nation has not figured out how to keep our children safe. No despair?

We are trained to think of hope and despair as opposite emotions. But when we apply the sensibility of *elu v'elu* — "these and those are the words of God" — a new understanding emerges. Perhaps the despair that Rebbe Nachman refers to is not a feeling at all. Perhaps it's an action, a choice. The word he uses for despair, *yeush*, is a talmudic term that refers to giving up hope of finding a lost object. When an owner gives up hope, he gives up ownership of the object: his despair actually changes the status of the object. *Yeush* is the choice to let go, to give up, to discard our aspirations for the future.

My teacher Elie Wiesel taught that hope is also a choice. He told us we must not give despair the victory. To illustrate his point about hope — to explain its relationship to resistance — he shared a story of a woman named Roza Robotka, an inmate in Auschwitz-Birkenau, who smuggled grains of dynamite *under her fingernails* for weeks in order to collect enough to bomb the

crematoria. She and four of her comrades were captured after the Sonderkommando Revolt in October 1944, and, while being taken to be executed, they shouted the biblical phrase *chazak v'amatz!* (be strong and of good courage!). The lesson Wiesel wanted us to learn was: "There were many instances of resistance. And there is no resistance without hope."

When Rebbe Nachman says there is no despair, he is pointing to the choice to give up, to cease resisting, rather than the human feelings of despondency that he himself often felt. Despair-as-choice, to which Rebbe Nachman refers, forecloses hope and makes action impossible. But once we establish that we will never give up, we can experience the emotions of hope and despair in the very same moment. Though it may sometimes drive us to distraction, feeling the weight of the darkness will never threaten our commitment to act. Allow your heart to break, yes. But then allow it to fuel your resistance.

I don't want to look away from those beseeching faces. I don't want to abdicate, to surrender to evil. The world gives us many reasons for despondency, and the world breaks our hearts. Hope without heartbreak can be naive. Heartbreak without hope leads to inaction, apathy. *Elu v'elu*. We need them both. Honoring our heartbreak, our grief, and our frustration is healthy and necessary. But it is hope that keeps us from *yeush*; it is hope that makes resistance, and therefore change, possible.

Rabbi **Ariel Burger** is an author, teacher, and artist. His forthcoming book, *Witness: Lessons from Elie Wiesel's Classroom*, is now available for pre-order on Amazon. A Covenant grantee, he is developing integrated arts and Jewish learning content for adult learners and educators. You can visit Ariel's virtual gallery at [arielburger.com](http://arielburger.com).

## Privileged and Vulnerable

Danya Ruttenberg

Here's the paradox: Antisemitism and Jewish privilege are, and have long been, two sides of the same coin. Hatred toward Jews has been deeply intertwined with the notion that Jews have had unique sorts of advantages for around a thousand years.

In the Middle Ages, Jews were barred from many professions, and it was sometimes illegal for Jews to own land. It was convenient for local authorities to permit Jews to work in trades that were repugnant to Christians — most notably, moneylending, associated in the Christian

world with depravity and sin. Therefore, they were both resented for this work and identified with it. Even as early as 1233, antisemitic drawings depicted the usurious Jew, using many of the same themes one might find today in a Google search. Antisemitism drove a small number of Jews into moneylending, which then reinforced that antisemitism.

Ironically, despite this narrative of privilege, most Jews throughout history lived a fairly precarious existence, economically and otherwise. We have been subject to expulsions, pogroms, Inquisitions, and genocide many times over — often, indeed, fueled by the trope of the greedy, crooked Jew serving as the scapegoat for unrelated and more general societal stresses and complexities. Often, the shift from living in peace — tolerated and even embraced by the rulers and locals of a host country — to antisemitism happened very quickly.

And now, too, we are living in a time marked by stories of privilege and vulnerability. It is a time when Jewish advantages — and/or perceptions of Jewish advantage — are both protecting us and marking us as targets.

Last summer, the Charlottesville white supremacist demonstrators chanted "Jews will not replace us" and "Blood and soil!" a direct translation of the Nazi slogan "*blut und boden*," which plays on the notion of Jews as powerful, dangerous interlopers. Two months before that, the Chicago Dyke March ejected participants who held Pride flags with Stars of David. And in March this year, Washington D.C. Council member Trayon White Sr. inadvertently used (and later apologized for) a recurring antisemitic allegation that the Rothschild family, a wealthy European dynasty, manipulates world events for its own advantage.

In recent years, there has also been (rightfully, in my opinion) increasing acknowledgment that many Ashkenazi Jews in America benefit from white privilege. Jews are found at all economic levels in this country, and as a collective we have more social and cultural capital than many other minority groups in the United States. We are not as vulnerable as other communities under attack. As a religious group, Jews are, thus far, not targeted by the government in ways that other groups are. ICE (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement) is not seeking Jews out as a group; we are not being barred from the military or being singled out in a travel ban. Over decades, many American Jewish families have assimilated into the broader culture and "become

white” — which has influenced our opportunities for education, jobs, housing, affluence, and generally getting ahead.

Nevertheless, antisemitism functions as it has for centuries. President Donald Trump's attacks on “Soros globalists,” White House adviser Stephen Miller's claim that a reporter had “cosmopolitan bias” (a phrase with longtime antisemitic connotations despite Miller's own Jewish origins), and candidate Trump's tweet of the Star of David superimposed on currency (a Star he claimed was a symbol of law enforcement, and quickly altered after coming under under fire) startle. All depend on centuries old, manufactured narratives of Jews as wealthy and powerful.

Some members of the Jewish community are feeling our multi-generational trauma and are experiencing a terror during this time. Notably, according to the Anti-Defamation League, the number of white supremacist propaganda incidents on American campuses has tripled in the past decade.

But this is not the time to hunker down. I have advantages that my ancestors in Europe never dreamed of, including the social capital to fight bigotry with full force. We have an obligation to stand up for those who are more vulnerable to both institutional and random attack, as well as to embody the full tenacity and verve of an elderly woman photographed last summer, holding a sign that said, “I escaped the Nazis once. You will not defeat me now.”

We need to name antisemitism when we see it and call on our allies to do the same, while leveraging every advantage we have to help those who need us to show up for them. The nature of antisemitism may be paradoxical, but our obligations to fight every kind of bigotry and hate head on are, ultimately, very straightforward.

---

Rabbi [Danya Ruttenberg](#) is the author, most recently, of *Nurture the Wow: Finding Spirituality in the Frustration, Boredom, Tears, Poop, Desperation, Wonder, and Radical Amazement of Parenting*. She is Rabbi-in-Residence at Avodah.

## Our Moral Obligation

*Amy Tobin*

As the CEO of a Jewish Community Center in the Bay Area, my job is to create healthy communities inspired by Jewish values, culture, and tradition. We are an expansive place defined by inclusivity and accessibility. During my tenure, I have learned that community centers are expected by many to be neutral spaces

— not defined by denomination and welcoming to everyone.

The JCC serves Berkeley, Oakland, and other towns and cities in the East Bay. Our community happily includes queer Jews and people of color, intermixed Jews and non-Jews. We are home to families, sophisticated boomers, and 30-somethings who question everything.

In the fall of 2016, our community was stunned when a man who had degraded women, signaled support for white supremacy, and insulted people of color, Muslims, and people with disabilities, was elected president of the United States.

At the JCC, we began to investigate our responsibilities as a Jewish communal organization in this historic moment. Did we, as a community center, have a point of view? And if so, how would be a space for those with different opinions?

The paradox of the JCC is to be pulled by conflicting meanings of “inclusive.” We are a place to bridge divides through a shared commitment to Jewish values. There is enormous pressure on communal spaces to avoid being political. Having a point of view about anything — immigration, racial justice, women's rights, guns, or even God — threatens the ideal of inclusivity. Yet we recognize that some people are more marginalized, at risk, and still striving for basic rights and equality. The other side of inclusive also means to recognize historic and current forces that stand in the way of equal rights for all and to be vocal about standing up for them.

In response to the national conversation, our Board of Directors developed a civic engagement position with two pillars. We first commit to welcoming everyone. We want to make space and opportunities for civic discourse, to provide a place for people to have difficult conversations and discover shared values. We also have a moral obligation to stand for equal rights and safety for all. We welcome and support people of all religions, nationalities, and socioeconomic backgrounds, communities of color, people with disabilities, and the LGBTQ community.

A tension exists between the two pillars of this position. How can we truly be a place for dialogue across difference and also have a point of view? Can we express this view and still be a place for everyone? What about people who agree with the positions of the current administration? And aren't we supposed to be neutral?

This tension is healthy and important. Jewish community centers are the Jewish town square, a place for the many voices in our communities. But each JCC has its own voice and a responsibility to use that voice.

If we are tone-deaf to the national forces that affect us, we are irrelevant.

Today we actively weave these principles into our programs. We are willing to face the complexities and contradictions that come with striving to do what's right. Jewish tradition has prepared us for this moment. We know how to argue over ideas. We are familiar with the messiness of painful divisions, whether over how we express our support and concern for Israel or how we stand against antisemitism on the right and the left.

I believe the American Jewish community can recognize when it's time to come together around our core values. As a mainstream, longstanding communal organization, we want to amplify the national conversation about the Jewish obligation to create equal rights and safety for all: to be anything but silent, and to listen to our legacy.

When tested against Jewish values, we found that “neutral” is utterly impossible in 2018. As Jews, we know what it means to be the outsider, the oppressed. We will never forget how we have lived in mortal danger, quietly and creatively assimilating to survive. We have seen history, and we have survived it. To look away from the actions of the current administration is to look away from our Jewish and moral education.

---

[Amy Tobin](#) is CEO of the JCC East Bay. She has consulted with arts and Jewish organizations, currently serves on the UpStart Alumni Advisory Council, and has served on boards including the Nonprofit Centers Network, Joshua Venture Group, and Be'chol Lashon. A songwriter and performer, Amy has toured nationally with “The Esther Show,” a cabaret rock opera based on the Book of Esther.

### Editor-in-Chief

Susan Berrin

### Founding Editor

Rabbi Eugene Borowitz, z"l

### Design

Emily Rich

### Contact

info@shma.com

### For editorial inquiries, contact

sberrin@shma.com

### Advisory Board

Rachel Brodie  
Joshua Feldman  
Richard Hirsh  
Jill Jacobs  
Ari Y. Kelman  
Avi Killip  
Shaul Magid  
Lee Moore  
Danya Ruttenberg  
Robert J. Saferstein

*Sh'ma* and *Sh'ma Now* are trademarks of the Sh'ma Institute, an independent nonprofit supported by Lippman Kanfer Foundation for Living Torah.

---

**“Consider & Converse: *Elu v'elu* is a guide that walks you through this issue, inspires reflections, prompts questions, and provides ways to connect this reading with other meaningful experiences. It is found online at [www.forward.com/shma-now](http://www.forward.com/shma-now).**

# NiSh'ma

On this page, we offer three takes on a commentary by Reb Haim of Volozhin about how to respond when seeing a large crowd of people. We are told to make a blessing to our God of Secrets, acknowledging that each of us has an independent and unique intellect. Our commentators examine the associative values — such as humility and respect — found in this prayer. Our online version is interactive, and we welcome your comments. —S.B.



**Daniel Brenner:** I once heard a Hasidic story about a rabbi who developed the spiritual ability to channel other people's thoughts. One day, one of his students begged to learn the tricks to reading the minds of others. Reluctantly, the rabbi taught the young disciple. The next day, the rabbi overheard the disciple pointing people out to his fellows as they

passed by the shul: "See him, all he thinks about all day is holy books, a real *tzadik!* But see him, all he thinks about is men and women engaging in sex! A *shanda!*" The rabbi grabbed the arm of his young disciple and scolded him: "That's enough mind-reading." "Why?" his student asked, "I am learning so much, now that I can understand the secret thoughts of men!" "Well," the rabbi replied, "you just praised our town's bookbinder, who is a thief, and you just cursed the town's matchmaker, who is one of the holiest souls in our village!"

One of the functions of liturgy is to keep us humans humble. This blessing, *Chacham Razim*, which blesses the God of Secrets, keeps us humble by teaching: If we see a large group of people and if for some reason we hold the conceit that we can read the minds of those around us, and we actually think we know their secrets, stop! Though God is wise to secrets, we are not. Reb Haim of Volozhin envisions God's wisdom as an unbreakable encrypted databank of billions of individually led human secrets, ours included. The best we can ever do, I think, is to try to understand what is happening in our own independent intellects, try to see the world through different perspectives (*elu v'elu*), and hope that, on occasion, we will feel the rush of divine interconnectivity.

Rabbi **Daniel Brenner** is the chief of education and program for Moving Traditions. He was recently featured in *The New York Times* cultural arts section for his touring performance of Klezmer Aerobics ([klezmeraerobics.com](http://klezmeraerobics.com)).



**Tiferet Berenbaum:** Attending a recent international conference of the Bnai Brith Youth Organization, I was awed at the sight of more than 3,000 young Jews sitting around tables laid out for Shabbat. For such a moment, our tradition gives us the blessing *Baruch Chacham Razim*, blessed is the One who is wise to secrets. I love working with teenagers who are simultaneously throwing off the cloak of childhood and engaging with the realities of adult living. They are both testy and open to new experiences and deep learning. Our next generation has access to greater scientific and technological advances than we had, and because of social media, video, and the vast knowledge base of the Internet, they will know a great deal more than us.

As Rabbi Daniel Brenner writes, one purpose of liturgy is to keep us humble. This particular blessing humbles us by helping us acknowledge that we cannot know God's secrets or the vast unknowns that our younger generations will eventually discover. Khalil Gibran poignantly writes about youth: "For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow, which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams." Walking into that Shabbat-ready room, I saw the future; I saw solutions to problems we haven't yet imagined. I saw promise. Only the Holy Blessed One, the *Chacham Razim*, knows the truth within each of those teens. As adult guides, our job is to help them discover and manifest that truth in their lives.

Rabbi **Tiferet Berenbaum** is the spiritual leader and education director of Temple Har Zion in Mount Holly, N.J. She received ordination from the Rabbinical School of Hebrew College in 2013. She lives and loves with her husband, Joel, their 1-year-old daughter, and their beagle, Clint.



**Hank Lazer:** I am initially drawn to the phrase "God of Secrets," though I'll make my way there indirectly. As Rabbi Daniel Brenner's commentary notes, it is this wonderful blessing — *Chacham Razim* — that points us toward the God of Secrets and keeps us humble. Indeed, we cannot know one another from the outside. Each is an "other" to me, to be respected, cherished, and considered by me for the enigma that we also are to ourselves.

As a poet and not a scholar of Jewish texts, I approach this passage with what my Zen practice calls beginner's mind. I thought I understood halakhah to mean Jewish law, but my first etymological dig — for the God of Secrets is simultaneously present and occluded in language — suggests that halakhah at its root means "the path that one walks," and, in the case of this passage, the path to walk along is the road of language. God is a God of Secrets; otherwise, it would be easy to know God directly and with certainty. God is the keeper of secrets, and the best-kept secret is the very nature of God.

Blessed is the God of Secrets for that God allows us to love and to be on intimate terms with the unknowable.

**Hank Lazer** is the author of 27 books of poetry, most recently *Thinking in Jewish* (N20) (2017) and *Evidence of Being Here: Beginning in Havana* (N27) (2018). In 2015, he received the Harper Lee Award for lifetime achievement in literature.



"Homage 8144a" by Irene Mamiye

*"One must not think slightingly of the paradoxical ... for the paradox is the source of the thinker's passion, and the thinker without a paradox is like a lover without feeling: a paltry mediocrity."*

— Søren Kierkegaard