

## **Polarities: Human Limitation and Communal Aspiration**

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This past spring, one of my close colleagues whom I've known since Rabbinical School days had the sad privilege of officiating at the funeral of his step-father. However, as is often the case at funerals, the sadness and loss was somewhat softened by the inspiring moments that were shared in a range of eulogies by his step-father's friends and colleagues. It so happens that my friend's step-father had been a rocket scientist who had worked on the early efforts to develop technology that would make human space travel possible and a number of people who spoke at the funeral were retired members of this same historic group.

One of these colleagues from those early days got up to speak and shared an anecdote about my friend's step father that struck my friend as particularly meaningful. Apparently, whenever someone would find out about the work his step father had done in the space program, they would frequently express their amazement and wonder how it was that they had been able to make so much progress in such a short period of time on a task with so many difficult problems to solve. He always had a direct and unhesitant response to this question. The secret, he would say, was that they were not afraid to make mistakes.

This notion that the willingness to make mistakes can be a tremendous catalyst for learning is not new. Many great thinkers and doers have expressed similar sentiments on this topic. For instance, Albert Einstein is quoted as saying, "The only sure way to avoid making mistakes is to have no new ideas," and "Anyone who has never made a mistake has never tried anything new." This positive disposition towards mistakes has also been trumpeted in much of the research on top performing companies and organizations.

It seems that in organizations where a mistake is viewed only in a negative way, staff members tend to refrain from reporting their mistakes and very often, this secrecy leads to much more

serious negative consequences for the organization down the line. But in organizations where mistakes are seen as a natural part of the learning process for individuals and for the organization as a whole, employees are not fearful of reporting their mistakes and as a result, the organization receives a number of benefits.

The first of these is that the consequences of the mistake can be addressed in a more direct way, thereby minimizing any negative impact that might be occurring. But there are also situations where a mistake can actually lead to new insights that end up making a significant positive contribution to the functioning of the organization going forward.

This perspective is also found in our own religious tradition. Biblically, one has to look very hard to find any personage who is not depicted at one point or another as having veered from the expected path of unadulterated righteousness. Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, the list could go on and on.

It's true that the Bible's message is probably not intended to encourage us to do our own experimenting in this way, but the fact that the spiritual heroes and heroines of our people all have major mistakes attached to their biographies implies a certain kind of recognition that part of what makes these characters worthy of our admiration is the very fact that they dealt with the consequences of their decisions and were able to grow from the experience.

Even with all of this philosophical, pragmatic and religious support for the normalcy and even the potential usefulness of the chaos that making mistakes can sometimes create, it seems that this mistake-friendly attitude is still surprisingly rare in much of the organizational world, perhaps most strikingly and for our purposes, most importantly, in that particular corner of the organizational world occupied by religious communities.

It has been noted by many who study contemporary religious institutions that religious communities face some unique challenges when dealing with the reality of human fallibility. This may initially sound surprising or counter-intuitive since so much of religious life and

language is geared towards acknowledging, and helping people contend with, the many levels of imperfection in our world, including our own behavior and that of others.

Yet, at the same time, religious communities are also widely considered the guardians of the deepest virtues of the human spirit and consciously aspire to embody these virtues within the collective life of the institution.

In the face of this powerful idealistic side of religious communities, the inevitable missteps or moments of blindness, or unexpected sharp words that do come about, often engender a greater degree of shock and disappointment on the part of community members than would be the case in other contexts. And yet, at the same time most members of religious communities would certainly embrace the notion that everyone has their fallibilities and blind spots, and would insist that their community is meant for all who wish to be involved.

This combination of commitments that exists within religious communities where there is both empathy for human limitation at the level of the individual, and also aspiration towards an almost messianic ideal at the level of the collective, is known in the literature of organizational dynamics, as a polarity. Polarities are pairs of values or commitments within an institution that both balance one another and can also feel as if they are in tension with one another. There are often vocal sub-groups that push for emphasis on one pole at the expense of the other, but the reality is that if the community tilts too strongly in either direction, it will likely result in institutional imbalance and ill health. In fact, both ends of the polarity need to be recognized and nurtured in order for the organization to flourish.

One clear example from the life of many religious communities is the polarity of tradition and innovation. To put this into terms with which we are familiar, when someone comes forward with an idea for a new Shabbat service format, or a new adult education program, do we tend to see that as a threat to what is reliable and familiar, or do we tend to see it as an opportunity to create excitement and stretch ourselves in important ways? As with all polarities, both perspectives hold pieces of truth and need to be acknowledged. The same could be said for

other common congregational polarities such as in reach vs outreach or leadership vs. management.

However, the polarity we are focusing on here may be the most fundamental polarity that exists within religious communities. We have our implicit and explicit communal ideals on one hand and empathy with human imperfection in both abstract and concrete terms on the other. This polarity can get activated in a number of different ways.

When conflict erupts over two equally important communal values, that situation itself can feel to some like a betrayal of the mission of the religious community, in other words, a collective mistake that requires redress and resolution at the soonest possible moment. In this context, the entire membership may be seen as bearing responsibility for the deviation from its stated commitments.

Or when there is a perception that a particular individual or group of individuals has acted in ways that are seen as contrary to the accepted values and spirit of the community. Or simply when someone fails to follow through on a commitment, or makes a choice that some see as ill-considered. What we ideally want to be able to do in these situations is hold on to both ends of the polarity as we work towards a thoughtful and healthy response. What does it look like to do this?

We must strive both to honor and affirm the inspiring vision that we have set for ourselves and simultaneously, we must continue to embrace the awareness that each one of us will, at one time or another, in one way or another, fail to live up to that very same vision. If we let go of either end of this polarity, we risk doing damage to one another and to the community as a whole. If we hold on only to the pole of vision and values, we risk slipping into condemnation and self-righteousness, and if we hold on only to the pole of empathy and compassion for human imperfection, we risk making a mockery of our highest aspirations.

This is, as we all know, a pretty tall order. But isn't this really the heart of what religious community is all about?

It is definitely wonderful and energizing when we experience success and can celebrate with one another, and we should be thankful for the many opportunities we have to do so, but I think the true measure of who we are together is how we handle one another when things are not going smoothly.

Do we engage each other in conversation around our differences, or do we pull back into enclaves that only reinforce our own perspectives? Do we assume that we have all of the relevant information, or do we cultivate our curiosity and seek out elements of context that may shine new light on thinking or behavior that strike us as problematic? And, if we attempt to give constructive feedback to one another, how careful are we about the timing, language and affect of our delivery? After all, the sages of the Talmud said on more than one occasion that the skills of giving and receiving feedback are two of the rarest and most difficult to develop among the human virtues.

Clearly, all of us are in process with each of these challenges, but for me, **this is** the most important process for us to engage in and work on, more so than any other dimension of our communal activity.

I would like to suggest several building blocks that could serve us in our continued forward movement on this front.

The first thing is to affirm, and I think many of us already do, that there is nothing inherently wrong with, or unbecoming about conflict inside a religious community. In fact, as long as it is coming from a respectful place, it is healthy and life-giving and helps us all to grasp a broader range of what is real and what is important.

Secondly, I think we each have the obligation to work on our own awareness of the dignity and vulnerability that reside equally within ourselves and within every other member of our community.

Rabbi Jeff mentioned this morning the special bookmarks we handed out with the dual message from the Hasidic sage Reb Simcha Bunam that we are all both highly exalted beings and at the same time, nothing but dust and ashes. And here we have another polarity! The trick is to discern when the correct time is to focus on each of those identities. Simcha Bunam taught that most of us tend to focus on the opposite of what we really need to hear in the moment. When we are feeling down, we often get sucked into feeling even worse, and when we're feeling like the world is our oyster, we are drawn to reinforcing that experience rather than balancing it out with its polar twin. Practicing seeing ourselves and one another as embodying both of these dimensions will go a long way towards strengthening our capacity to deal constructively with community turbulence when it arises.

Finally, I think we can also take a page from the book of Albert Einstein and the aerospace engineers and allow ourselves to see the possibility of learning that can take place when our respective human fallibility is on display. There can be learning for those who may be entrapped for a moment in their own limitations and there can be learning for the community as a whole, if we have the discipline and the awareness to approach one another from a place that stays connected to both sides of the polarity, to empathy and humility and to mutual accountability.

I feel truly honored and blessed to be walking this precious and challenging road of community with all of you and I look forward to experiencing the many ways that we will continue to gift one another with this opportunity to grow individually and collectively, as we aim for the moon and beyond, towards the potential of who we sense can become.

Good Yuntif, Gmar Hatimah tovah and Shabbat Shalom