

## AND....connecting worlds

Rosh Hashanah 5778, September 22, 2017

Well, it had to be on a Monday or Tuesday or Wednesday – I have yet to succeed, or even try a NYTimes Crossword puzzle on Thursday or beyond...

So, 30 down: good-news-to-bad-news transition:

Do you get it? I did – right away!, because I had been thinking already about this talk! The answer to: good-news-to-bad-news transition? BUT

*And why had I been thinking about it already? Because I have been noticing the word BUT as the connector in too many of my sentences and story-tellings recently. So, I've been listening to myself and listening to others. I started asking around....*

1. One friend remembered always being aware of family conversations her whole lifetime – that involved continual **no, but** in almost every dinner table conversation. She always thought that was the way 'smart' people discussed!
2. And a very clever wordsmith friend asked, "Isn't it all really one question, continually reverberating through every conversation? : **BUT** WHAT ABOUT ME???"
3. And one more: when I asked the congregation for their AND/BUT personal quips, wonderful Janet Buchwald answered my query, with: Ha! now ask me to remember two parts of a sentence that I *didn't* connect with a 'but'. *That* would be a challenge :)

Words are important. They do matter. As Rabbi Ed Feld teaches, when describing his translation of the word, “no-rah” – awesome!, in his new Mahzor, “we Jews take words very seriously. Jews have been called The People of the Book, but in fact we are the People of the Word. And words matter.”

I ask myself and you, of course: Why is that little word, ‘but’ (sorry to keep saying it over and over in the next 10 minutes, BUT that’s the topic!)...so comfortable for us – even more so than the equally small word, AND? It seems that we more easily focus on what is missing rather than what is working. What is it about separation, distinction, comparison that fits our psyche more easily than connection, integration and ...yes, the mysterious paradox of holding this AND this simultaneously, in each mysterious breath?

So, that’s the issue for today: connecting words and worlds with BUT/AND (show hands) and the teaching to be found in choosing between...

Before I share with you some teachings on relationship, self-awareness, and yes, God, that come from these two three letter words, I’d like to bring you more fully into the conversation by offering you a little time to consider usage and meaning:

(sheet for discussion at end of talk)

You have a sheet with some wonderful samples of ...BUT sentences – use them as triggers to discuss the power, meaning of these words, AND and BUT...Read the sentences (maybe just need one!) to read aloud to each other. It might be fun to look and analyze and change one word for the other in the samples given...or to remember your own example from your own experience:

And ask:

What do I learn from the sentence and its speaker as it is written?

How do I feel – in body and spirit – when hearing the BUT sentence?

Does anything change in meaning or awareness when I replace the BUT with an AND?

(6 minutes to study, discuss)

Thank you all. We have time for just 4 mini-awarenesses that came from your study together. (ask...)

When I began to research the use of these two words, I discovered, not surprisingly to many of you, that the world of AND/ BUT in modern learning and teaching has been garnering public attention in recent years.

**From the coaching world:** A great blog by coach Judy Elkin is called AND: She writes: It seems that little word, BUT, connecting two parts of a sentence, seems to negate the first part of the statement. With a small adjustment, from but to and, we can find a big difference in our attitude and perspective, drawing attention to our capacity to increase positivity and possibility in our lives.”

We tend to choose a side and live there. Anything before the BUT is lost to oblivion. BUT shrinks and grudges; AND amplifies and allows. (look at your sheets)...

BUT denies one half of your awareness. AND allows both sides of the statement to be true and to put us in the world of simultaneous existence, acknowledging and even valuing two truths at once. By changing this simple wording you can remove

some of the limiting factors that keep us from growing personally and collectively.

**From the business/social world:**

When you're trying to give good feedback, you can often negate your efforts by adding a "but" after a positive statement. One congregant's experience of this: I always thought that he made the best salads, but then I realized his salads taste great because I didn't have to make them. By using "and" instead, you can avoid someone getting defensive or vulnerable.

Better to frame your critique as redirection rather than make it sound like whatever good thing you mentioned has a failing coming right behind...

And it's not all about general business or social practice. We, in this community, are living with BUT and AND in our definition of ourselves as a congregation. We have continued to thrive for 17 years now with open-hearted leadership and caring from our Rabbi Thomas, BUT it's time to move forward. Meaning?? Well, for example, we have a vibrant older population that wants our attention, our teaching, and our guidance toward deeper community connection, social action, and spiritual growth. We have new young families entering our doorways and we want more to join us. They want to grow with their children, create community and develop a congregation that meets their growing family needs.

- A. Loyalty and devotion to all we have been **but** opening to new directions and definitions of self, congregation, and Judaism?

B. Loyalty and devotion to all we have been AND opening to new directions and definitions of self, congregation, and Judaism?

Can we hold both teachings with an open-hearted, open-minded AND? It is essential and....hard.

For after all, there will always be challenges. After all, AND is good, **but** not THAT good!

It's all relational, yes – whether you are working with others, living with another, praying with others – we are being taught that negating the 'other' parts of your connecting world doesn't help resolve a problem and can build up resentment with more separation and conflict growing.

And the building of AND-awareness is a vital factor in your relationship with yourself: We are complex beings with complex psyches, needing to learn to hold more than one feeling at a time. We CAN and DO feel frustration and love at the same time. We can allow ourselves to own all aspects of ourselves, even when they seem to conflict with one another. Taking ownership and accepting our range of feelings – possibly even celebrating this YES and that NO can lead to a greater freedom and happiness.

This community and many of its individual members have been growing and working with the challenges of middot practice – acknowledging the wide array of valuable soul traits that comprise our hearts and minds and cultivating qualities that can lead us to such freedom and happiness. Our wonderful Lisa Goodman suggested one example of living with the balance of different "ANDS in our middot/soul traits practice: "(paraphrase)..working with Gevurah, the strength of "should" in our actions, needs the continuing balance of chesed/compassion, in order to keep open options and possibilities within any action we take." Moving from

the 'but' of closed determinations to the 'and' of making loving and open-hearted choices is not-easy-practice and crucial for every day of our lives.

There is much gray area to be found in the world of "and", within our own selves. It allows, and even demands as we move into mindful awareness, that we have to dig deeper to figure out how we feel about things, what our actual motivations are. We open ourselves to exploration, valuing the first truth just as much as the second.

**And how do we come to value these truths? Hopefully, by following the trajectory from Relationship to others in the world; relationship to self AND now relationship to God....**the choice of words and meaning and mindful awareness matter here as well.

As I've been listening to conversations recently, I've also noticed more carefully our sacred word, and the AND/V is everywhere to be found. - Our Torah, our classic texts, and our liturgy - filled, filled with AND,(V) even when the AND denotes contrary ideas.

You roll away light before darkness **and** darkness before light;

Guard my tongue from evil...**and** to those who curse me may my soul be silent as the dust.

From the beautiful portion, Nitzvavim, just re-studied last week:

***R'eh natati lifanecha hayom et Hachayim v'et hatov; v'et ha mavet, v'et harah... u'va'charta ba'chayim***

See! I set before you today Life **and** Good **and** Death **and** Evil...

**And** choose life!

And and and....choosing, discerning, celebrating the possibilities of AND – our work in the world.

And it is at this point that my friends' question: BUT What About me? can be addressed in its spiritual dimension:

For our texts and teachers do give us "Ach/BUT" ...

In the middle of many ANDS/'vav's in the portion, Ki Tissa...the Isarelites are learning about how to build a tabernacle, how to array fragrances, how to count their population, how to....AND, And, And...

A sentence jumps out: ***'Ach et shab'totai tishmoru ki ot hee baynee u'vianaychem l'dorotaychem...***"

BUT my Shabbats you will keep/guard/protect...It is a sign between Me and you for all generations.

A stop sign! A point of separation clearly held out for us: do all this, hold all the varied teachings in your heart and in your practice...BUT know and remember deep, deep truths that are the core of your being and the collective being of your people. There are bottom lines that, as we learn and grow, do make us the discerning beings we are gifted to be – by God.

AND (v)/BUT (Ach)...In the holy paradox of truth-searching, how can they live together? Perhaps, in the mystery of existence, we are not the ultimate holder of the power of AND. We champion the But, AND yet it is God who is the ultimate holder of AND.

Rabbi David Jaffe offers a beautiful and valuable teaching exemplifying the fullness and complexity of this concept:

In Breshit 1:31, after the setting of creation of this, our world, for us and with us in it – after all the varieties of living things and humans are created: God said: 'V'hineh tov m'od"...and behold! It is very good. Commentators asked: why the "v" – the AND here? We easily could read: Behold! It is very good. Why "V"? And they consider and teach us so brilliantly: The "v"/and allows for both the yetzer tov (good inclination) and the yetzer harah

(evil inclination) to both be blessed by God as good! So, perhaps at the beginning of all things, time and space, we were one, integrated soul – and all the potential directions, not labeled ‘evil’ or ‘good’ were all one, one yetzer, given us by God...a yetzer of life and energy and choosing and discerning and – of free will. And yet we have, throughout the lifetime of humanity, bifurcated those two inclinations and struggle through every lifetime on the planet – for dominion, one inclination over the other continually adding in “BUT” ...BUT, in this teaching, all the possibilities, all the inclinations are good, and FOR GOOD, held by Godliness and Oneness.

Noticing and challenging the ‘but’ in our sentences – such a simple and impossible act – can bring us a taste of that world before and perhaps of a world that is always coming, when we can hold the contradictions and the questions and the fears and the delights as all good – seeing through the eyes of this Mystery of Unity.

Our religion, our practice is about connecting the two halves of the spiritual sentences we encounter along our spiritual journey with AND: the two pockets of centrality and meaninglessness; the inclinations that call for our independence and our surrendering; and the finality of death with the wonder of soul as eternal breath of God. Whew! It is learning to embrace holy paradox: that which is just beyond or always beyond our own opinion or thought – and what we forever hope to learn: how to accept the truth of this AND this in one moment.

Listen to this beautiful poem/teaching from the Lubavitcher Rebbe:

**GOD MADE GOD’S WORLD OF CONTRADICTIONS, OPPOSITES  
THAT COMBINE AS ONE.**

AT THEIR NEXUS, A WORLD IS FORMED. NEITHER CAN EXIST WITHOUT THE OTHER, ALL FUNCTION TOGETHER AS A SINGLE WHOLE.

BEING AND NOT BEING

INFINITY AND FINITUDE

LIGHT AND DARKNESS

FORM AND MATTER

QUANTITY AND QUALITY

TOTALITY AND DETAIL

COMMUNITY AND INDIVIDUAL

GIVING AND WITHHOLDING.

PARADOX IS OUR WINDOW TO BEYOND.

Now, perhaps this step into the holiness of paradox – of realizing that, ultimately, everything is AND within the domain of Oneness and wholeness that is ours to yearn for...is too much to consider as we question how to tell a student think they're great BUT they are not practicing enough to learn their portion! or how to accept that we so want to repair the world BUT feel such a desire to run away to a nearby Fiji island and leave it all behind.

Yet, however, with all that, AND: we can practice. The gift given of goodness and hope and possibility rests with our learning to say AND.

So, begin with a sentence: one from our list, one you've heard today, one you'll probably hear in a conversation in the next day

or so. Turn the balance from BUT to AND and see how it feels. And then, in the coming week:

- listen to a friend tell you a tale and gently, gently, say ...say that with AND instead of BUT.
- Be mindful of your own language. When you give your thoughts, opinions and hear the BUT word emerging, try pausing, and say (in your heart or out loud!), let me try that with an AND instead. How does that feel in your body/in your heart? And what is the response you notice?

There is a time for everything under the sun: All ANDs: a time to buildup AND a time to tear down; a time to DANCE AND a time to mourn; A time to cast away stones AND a time to gather stones together....Holy gorgeous paradox, beyond our understanding, and yet holdable with the idea of AND. May we continue the lifelong process of mindful exercise in each moment to serve with holiness and connection and to choose AND.

Sing: u'vacharta ba'chayim

Choose life, choose life