

Living in tension: When to stand firm, and when to compromise?
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Life can be complicated. Let me share some wisdom to help us find our way.

Life's a game of give and take.

BUT

Don't give an inch.

The pen is mightier than the sword.

BUT

Actions speak louder than words.

Good things come to those who wait.

BUT

If not now, when?

Out of sight, out of mind.

BUT

Absence makes the heart grow fonder.

Many hands make light work.

BUT

Too many cooks spoil the pot.

These contradictory adages articulate some of the many tensions that confront us daily. We spend our days wondering: Am I ordinary or extraordinary? Should I lead or follow? Do I speak up or remain silent? Should I try again or move on? Do I try to fit in or stand out? The tensions always exist and will not go away. The goal is finding the right balance.

The older I get, the better I understand that more is about context and less is absolute. Sometimes at home too many cooks do spoil the pot. And equally sometimes at home, many hands do make light work. It all depends on whether my wife Laura finds me in her way (usually) or helpful to her that day!

The answer often is not 'in the middle.' The answer is often, Sometimes this, sometimes that. It really depends. And how do we know which is called for? I'm not sure, so I ask Laura!

Today I want to look closely at the tension between compromise and not giving an inch, flexibility and rigidity. This is always worth thinking about, as individually we make choices about this daily. But these issues are at the fore today societally in the peak of election seasons. Israelis and fellow Zionists were stressed to the max this week with the third hard-fought Israeli national elections in under a year. And millions of Americans voted this week in the Super Tuesday elections, as we in Illinois prepare to vote in primary elections in ten days. There's a lot of stress and tension here and now. I make this point not to comment on the elections but to

Speak about something important that runs beneath them: the tension between, When should I compromise? and When should I not give an inch?

Do you know what would really help us all right now? A Rinat Shabbat Friday night service would really center us, right Rabbi Schwab? Come back in two weeks for that. But we do have Purim next week, which will be awesome.

Speaking of tensions, Purim is packed with them. The holiday is riotously fun but also deathly serious. It highlights concealing our identities but also unabashedly letting them shine forth. Megillat Esther, the Scroll of Esther we read at nighttime and daytime, makes the case for bending. And for standing firm.

Would you rather your daughters emulate Queen Vashti or Queen Esther? The reigning queen to King Ahashverosh, Vashti is told to show off to the King and his friends wearing her royal crown - only her royal crown. Vashti refuses to submit to her drunken husband and does not show. Her defiance later won her respect from American feminist leaders. Yet do you know any girls who ever dressed up as Queen Vashti on Purim? Vashti made her stand, was likely killed, and had no more influence on the scene. Like porcelain, her rigidity caused her to shatter. Obviously Vashti was in a lose-lose situation, and I'm not advocating that she submit to the King's gross pleasures. I'm pointing out that Vashti's adamance came at a very high cost.

Meanwhile, Esther begins the story doing what others tell her to do. Until Chapter 4 she makes every compromise. She gives in. She listens to her Uncle Mordechai and enters a beauty contest whose prize is winning a life with the drunken fool King Ahashverosh. She conceals her religion and her identity.

And then Chapter 4 happens. Mordechai frightens her into not compromising on the safety of the Jewish people. She risks her life and boldly confronts the king, publicly declaring her Jewish identity: "Let my life be given me at my petition and my people at my request. For we are sold, I and my people to be destroyed, to be killed, and to perish" (7:3,4). Esther's adamance moves the king and inspires readers ever since. That's why I believe the Book is called Megillat Esther and not Megillat Mordechai. Though Mordechai had the idea, he was managing from the dugout while only Esther was on the field, in the batter's box with everything on the line.

So the Book of Esther tells us that not giving an inch fails - in the case of Vashti - and succeeds - in Esther's case. That sounds like life itself. Sometimes it's this, other times it's that.

When I was a Rosh Eidah at Camp Ramah I was managing a team of counselors and had to make decisions like the following: Could one staff member take an extra morning off to go to town with their friends who were visiting from out of town? I was usually one to say Yes, and sometimes this worked. The counselor saw this as a recognition of their hard work, and they got a much-needed break. Yet other times, my flexibility backfired. The counselor came back later than they were supposed to and it caused friction among other staff members. It just depended.

Wrong are people who slam any compromise as weakness. Incorrect are those who label any refusal to give as stubbornness. Compromise is not always a defect, neither is it always virtuous.

And not giving an inch, likewise, is not always bad, neither is it always good. It just depends. But being aware of this tension gives us some clarity. It allows us to see that sometimes one is called for, at other times, the other. We must always be aware that we have a choice.

Judaism heightens our awareness of living in between tensions. Let me give two examples.

The first is from the Hasidic rabbi Simcha Bunim of Pesischa. He had a custom of keeping one note in each of his pockets. In one it said, "For my sake the world was created." And in the other it said, "I am but dust and ashes." Whenever he was feeling self-centered, he read the note that he was but dust and ashes. It checked his ego and centered him. And whenever he was feeling low, he read the note that G-d created *him*. This pick-me-up centered him. These notes allowed him to more or less maintain a balanced approach to living.

I think this is really beautiful. I once had a keychain with these two phrases on both sides.

The second is a famous saying from the Sage Hillel in Pirkei Avot (1:14). Hillel says, "*Im Ein Ani Li, Mi Li? UkSheAni L'Atzmi Mah Ani? V'Im Lo Achshav, Eimatai?*" If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I care only about myself, what am I? And if not now, when?"

Let's look carefully at the first two phrases in this Mishna and see the tension. "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I care only about myself, what am I?" The first phrase highlights the self over all others, which is essential for functioning in the world. While the second phrase emphasizes the group ahead of the self, which is essential for having a society that cares for others. Both are correct, and both are called for at different times.

Rabbi Yitz Greenberg offers sage advice on this maxim from Hillel. Literally, his book is called "Sage Advice"! He writes, "Looking out *only* for oneself is selfish. Such behavior reduces both one's standards of ethical behavior and his quality of life. Hillel affirms building on self-interest and family attachment while expanding the circle of responsibility and care to wider and wider circles. 'Charity begins at home' but then it should extend outward. In sum, the key to moral behavior is balance; self-interest, yes; self-centeredness, no."

I think the same can be said for flexibility and rigidity; the key behavior is balance.

When we feel torn between two poles, each pulling us in opposite directions, let's move the decision from our guts to our heads. Let's articulate our values and talk it out with a friend. By doing so, we will be closer to answering questions to which we thought there was no answer.

Shabbat Shalom.