

Havdalah – Dichotomies

One of the more prominent features of Jewish law is its dichotomies. You are either pure or impure, your food is either kosher or non-kosher, any action of yours is either permissible or forbidden, you're either a Jew or a Goy, you are either a believer or a heretic. This is most apparent in the traditional havdalah (end of sabbath) ceremony, which ends by blessing "He who distinguishes between holy and unholy, between light and darkness, between Israel and the nations, between the six days of the week and the Sabbath..."

As many thinking people, I am disturbed by black and white dichotomies. As comforting as it is to know where one stands in any particular instance, most situations fall under the Rabbinic legal category of ספק (uncertainty). What should one do when one encounters a situation in which the law code we choose to follow is unclear or deficient? A famous rabbinic maxim, which has sadly fallen into disuse in Israel's polarized society, is דרך ארץ קדמה לתורה – "Moral conduct supersedes Torah" (or more generally law). Each of us should become a moral philosopher, judging our everyday conduct by our internal compass, and charting our own courses. My own havdalah liturgy relates to the problems of dichotomous thinking, and I present a snippet of it, first in the English translation, then in the original Hebrew.

A paeon to pain
For without it there is no joy
Better that we hold one another
until the seizure passes

I fear
being splayed betwixt imperatives
revolving manically, thoughtlessly
tied to poles

But the middle, the abyss in between
I avoid it, it is uncertain unclean
I think
And thus I continue to hop in agony
Hoping you are with me

הבדלה בין הבתרים

ושבחתני אני את הפאב
אשר בלעדיו אין שמחה
טוב אשר נאחז זה בזה
ובזה תניחי את ידך עלי

נראתי מן הקטבים
נקרעתי בין גזרות בתריהם
האחים הם,
שהאחד מת ורעו מיבם!?

אך האמצע, האין, בין הבתרים,
הוא אבי אבות הטמאה
היא אם כל הקבלים
ולכן עודני פוסח על שני הסעיפים
אני מקוה שתהיי אתי למרות היסורים