

Article

Narrativism and the Unity of Opposites: Theory, Practice, and Exegesis: A Study of Three Stories from the Talmud

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Abstract: In this article, we pursue a double mission: First, we will demonstrate the unique nature of dynamic group facilitation as it emerges from the concept of the unity of opposites and its relation to situations of conflict, as well as the pedagogical challenges that teachers face in the classroom. This approach underlines the value of a more dialogical and dynamic understanding of the intricate networks of relationships that take place between students and with a teacher at any given moment in a classroom situation. Second, we will examine three Talmudic midrashim that focus on conflict and reconciliation through the lens of facilitation, while casting light on the theology behind the facilitation method and its hermeneutic power. Again, this approach to the interpretation of these texts allows them to emerge as valuable not only to the learning process, but also to the dynamics of interaction that saturate the learning situation. To this end, we will highlight the links and differences between two styles of facilitation—the narrative and the unity of opposites. These links and differences will help us illuminate the similarities and differences between the facilitation processes they employ. Because (1) the notion of exegesis is strongly embedded in narrative theory; (2) theology has deep roots in the concept of the unity of opposites; and (3) both styles address conflict and its resolution, in the second part of this article, we take the insights of the narrative and unity of opposites approaches and juxtapose them as hermeneutic tools for reading three related Talmudic midrashim that focus on conflict and reconciliation. In this way, we hope to exemplify how the different approaches can be applied to the design of the different facilitation styles, both in conflict dialogue groups and as a lens through which we can read these seminal tales that have shaped consciousness, identity, and the attitude towards the culture of debate in Judaism.

Keywords: dynamic group; facilitation; Midrash; talking peace

1. Introduction

This article has two purposes: 1. to present the concept of “the unity of opposites” as the grounds of a unique approach to dynamic group facilitation, particularly in the context of conflict resolution, while comparing it to the more familiar narrativist approach; 2. To read three Talmudic stories that focus on conflict and reconciliation through the lens of facilitation, which will help clarify the theological and philosophical positions that ground the different facilitation methods and their hermeneutic power.

To this end, we will compare and contrast two theoretical approaches to facilitation—the narrativist approach and the unity of opposites approach. These commonalities and contrasts will give us a conceptual foundation for comparing the different methods and processes of facilitation that arise in each. The second part of this paper takes the insights of each approach and makes use of them to

interpret three related Talmudic stories that focus on conflict and reconciliation. The grounds for using these approaches to facilitation as exegetical tools in interpreting religious texts are threefold: (1) the notion of exegesis is strongly embedded in narrative theory; (2) the concept of the unity of opposites has deep theological roots; and (3) both approaches address conflict and its resolution.

Although we describe a few examples of the authors' pedagogical practices and integrate a few quotes from participants, this paper does not contain any type of empirical research. The methodology used is reflective and hermeneutical rather than empirical¹. We seek to introduce the reader to the conceptual models that undergird the authors' practice while situating it in the relevant literature.

We then hermeneutically re-engage ancient Jewish texts with the intention of shedding new light on contemporary educational practices and/or challenges. We believe that such critical and creative interpretation of ancient texts is a landmark of Jewish educational thought. The readings that ensue will make manifest the similarities and differences between the two approaches and illuminate how each approach generates a method of facilitation for dialogue groups in conflict situations while also leads us to different understandings of these foundational stories, which shape the consciousness and culture of dispute in Judaism.

2. The Narrativist Method

Dynamic encounters generally seek to find common ground between the parties in conflict and, from it, to arrive at some sort of compromise or acceptance between the participants². Different approaches can be included under this broad umbrella. Some of them employ a *group representational narrative* and invite the participants to speak as representatives of their identity group, so that they do not speak as individuals but for the collective. The assumption is that human beings are products of the group or community with which they are affiliated³.

The *anti-stereotype approach*, derived from the previous one, focuses on reducing the sense of threat and alienation each group experiences with regard to the other group, which is derived from their prejudices. These prejudices are the result of their lack of prior acquaintance with the other side and their exposure to the stereotypes of the other that prevail in their own communities, in public discourse, and/or in the media. Facilitated group encounters of this type are initiated by bringing the different affinity groups into contact with one other, and then, compromise within the group is attempted, while ignoring or shunting aside whatever might subvert that compromise⁴.

In contrast to a narrativist approach founded on group affinity of one sort or another, the *narrativist approach* developed in the 1970s by White and Epston endeavors to uncover the different narratives of the participants as *individuals*⁵. In accordance with its focus on subjectivity, this approach does not presume to identify a general truth, nor does it acknowledge any kind of panhuman unity that would be diminished if a voice is not heard. The goal of the narrativist approach is to enable coexistence and to generate a space for harmonious interpersonal and intergroup connections.

This approach can be used for both individual and group facilitation. For an individual, the subject tells his or her life story or recounts some unresolved dilemma that troubles him. In this manner, the story they tell themselves about themselves is revealed and the therapist or narrative facilitator writes it down and reads it back aloud, allowing the subject to hear what she said. The premise is that during their lives, people construct life stories that include narratives that cause them great distress. The followers of this narrativist approach hold that telling one's story is not the same as having it told

¹ Thus, at no point in this article do we seek to study, analyze, and/or evaluate participants' learning and experience, which would have required traditional empirical research.

² See, for example, "The Identity Space" (Heb.) in (Ben Rafael and Chaim 2006, pp. 111–16).

³ The intergroup approach developed at Neve Shalom is a prominent example of this approach. See (Halabi and Sonnenschein 2006, pp. 47–58).

⁴ See, for example, the contact theory approach, in (Allport 1960, pp. 301–10). See also criticism of such approaches in (Shulov-Barkan 1993, p. 15).

⁵ (White and Epston 1990).

to you by another person⁶. The process continues with the subject generating various alternatives for the story's conclusion (not all of them necessarily positive). This allows the subject to hear alternative possibilities; again, the premise is that there is no single correct version of the patient's life story, making possible alternative constructions of it (reconstructed or re-authored stories) that are more positive for him or her.

When this approach is used in a group setting, the facilitator asks each member of the group to tell his individual story. Each story is then analyzed by the group as a whole. This procedure allows the group members to understand and respect the narrative they have heard and enables the members of the group who are in conflict to appreciate that the whole truth is not to be found exclusively with them. In this manner, sensitivity to the other's language and story can emerge.

This narrativist method has a number of premises. First, the shape of a person's life and values has a deep effect on the way that he or she understands reality. This understanding affects the shape of that life in a continuous feedback loop. Second, a space is created so that he or she can step back (with the help of the facilitator, therapist, or group) and examine the story. Third, the alternate endings permit the subject to have a new perspective on himself. Fourth, the narrator's exposure to alternative stories can change how he sees his own (Bar-On and Kassem 2004; Bar-On and Litvak-Hirsch 2007). Based on these premises it can be seen how the reshaping of the way that one tells one's story can reshape, in turn, the way that one lives and perceives the world and other people.

2.1. Implementation of the Narrativist Approach in Conflict Resolution

Dialogue groups employing the narrativist approach began in Israel with the TRT ("To Reflect and Trust") group, led by Dan Bar-On, which brought the children of Holocaust survivors face to face with the children of the perpetrators. As meetings continued, various narrative tools were developed to make this fraught encounter possible (Albeck et al. 2002). Later, these tools were employed for encounters between Jews and Arabs and other groups in conflict. Dialogue groups using the narrativist method were also developed by organizations such as PRIME,⁷ aided by Bar-On (2006) and Adwan and Bar-On (2001). They were later joined by others, including Shifra Sagy, who directed the group's research project on narratives (Sagy et al. 2002b, pp. 41–58; Sagy 2017). One of the best-known outcomes of this approach in Israel is the creation of a historical account of Israel/Palestine composed of different narratives. The group, which was comprised of Israeli and Palestinian history teachers, ultimately produced a high school textbook⁸. The book, which addresses the 1948 war and the intersection of the Israeli narrative of the establishment of the state with the Palestinian narrative of the *Nakba* (Einy-Alhadeff 2008a⁹; Naveh 2011), exemplifies the assertion that there is no single "truth" and no way to uncover an all-inclusive truth; rather, it is crucial that each side be able to recount its own truth with regard to the events that all experienced but in different ways.

This approach was also applied in an Israeli–Palestinian group (Sagy et al. 2002a), established and led by Shifra Sagy, which concluded with a joint trip to Poland and Auschwitz. It also began with

⁶ It is important to emphasize, however, that it is not the therapist or facilitator who provides the knowledge necessary for treatment or resolution. It must come from the subject, and the therapist's role is to aid him or her in discovering it by providing an empathetic ear and a therapeutic connection (Omer and Alon 1997; Bronsky 2014).

⁷ "An international network of professional healthcare educators, committed to integrating rigorous science and compassionate care for the whole person. PRIME encourages and supports healthcare professionals to practise and teach sound scientific knowledge and clinical skills, to consider the effects of illness on the whole person—body, mind and spirit—and to provide care with integrity and generous compassion" (<https://www.prime-international.org/home.htm>)

⁸ Eyal Naveh and Adnan Massallam were the leaders of the project, which produced a textbook written by Dan Bar-On and Sami Adwan, *Lilmod et HaNarativ HaHistori Shel HaAher: Palestinim veYisre'elim* [Studying the other side's narrative] (Bar-On and Adwan 2009). Also involved was the Georg-Eckert-Institut in Braunschweig, Germany. The book, similar to the narrativist method described here, is made up of two narratives of the history of Zionism and the Palestinian *Nakba* and insists that a deep familiarity with the different narratives is the basis for forging good relations with the other, by means of a passage from conflict to conciliation. (Bar-On 2006, 2008; Naveh and Yogeve 2002; Adwan and Firer 1997, 1999, 2000; Adwan and Bar-On 2004). The textbook was rejected by the Israeli Education Ministry (Ben-Meir 2010).

⁹ See the extensive bibliography there.

the narration of the members' stories and ended with analysis of each story and its reflection back to its teller.

2.2. The Narrative Dynamic and Its Philosophical Implications

The narrativist approach is based on a liberal, pluralistic, and postmodern outlook and the understanding that “what really happened” is not as important as the nature of the story that people tell themselves and others about what happened. The advocates of this approach attack the idea that there is a single “truth” and in fact posit that unequivocal “truth” generates conflict.

Furthermore, they hold that acquaintance with the other's narrative dissolves ideological conflict and breaks down absolute ideological truths into narrative and subjective points of view about the conflict (Einy-Alhadeff 2008b)¹⁰. The deconstruction of the truth is accomplished by attending to the different “truths”. Once they are exposed to multiple narratives of truth, the members of the group come to the realization that everything is relative; the ideal of universal truth dissipates, and the attitude towards the truth of each speaker changes. According to Paran and Shalif (Paran and Shalif 2007; Shalif et al. 2007), the narrativist approach illuminates the extent to which the meaning assigned to a story is influenced by the norms and thought patterns of the society and culture in which one lives. The expectation that one will respect the other's truths follows as a matter of course.

2.3. The Unity of Opposites

The “unity of opposites” approach (Rosenak 2007, pp. 44–57; Rosenak 2013, pp. 44–49)¹¹ differs from the foregoing both in its orientation (the objective and purpose of the group or therapy) and in its assumption that the telling of the story produces *an event in the world*.

Before proceeding, we must devote a few lines to clarifying the concept of “unity of opposites”. It is based on a theory found in the Kabbalah and developed in Hasidic thought in general, and that of Habad in particular (Rosenak 2007, pp. 45–46), with parallels in modern Western discourse (Rosenak 2007, pp. 47–54; Taylor 1999, pp. 13–37). This approach embodies a paradox. It maintains that all reality derives from a single source, which is referred to in the Kabbalistic literature as the *sefirah*¹² of *Keter*, “the crown”, the highest and most abstract of the *sefirot*. In the terminology of the classical Kabbalistic work, the *Zohar*, emanating from *Keter*, are opposing pairs of *sefirot*—*Din* and *Hesed* (justice and lovingkindness) and *Hokhmah* and *Binah* (wisdom and understanding)—with the first of each pair representing the paternal aspect of the Godhead and the second of each pair representing its maternal aspect. These conflicting *sefirot*, or aspects of reality, derive from a single source and aspire to return to a single source. The contrasts and contradictions that arise in the encounter with the inner life of the other and his or her modes of thinking all express truths that coexist in the One. From the perspective of the One, contrasts are not contradictory. All contrasts and disputes are superficial, artifacts of the natural and unavoidable perspective of those who do not have the metaphysical vantage point of the One that contains all. The foundations of this idea lie in the Kabbalistic notion that “no place is empty of Him¹³”. The divine permeates everything; and everything is a partial manifestation of the divine. This approach does not lessen the conflict that exists in the world, but it does place it in a new perspective. One who has internalized this approach does not find contradiction frightening, because she understands that everything has its source in the One, and the divine One, as Rabbi Kook

¹⁰ See also Leshem Zinger, *A Tool for Peace: A Mental, Cultural, and Symbolic Model for a Joint Decision-Making Process in Jewish Society in Israel* (Leshem Zinger forthcomingb).

¹¹ See also Leshem Zinger, *A Tool for Peace* (footnote 8).

¹² In the Kabbalistic worldview, reality emanates from the ineffable divine in ten stages or aspects, known as *sefirot* (singular: *sefirah*). The *sefirot* are the manifestations of different aspects of divinity with each one representing or symbolizing some set of characteristics and bearing complex relationships with the other *sefirot*.

¹³ 56 *Tikkunei Zohar*, 122:b.

put it, “does not suffer any impediment on account of contradiction and has no need for resolution and decision¹⁴”.

This approach is not relativistic. Those who assert the unity of opposites recognize their own role as a part of the whole and the need for entrenchment in their own world even while maintaining a positive attitude towards the existence of the other, to whom they are opposed but whose existence they welcome¹⁵.

How is this related to group dynamics? For the unity of opposites approach, a story has a meaning that is far broader than the narrator and his or her experiences; the assumption is that each person’s story is, in some way or another, a reverberation of God’s voice. To put it another way, whereas the narrativist approach makes the political (rather than metaphysical) assumption that space must be made for the stories told by everyone in the circle, that all the participants are equally important, and that hearing their stories is essential for understanding the conflict, for the unity of opposites approach, metaphysics is essential to understanding the process.

In the narrativist approach, the main things are the individual stories and the interpersonal bonds that develop around the various narratives. That bond is critical for the unity of opposites approach as well, but it reflects much more than an encounter between two subjects. In the unity of opposites approach, the encounter generates an event that transcends the experience of the subjects. In this type of facilitation, there is sensitivity to the existence of a “present open space”, *chahal panui* in Kabbalistic terminology, (Leshem Zinger forthcoming) where the unity of opposites is possible in the togetherness generated between the subjects.

For groups facilitated according to the narrativist approach, the main thing is the personal stories and the creation of a space in which different narratives can be told; and this is the hoped-for peace. Discourse within the unity of opposites approach, in contrast, seeks to go beyond the interpersonal encounter and to glimpse an understanding of the single integrated truth that is comprised of opposing truths. One practical difference between the two approaches is that the facilitator of a unity of opposites group will not only be sensitive to the various stories but will also encourage the participants to work together to understand some concept in depth. In a group that is dealing with peace for example, the facilitator using the narrativist approach will try to get the participants to articulate their narratives about peace. The unity of opposites facilitator will strive to touch on the concept of peace “in itself”—the concept of peace that is embodied in, but not exhausted by, the diverse narratives. If they seek to actually gain knowledge about peace, then, religious subjects, despite their deep engagement with the conflict, its pain, and its sensitive human elements, will have to deal with God, one of whose names is peace, according to at least the Jewish tradition. Unity of opposites discourse will thus go beyond the narratives to hear the *bat kol*, the heavenly voice, which, for those who wish to uncover it, will be heard in the present open space.

Here is a dynamic expression of this process: A facilitator employing the unity of opposites method will be sensitive to the objects that members bring to the group in order to represent their world. These may take various forms—a text, a picture, a map, or some object—and he or she will make them part of the process. Although this sort of thing could be used by the narrativist approach as well, in a unity of opposites group, those who brought these objects will often be invited to express “the voice” of the object; these objects also are present inside the present open space of the room.

¹⁴ (Kook 1963). *Olat Re’iya* 1. Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, p. 184.

¹⁵ Rabbi Kook puts it this way: “Ideologies tend to be in conflict. One group at times reacts to another with total negation. And this opposition becomes more pronounced the more important a place ideas have in the human spirit. To one who assesses all this opposition on the basis of its inner significance, it appears as illustrating the need for the spatial separation of plants, which serves as an aide to their growth, enabling them to suck up [from the earth] their needed sustenance. Thus will each one develop to its fullness, and the distinctive characteristics of each will be formed in all its particularities. Excessive closeness would have blurred and impaired them all. The proper unity results only from this separation. One begins by separation and concludes by unification” (Kook 1978, pp. 203–4).

In this manner, unity of opposites facilitation will also look for the independent voice of the “religious voice”; this voice is infused into objects and also animates objects, and therefore, “the Cave of Makhpelah”, “Hebron”, “the Temple Mount”, “the Land of Israel”, “the Holy Temple”, or anything else that is significant for the subject can suddenly give voice. In the same way, objects from the secular world will be asked to give voice, and the group will thus contain much more than its participants; it will also contain, in a physical sense, the voices of their worlds, their heroes, their spaces, and their most intimate objects.

The narrativist approach is not attentive to these dimensions. Those adopting this approach are open to human values, but always from the perspective of the narrator; they will necessarily be presented as subjective narratives, lacking any resonance of the autonomous standing of the ideas that human beings encounter in the world.

The unity of opposites approach is acutely sensitive to the metaphysical and consequently has a different relationship to the concept of truth. Working within this approach requires empathetic listening to the different narratives that refrains from dismantling the differing truths of each one but rather seeks to strengthen them by paradoxically revealing the unified truth. This truth is unified but not uniform or monolithic; it is all-encompassing rather than relativist.

The facilitator of a conflict group who employs the narrativist approach will endeavor to elicit many different stories, in the hope that they will change the tellers’ views of their own truths and bring them to understand the narrative nature of everyone’s reality and that one’s own reality has the same status as another’s. Peace is made possible by listening; its opposite is the result of refraining from doing so. In contrast, a unity of opposites’ facilitator will encourage the participants not to surrender their unilateral truth but rather to expand it. The premise is that each person brings a profound truth to the group that must be heard in full. Without this kind of listening, we will miss coming into contact with a deep aspect of reality that transcends the private worlds of each individual. The speakers are not expected to become more flexible or change when they hear the stories told by the other members of the group. In unity of opposites dialogue, the idea is that each speaker states his or her own truth to its fullest extent, while developing his ability as a listener to hear the truth of the other.

Light can be shed on the outlook of the unity of opposites approach by noting how it is different from other ways of resisting the relativism and emphasis on subjectivity embraced by the dominant narrativist approach¹⁶. One example is the *ideological approach* (Halabi and Sonnenschein) which asserts that the very idea of narration is a stratagem whose outcome or goal serves as a tool to be deployed by the hegemonic power (whoever that may be) in order to weaken and dissipate just campaigns against current injustices. The ideological approach demands recognition of the absolute truth expressed by the speaker and/or by the community to which he or she belongs.

In contrast to the narrative and the ideological approaches, the unity of opposites approach offers a third possibility: On the one hand, human reality is not a narrative; as in the ideological approach, there is a truth of the matter, though according to the unity of opposites approach it must be conceived differently. Recognizing that truth requires listening to others (and in this emphasis, it is similar to the narrativist approach). Failure to listen diminishes both the truth and the divine, as the divine that inheres in the group as a whole, because “there is no place empty of Him”.

The narrativist approach has a secular foundation; the ideological approach can be either secular or religiously fundamentalist; the unity of opposites approach will be recognizable mostly in religious communities with an affinity for Hasidic and Kabbalistic modes of thought.

¹⁶ For example, Sagy compared the narrativist approach with the model developed at Neve Shalom for a group of Israelis and Palestinians who visited Germany together (Sagy et al. 2002a).

2.4. Dialogue, Time, and Full Expression

A familiar phenomenon in narrative encounter groups is that there are stages of a conflict when participants cannot accept the other side's narrative. When that happens, the facilitator's job is to illuminate the crisis of trust, to restate the axiom that there is no single truth, and to encourage the members to listen again. The facilitator must treat the crisis moment honestly, make it clear that it really is too early for the listener to accept the rival narrative, express respect for this situation, and encourage those who are not listening to repeat their own narrative that is currently blocking them from listening to the other. The assumption is that the inability to accept the other's story stems from a lack of the necessary tools to do so and an attendant lack of confidence but that those tools and that confidence will become available later in the process. When they do, it will become possible for the participants to acknowledge the other's story¹⁷.

This recognition that there are times when no progress can be made and patience is required is found also in facilitation based on the unity of opposites. More than once, particularly in the middle of a political struggle, we have heard someone assert that "I do not want to listen to the other side, because doing so might weaken my commitment". Such statements indicate that the speaker is not open, at that moment, to the unity of opposites and certainly does not see his point of view as a narrative. Nevertheless, the unity of opposites approach differs from the narrativist approach in that it demands of the participants an independent and conflictual stance and recognizes the enigmatic truth that "war" is essential (Kook 1982; Rosenak 2013/2014). That is not to affirm a reality of permanent dialectic that precludes painful decisions. It does, however, invite members of the group to take part in a dialectic and paradoxical process.

This is exemplified by a remark made by a member of an encounter group that met before the Gaza Disengagement in 2005, when the residents of the Gush Katif settlements were evacuated/evicted/expelled. The group, which was facilitated by Hagit Yaron and Sharon Leshem Zinger¹⁸, included leaders of the Gush Katif settlers and community leaders from the Israeli left. They began meeting to try to create a dialogue six months before the moment that had Israel holding its collective breath. One of the Gush Katif leaders who took part shared with the facilitators his hesitations about joining the group:

I studied at an institution where there were leftists. I was excited and opened up to them. But even then, I felt disappointed, because in moments of real pain that call for understanding, they were not with me; and if that's how it was then, now, when the struggle is so fierce, they certainly will not listen. And I'm also very unsure about taking part in this dialogue group, because I'm a member of the staff organizing the struggle and I am deeply aware of how different participating in this group and acknowledging all the voices is from participating in the struggle; I am afraid of weakening my resolve to fight¹⁹.

Despite these reservations, this man nevertheless decided to join the group. He could have decided otherwise, but his deliberation reflected a recognition of the unity of opposites; in his own words, he felt "responsibility for the entire Jewish people". This insight brought him to the paradoxical realization that participating in the group would not undermine the struggle, as one would expect

¹⁷ An example of this phenomenon is the Forum of Bereaved Families, which brings together Jews and Palestinians who have experienced the trauma of losing a loved one. The deeper message of these meetings is that the worst of all has happened, but we will fight to keep such things from recurring. Everyone must be big enough to understand that his story is a partial narrative and make room to hear the other stories of the group and in the society. Of course, such a process usually does not happen right after the bereavement, and sometimes a year or more is required before this kind of dialogue is possible. When such a process does take place, however, the participants realize that their narratives are only one out of many. The process described here is very significant and crucial for a discourse whose premises are secular and liberal.

¹⁸ For *Collot BaNegev*, under the auspices of the UNDP (United Nations Development Programme). The group first met about six months before the evacuation of the Gush Katif settlements.

¹⁹ Oral communication from the introductory session of a dialogue group between residents of Gush Katif and members of the Israeli left, January 2005.

if it had been a process facilitated in the narrativist method. The facilitation in unity of opposites approach recognized his right to cry out his distress, a cry arising from a crisis, but this crying out also recognized the value of *Kelal Yisrael*, the Jewish collective, and the man making it knew that the truth could not be fully heard if only one segment of the Jewish people cries it out and listens to it.

Another example where unity of opposites' facilitation allowed the participants to deepen their commitments without destroying the dialogue can be found in an in-service encounter group of Israeli and Palestinian facilitators, led by Sharon Leshem Zinger. This group met the day after a deadly terrorist attack in Judea and Samaria in 2015. At the beginning of the meeting, as in a facilitation following the narrativist approach, all the participants were asked to share their feelings after the lethal incident. All of them expressed pain, but most of the Palestinians associated the attack with the "intolerable occupation". The Israelis were divided among those who openly agreed with the Palestinian participants and those who gently noted that violence is never a solution. The group did not include any members of the Israeli nationalist right or Hamas sympathizers on the Palestinian side.

Next, the participants were asked to split up into separate national groups to share how they felt about meeting at this sensitive time. They were told to examine whether they had fully had their say or had restrained themselves out of sensitivity and/or a fear of expressing intense emotions in the encounter with members of the other national group.

In the third part of the session, which was characteristic of the unity of opposites approach, the group reassembled, and the members were asked to speak their own truth without pulling punches. They were astonished at the new opinions that were heard. More uncompromising and indignant positions were expressed than in the first stage; a few of the Israelis expressed ideas that could be attributed to people who identify as center-right. The Palestinians, at this point began to be heard asking whether there was any real chance that they would be listened to and whether dialogue could really lead to change. Some even commented that they had missed hearing the voice of the Israeli right and that it was necessary if change was going to be possible.

In the fourth part of the session, the participants were asked to stand behind their chairs for a psychodrama exercise, also based on the unity of opposites approach²⁰. They were asked to adopt a broad and inclusive point of view, perhaps even with respect to what they thought of as God's perspective. Participants were asked to say what was taking place in the room. What was being said? What was being repressed? Was there any possibility of understanding something new and profound about the reality of the conflict from this vantage point?

In the last two (the third and fourth) segments of the session, the group members, who were accustomed to meeting one another, reported that "a new dialogue was taking place, one that, for all that it was painful, inspired hope and freed us from intractability and automatic speech".

3. Reading Talmudic Stories Using Narrativity and the Unity of Opposites

How can the narrative and unity of opposites approaches to conflict discourse be applied as hermeneutic tools? Moreover, given the centrality of dispute in Rabbinic discourse, can we find echoes of the insights provided by the two approaches embedded in the Talmudic sages' discussions of disagreement and reconciliation? We begin with one of the best-known Talmudic stories about disagreement: the story of the oven of *Akhnai* (BT *Bava Metzia* 59b). This story has received so much attention²¹ that it is hard to imagine that anything new can be said about it. Nevertheless, in the following we will highlight certain ideas that arise in this story that we have not found elsewhere, with the help of the analytical tools described above.

²⁰ It is important to note that psychodrama, developed by Jacob Moreno, did not emerge from the unity of opposites approach. Nevertheless, it permits systematic development of work accomplished within that approach, as described above. See at greater length [Leshem Zinger forthcominga](#).

²¹ See, e.g., ([Englard 1974](#); [Brand 2006](#); [Asoulin 2013](#); [Green 2014](#); [Schlein 2008](#)).

3.1. The Oven of Akhnai

We learnt elsewhere: If he cut it into separate tiles, placing sand between each tile: R. Eliezer declared it [ritually] pure, and the Sages declared it impure; and this was the oven of *Akhnai*.

Why [the oven of] *Akhnai*?—Rav Yehuda said in Shmuel's name: "[It means] that they encircled it with arguments like a snake [*akhna* in Aramaic], and established that it is impure."

It has been taught: "On that day R. Eliezer provided all the answers [i.e., presented all the arguments] in the world, but they did not accept them."

He said to them: "If the halakha is in accordance with my opinion, let this carob tree prove it!" Thereupon the carob-tree was uprooted a hundred cubits from of its place; others say four hundred cubits.

They said to him: "No proof can be brought from a carob tree."

Again, he said to them: "If the halakha is in accordance with my opinion, let the aqueduct prove it!" Whereupon the aqueduct flowed backwards.

They said to him: "No proof can be brought from the aqueduct."

Again, he said to them: "If the halakha is in accordance with my opinion, let the walls of the study hall prove it," whereupon the walls of the study hall tilted as if they were going to fall.

R. Yehoshua rebuked them [the walls]: "When scholars are engaged in a halakhic dispute, what have you to interfere?" They did not fall, in deference to R. Yehoshua, but neither did they stand straight again, in deference to R. Eliezer; and they are still standing at an angle.

Again, he said to them: "If the halakha is in accordance with my opinion, let it be proved from Heaven!" Whereupon a heavenly voice cried out: "Why do you dispute with R. Eliezer, seeing that in all matters the halakha is in accordance with his opinion!"

R. Yehoshua stood up and exclaimed: "It is not in heaven" (Deut. 30:12). What is "It is not in heaven"?—R. Yirmiya said: "As the Torah has already been given at Mount Sinai, we pay no attention to a heavenly voice, because You have already written in the Torah at Mount Sinai, 'After the majority must one incline (Exod. 23:2).'"

R. Natan met Elijah and asked him: "What did the Holy One, blessed be He, do at that time?"

He [Elijah] said: "He laughed and said, 'My sons have defeated Me, my sons have defeated Me.'"

It was said: On that day all objects which R. Eliezer had declared ritually pure were brought and burnt in fire. Then they took a vote and excommunicated him. They said, "Who will go and inform him?" "I will go," answered R. Akiva, "lest an unsuitable person go and inform him, and thus destroy the whole world."

What did R. Akiva do? He donned black garments and wrapped himself in black and sat before him [R. Eliezer] at a distance of four cubits.

"Akiva," said R. Eliezer to him, "how is today different from other days?"

"Master," he replied, "it appears to me that your companions are distancing themselves from you." Thereupon he too [R. Eliezer] rent his garments, put off his shoes, left [his chair] and sat on the earth, while tears streamed from his eyes. The world was then smitten: a third of the olive crop, a third of the wheat, and a third of the barley crop. Some say, even the dough in women's hands spoiled.

It was taught: Great was the calamity that befell that day, for everything on which R. Eliezer cast his eyes was burned up. R. Gamliel was traveling in a ship, when a huge wave arose to drown him. "It appears to me," he said, "that this is on account of none other than R. Eliezer ben Hyrcanus." Thereupon he arose and exclaimed, "Master of the Universe! You know full

well that I have not acted for my honor, nor for the honor of my paternal house, but for Yours, so that disputes will not multiply in Israel!" At that, the raging sea subsided.

Ima Shalom was R. Eliezer's wife and R. Gamliel's sister. From the time of this incident onwards she did not permit him [R. Eliezer] to fall upon his face [in supplicatory prayer]. A certain day happened to be the New Moon [*Rosh Hodesh*, when it is not the practice to fall upon one's face]; she mixed up between whether it was a full month [i.e., a 30-day month] or a deficient [29 day] one. Others say, a poor man came and stood at the door, and she took out some bread to him. [On her return] she found him [R. Eliezer] fallen on his face. "Get up," she said, "you have slain my brother." Meanwhile, an announcement was made from the house of Rabban Gamliel that he had died. He said: "How do you know?" She said: "I have a tradition from my father's house: All gates are locked, excepting the gates of mistreatment."²²

The great medieval commentator Rashi opens his comment on this passage with a drawing and explanation that illuminate the entire story. On the surface he is explaining what exactly is an "oven of *Akhnai*: "*Akhnai* [means] snake, which coils itself in a circle to put its tail in its mouth". This seems to refer to the oven's shape: it is round and spiral. Yet, the image he invokes is unusual: *Akhnai* means snake, and a snake, which symbolizes both death and healing, sticks its tail in its mouth and thereby forms the circle that is the shape of the oven. However, this image reveals a deeper dimension of the story: it deals with death, and death is closely associated with the topic being debated, namely, whether the oven is ritually pure or impure. Impurity is linked to death and purity to life. The snake that puts its tail in its mouth can be said to be biting itself and committing suicide. When Rashi describes the oven's shape, he tells us incidentally that our story is one about suicide, as will be seen in the intense drama that develops.

R. Eliezer ben Hyrcanus declares the oven to be pure, because he is of the opinion²³, derived from the elitist tradition that he follows²⁴, that the simple contrivance used by the common folk is not truly a vessel and consequently cannot become impure. The other scholars, heirs to the tradition of the School of Hillel, declare it to be impure. As they see it, if the common folk use it as an oven it is indeed an oven²⁵.

In the background of this debate we can detect three forms of halakhic thinking employed by the sages, as described by Yoḥanan Silman in his book *Voice Heard at Sinai* (Silman 1999). Because all three approaches are salient and may help us understand parts of this story more clearly, we will pause to present them. According to Silman, one must distinguish between three theories of halakha: the completed revelation approach, the ongoing revelation approach, and the progressive revelation approach.

The *completed revelation* approach, for whom R. Eliezer ben Hyrcanus (Silman 1999, pp. 19–68) can be said to be its best known representative, holds that the Torah was given in its entirety, whole and perfect, at Sinai—both the written law and the oral law²⁶. The complete halakhic scholar is one who is a "plastered cistern that never loses a drop of water" (which is how R. Eliezer is praised by his teacher

²² B *Bava Metzia* 59b (based on Soncino translation, but modified and with added glosses).

²³ Here, we have chosen to follow one of the many lines of interpretation. See notes above and following for other exegetical traditions.

²⁴ On the stringent elitism of the sages of the School of Shammai, as opposed to the more lenient stance of the disciples of the School of Hillel, see (Geiger 1982, p. 83; Weiss 1924, pp. 155–63; Ginzberg 1931; Urbach 1987, chap. 16).

²⁵ This kind of oven is assembled from multiple sections. Halakhah prescribes that vessels may be rendered impure but pieces of a vessel cannot. What, then, is the status of an oven that is assembled from several segments? According to Rabbi Eliezer it is not a vessel; the other sages hold that its use as a vessel defines it as one. For an interpretation that highlights the more formal halakhic root of this debate about the nature of the vessels in general and of clay vessels in particular, see Vider, Tzori. *Tanuro Shel Ben Dinai*. Available online: http://gush.net/dk/5767/1104mamar1.html#_ftnref6.

²⁶ BT *Soḏa* 37ben.

in Tractate *Avot*²⁷. The truth was given, once and for all (though it may be eroded over time)²⁸; all disagreements are the result of forgetfulness²⁹; and rote repetition is the correct form of study³⁰. The educated person is one who remembers that which he has been taught and preserves the tradition.

The *ongoing revelation* approach also holds that there is a single true and complete Torah but only in heaven; it is revealed to the world in installments—“scroll by scroll³¹”—on various occasions, in sections, at different times. Prophecy is an ongoing phenomenon (Silman 1999, pp. 89–111), and over time, more and more of the truth is revealed. According to the completed revelation approach, disagreements are a tragedy caused by failure to preserve the tradition³². By contrast, the ongoing revelation approach treats dispute as positive, because it is a means of bringing us closer to the celestial Torah that not yet been revealed³³.

The *progressive* approach does not believe that the Torah is static, either on Earth or in Heaven (Silman 1999, pp. 119–38). God’s (changing) will is revealed dynamically. Prophecy is the most important instrument for the emergence of new truths³⁴, and the truth may also change as scholars reveal new halakhic insights³⁵. Disagreements are a blessing (Silman 1999, pp. 139–43), and the course of halakhic development is progressive (as in the revelatory approach), but there is no fixed and final point to which it is directed³⁶.

Now, let us go back and look at the drama of R. Eliezer in the light of the three approaches: “Why [the oven of] *Akhnai*? . . . [It means] that they encircled it with arguments like a snake and established that it is impure.”

This sentence is equivocal. Who is circling? What are they circling? At first glance, it seems that it is the sages who are circling the oven and rendering it impure. Building on Rashi’s introduction to the passage, one can also understand that the other sages are circling R. Eliezer and rendering him impure—the impurity associated with the deathlike excommunication that will be pronounced against him at the end of the episode. In this reading, the sages are the snake that injects impurity and death into R. Eliezer. From the perspective of a group facilitator, it is clear that this is a very loaded situation for the group participating in the dispute. The possibility of violence looms.

“It has been taught: On that day R. Eliezer provided all the answers [i.e., presented all the arguments] in the world, but they did not accept them.” R. Eliezer is described as able to provide all the answers in the world. His truth is absolute, both in the present and the future. According to the story, he knows everything! We readers thus understand, as do the other sages, that there is no further need for a study hall that contains the truths of other scholars. R. Eliezer’s truth provides the truth of the Torah. In effect, R. Eliezer represents a divine figure whose knowledge is all-encompassing.

R. Eliezer’s narrative covers over and swallows up any possibility of alternative narratives; no room is left for other scholars. Lacking any attempt by R. Eliezer to constrict himself, to create an “open space” for them, his colleagues cannot accept someone who stifles them. This dispute has become a struggle for one’s place. In effect, the story addresses the question of the extent to which a human being or even God can fill up space in its entirety without leaving room for alternate narratives. What is vital about the role of the study hall, an arena of alternative points of view, as opposed to the absolute

²⁷ M *Avot* 2:8.

²⁸ BT *Shabbat* 112b; *Erwin* 53a.

²⁹ PT *Ḥagigah* 2:2: “When the disciples of Shammai and Hillel who had not studied sufficiently grew numerous . . .”; *Igeret R. Sherira Gaon*, edited by B. M. Levin, Spanish version, 8–10, “There were no disputes among the ancient sages . . .”

³⁰ B *Sukkah* 27b: “He never said anything he had not heard from his teacher.”

³¹ “R. Yoḥanan said in the name of R. Bana’a: The Torah was transmitted scroll by scroll” (BT *Gittin* 60a).

³² See note 28.

³³ Saadia Gaon. 1984. *commentary on Genesis*. edited by M. Zucker. New York: JTS, pp. 187–88.

³⁴ See R. Zadok HaKohen of Lublin, *Sefer Maḥshevot Ḥarutz*, ch. 10, “The words of Torah must be as if new every day, and as dear every hour as at the first hour.”

³⁵ “R. Berakhia said in R. Yehuda’s name: ‘Not a day passes in which God does not teach a new law in the heavenly court’” (*Genesis Rabbah* 64:4).

³⁶ The discussion about the abrogation of the commandments of the Torah in the messianic era can be understood as reflecting the different approaches sketched here. See *Leviticus Rabbah* 13:3; *Sefer Tikunim Ḥadashim* 18; *Yalkut Shimoni* Leviticus 11, §535.

divine truth that encompasses all? The narrativist approach would try to deconstruct R. Eliezer's total (or perhaps even totalitarian) assertion because of its erroneous (for the narrativist approach) conception of truth, for R. Eliezer ben Hyrcanus believes that there is a single and monolithic truth. The unity of opposites approach, in contrast, would hear R. Eliezer's cry, along with the cries of the other voices in the study hall in order to appreciate the depths of the truth shared by all and thereby allowing it to expand.

Of course, a narrative facilitator would not be willing or able to accept the assertion that some person provides all the answers in the world. R. Eliezer's excommunication is harsh but reasonable only from the emotional perspective of a group that is not seeking to change its dynamic. By contrast, the unity of opposites approach sees R. Eliezer's response as a challenge, despite the fact that, he, who subscribes to the completed revelation approach to the Torah (symbolized by the description of him as a plastered cistern that never loses a drop), does not appear to accept the principle of the unity of opposites.

Both methods of facilitation view dismissing or stifling one of the narratives in the study hall as requiring attention by the facilitator and extensive work with the group. There is no doubt that dynamic facilitators of both schools find this story hard to digest.

The passage in the Talmud continues, "but they did not accept them [his arguments]". There is no dialogue in this group. The other sages do not even try to rebut his claims. In fact, it seems that they have no answer, because he can provide "all the answers in the world." They understand that he has the better of them, with regard to both logic and tradition. Their problem, evidently, is less with his halakhic stance per se and more with his persona, as he who knows all the answers in the world and the implications of that situation for the world and for themselves. Hence, "they did not accept them." They cannot accept what he says. "But why?" R. Eliezer might have asked; and their answer would have been something like "because!" That response would have infuriated R. Eliezer. The discourse among the sages is, like Rashi's snake, locked in a vicious circle with its tail in its mouth. The result is not long in coming: "He said to them: 'If the halakha is in accordance with my opinion, let this carob tree prove it!'"

What is the nature of this move? To understand this, we must return to the other sages. They know that they cannot refute R. Eliezer's position; the tradition he reports is solid. Their problem is not with his halakhic ruling or decision but with his embodiment of a radical conception of the Torah as completely revealed, leaving no room for anyone else. They express their opposition by reference to his personality. This is revealed in his repeated attempts to persuade the others that he is in the right: the truth he possesses will go so far as to destroy the world in order to prove itself correct. In this way he demonstrates the shortcoming of his truth, despite its reliable provenance.

The sages push R. Eliezer into occult realms of discourse; the halakhic debate is abandoned as it has been exhausted, and R. Eliezer turns to magic, with its heavy symbolic load. He is forced to go there by the other sages, who are laying the groundwork for the sanctions against him with the intention of making clear even to future generations why R. Eliezer's view is rejected, despite its authenticity. Presumably, there were others present, students who were not active participants in the interaction between R. Eliezer and his colleagues. They learned the fate of he who does not follow the line set by the majority, and they also heard and experienced a discussion that left no empty space for listening to the other, according to both the narrative and unity of opposites approaches.

R. Eliezer attacks: "Let this carob tree prove it!" R. Eliezer has vast power; he can manipulate the world like a magician. By implication, a person who masters the Torah also knows the inner workings of nature, because, as we are taught, "God gazed into the Torah and created the world"³⁷.

³⁷ "Creation is determined according to the Torah, for 'He gazed into the Torah and created the world' (*Zohar Terumah* 161a)" (R. Yitzhak Zev ha-Levi Soloveichik, *Ḥiddushei HaGriz HaHadashim*, §90).

The appeal to the carob tree is no coincidence. The carob tree is a prominent symbol of vitality³⁸. It was a carob tree that sustained R. Shimon Ben Yoḥai and his son for twelve years when they took refuge from the Romans in a cave³⁹. A person with magical powers who looks at a life-giving carob tree and says, “If the halakha is in accordance with my opinion, let this carob tree prove it!” could have had the tree reinforce life and produce abundant fruit. However, the carob can also be turned into a destructive sword. Carob in Hebrew is *ḥaruv*, while sword is *ḥerev*, and destruction is *ḥurban*. Here, R. Eliezer uproots the carob tree (and, we presume, leaves it to wither). In this way he testifies that the truth of the Torah is more important for him than the sustenance of those who lead their lives outside the study hall. With this action, R. Eliezer not only fills the interior of the study hall until there is no room left for anyone else, he also fills the entire world, proclaiming that his truth outweighs the existence of everyone else. From this we infer that R. Eliezer’s narrative is more important to him than the lives of all the inhabitants of earth; he is willing to condemn the world to starvation, as long as the truth emerges victorious.

In contrast to the extreme commitment to the completeness of the revelation, closely related to the approach of the School of Shammai⁴⁰, which is identified with those who never forget anything they have learned, other sages seem to assert the possibility of a multiplicity of narratives (in the spirit of the progressive revelation approach⁴¹ or at least the conception of the Torah as an ongoing revelation)⁴². We may presume that a person such as R. Eliezer would reject the dynamic axioms of the narrativist approach. Even the unity of opposites approach, though he might have some affinity for it, would be challenging for him, because it regards heavenly voices that convey something new as positive while they would be an anathema to R. Eliezer. However, even if R. Eliezer would reject the unity of opposites approach, the unity of opposites approach does not reject R. Eliezer. Unlike the narrativist approach, which cannot accept R. Eliezer, because he would reject the principle that all narratives are subjective, the principle of the unity of opposites can contain R. Eliezer’s worldview but will not allow it to fill up the entire space without leaving room for the other voices that are required for discovering the unified truth.

The other sages do not capitulate at the uprooting of the carob tree. They say: “No proof can be brought from a carob tree.” They are not cowed by his magical powers, nor do they intervene to save the world from famine, and instead, they continue to press R. Eliezer and tell him that the carob tree is no proof of his claim.

R. Eliezer does not realize that there is no exit from the intractableness of this situation⁴³. He is locked into his obligation to prove the truth of his opinion, a proof that is no longer a matter of rational argument but rests on the evidence of his ability to manipulate the world with his knowledge and thus prove that he is right. The unwillingness of the other sages to accept his argument forces him to entrench himself in it, only strengthening the future indictment against him. After the carob tree, he turns to the aqueduct. Carobs are food, but water is the very basis of life and is also compared to the Torah.⁴⁴ “If the halakha is in accordance with my opinion, let the aqueduct prove it!” Will R. Eliezer increase the flow of irrigation water? No; he deprives the fields of their water: “the aqueduct flowed backwards.” Again, R. Eliezer demonstrates that the truth he possesses is more important than the lives of others and even hints that his truth is more important than the study hall where the oral law is

³⁸ On the carob, the aggadic texts that deal with it, and their implications in the literature, see <https://daf-yomi.com/DYItemDetails.aspx?itemId=27676>.

³⁹ BT *Shabbat* 33b: “Yehuda the son of proselytes went and related their talk, which reached the government. They decreed: ‘Yehuda, who exalted [us], shall be exalted; Yose, who was silent, shall be exiled to Sepphoris; Shimon, who censured, let him be executed.’”

⁴⁰ On the link between the School of Shammai and the integral approach, see Silman, *Ḳol Gadol*.

⁴¹ According to which every generation can hear new prophetic voices and add to the Torah, and disagreements are a blessing. See above, (Silman 1999), and notes on discussion of the progressive approach above.

⁴² See discussion above of the ongoing revelation approach.

⁴³ Leshem Zinger, *A Tool for Peace*.

⁴⁴ “‘Ho, all who are thirsty, come for water’ (Isa. 55:1)—and water means Torah” (*Avot de-Rabbi Nathan A*, ch. 7, addendum b).

studied. The physical water symbolizes the “water of the Torah”, which may be the next to pay the price. However, the sages do not give in and continue to press R. Eliezer, causing him to display his rigid personality. They respond: “No proof can be brought from the aqueduct.”

R. Eliezer, now completely locked into his role, continues, as if automatically: “If the halakha is in accordance with my opinion, let the walls of the study hall prove it.” Here, he is threatening the entire oral law: “the walls of the study hall tilted as if they were going to fall.” From R. Eliezer’s perspective, there is no value to the study hall if the truth is not accepted there. Now, perhaps unexpectedly, the other sages, who have thus far observed his aggressive actions and perhaps even encouraged them, intervene before it all comes crashing down. We suddenly realize that they too possess supernatural powers that are not inferior to those wielded by R. Eliezer: “R. Yehoshua rebuked [the walls], saying: ‘When scholars are engaged in a halakhic dispute, what have you to interfere?’ They did not fall, in deference to R. Yehoshua, but neither did they stand straight again, in deference to R. Eliezer; and they are still standing at an angle.” The dispute has not been resolved. According to this story, there is a symbolic wall leaning at an angle, with R. Eliezer, representing the completeness of revelation, pushing it in one direction and R. Yehoshua, representing an understanding of revelation as ongoing or as progressive, pushing back so that it will not fall over.

Looking at the conflict from the perspective of a dynamic facilitator, we should note that the study hall in which the status of the oven of *Akhnai* is debated is one of loud arguing and imperfect listening. R. Eliezer cries out his truth in a manner that precludes his hearing the other sages’ attempts to rebuke him. He is also unable to hear the voices of those who live outside the study hall, whom he would deprive of food and water. The other sages are attentive, both to their inability to refute R. Eliezer’s arguments and to R. Eliezer’s personality, which they endeavor to reveal to their students before they impose upon him the death-like sanction of excommunication. However, they are entirely deaf to the dimension of truth that inheres in R. Eliezer’s world. They are incapable of seeing the necessity of the presence of his perspective, either as a narrative or as one of the opposites that comprise the unity of opposites.

It is apparent that the stance of R. Eliezer’s opponents does not match the secular and subjectivist premises of the narrativist approach. It is closer to the theory of the unity of opposites, even if, for now, the dynamic is locked and stagnant. A metaphor for the attempt to unite opposites, though it is not expressed in the dynamics of the sages’ behavior, is provided by the walls of the study hall. They are frozen at a slant, because no decision can be pronounced between his perspective and theirs “and [the walls] are still standing at an angle.” Life on the diagonal is the core of the unity of opposites according to André Neher ([Rosenak 2015](#), pp. 454–55), who writes about this concept drawing upon its meaning in the work of R. Yehuda Loew ben Bezalel, the Maharal of Prague ([Neher 1991](#)).

R. Eliezer is not aware of significance of the walls remaining at an angle; he is so tightly locked into his role that now he throws down his last card, which, according to him, should settle the argument once and for all: God himself will decide. “If the halakha is in accordance with my opinion, let it be proved from Heaven!” And God does indeed respond: “Whereupon a heavenly voice cried out: ‘Why do you dispute with R. Eliezer, seeing that in all matters the halakha is in accordance with his opinion!’” Now, even the Holy One blessed be He has renounced the sages’ oral law and ratified R. Eliezer’s perfect mastery of halakha. The completely revealed Torah of R. Eliezer, which can provide “all the answers in the world”, has received a heavenly seal of approval. This is a surprising turn. Unlike the unity of opposites approach, which summons the heavenly voice in order to generate a space that can contain all contraries, here, the heavenly voice bursts into the study hall in order to fill the space on behalf of R. Eliezer at the expense of the opinions of the other sages.

Nevertheless, R. Yehoshua is not deterred. He stands up and exclaims: “It is not in heaven” (Deut. 30:12). What is “not in heaven?” R. Yirmiya said: “As the Torah has already been given at Mount Sinai; we pay no attention to a heavenly voice, because You have already written in the Torah at Mount Sinai, ‘After the majority must one incline’” (Exod. 23:2).

Note that from the perspective of dynamic facilitation, the story has taken a sharp turn. God has come on stage and joined the group of sages. R. Yehoshua will not allow that: You assert that “in all matters the halakha is an accordance with his opinion?” Has not Your narrative has always been “It is not in heaven”? You proclaimed and promised that You would not join the group that establishes the oral law. God can be part of what occurs as an inclusive space, but not as an oppositional voice.

In this last step, R. Yehoshua reveals himself to be the strongest member of the group. God accepts his verdict. The Talmud interrupts the story to cite an encounter with Elijah from which we learn that R. Yehoshua’s vigorous intervention provoked a divine reaction, similar to God’s reaction when Moses stood firmly for his principles and defended Israel against the heavenly verdict that would have annihilated them in the wilderness⁴⁵: “R. Nathan met Elijah and asked him: “What did the Holy One, blessed be He, do in that hour?’ ‘He laughed and said, ‘My sons have defeated Me, My sons have defeated Me.’”

The sons’ victory over God is expressed by the ironic fact that according R. Eliezer’s conception of the Torah as already completely revealed, by virtue of which he demands that the other sages accept his view, a heavenly voice that bursts into the study hall is inadmissible⁴⁶. God may not be added to the company of scholars, and the Torah that was revealed to them long ago must be respected, because it is not in heaven.

The rejection of R. Eliezer’s all-embracing divine narrative and the claims that the Torah is “not in heaven” and “after the majority one must incline” create an open space in the study hall and make possible legitimate disagreements. The multiplicity of voices only becomes possible once it is clear that divine truth is banned from the dispute and that the truth is only ever shaped by imperfect human beings. This perspective fits well with the narrativist approach. In contrast, according to the unity of opposites approach, God is invited into the study hall, but His presence does not fill the entire space but rather generates space for voices that would not be heard otherwise. These voices can be heard without them causing stagnation of the discourse; rather, all voices and opinions are strengthened. In this way the unity of opposites approach conceives of the divine presence as therapeutic rather than destructive, in contrast to God’s presence in this story of the oven of *Akhnai* where it has the potential to destroy the world and is embodied in the person of Rabbi Eliezer.

The narrativist approach also finds inspiration from the excursus that relates R. Nathan’s encounter with Elijah. This account of God’s response to R. Eliezer’s defeat is but one of many possible ways to conclude the story and give it a stamp of approval by presenting God’s opinion of what happened that day.

The last part of the story has R. Yehoshua and his colleagues symbolically declaring R. Eliezer to be impure. “On that day all objects which R. Eliezer had declared ritually pure were brought and burnt in fire.” The heavenly voice has been excluded from the study hall and R. Eliezer has been stripped of his power. Now, in a mirror image of what R. Eliezer did, the other sages silence R. Eliezer’s voice for the rest of his life and fill the space entirely with their own position. R. Eliezer’s insensitivity to the other sages has been inverted, and they treat him as he sought to treat them. Unlike him, they are successful. Rather than the enigmatic harmony of “both this and that are the words of the living God⁴⁷”, “they took a vote and excommunicated” R. Eliezer.

⁴⁵ Exod. 32:32–33; B *Berakhot* 32a; *Exodus Rabbah* 47.

⁴⁶ See Zvi Hirsch Chajes 1958. See also Maimonides, *Introduction to the Mishnah*, 14: “Know that prophecy is of no benefit for interpreting the Torah and extracting the branches of the precepts by means of the 13 Exegetical Principles; rather, what Yehoshua and Phineas did by close study and logic is what Ravina and R. Ashi did.” Furthermore, “This teaches that a prophet can no longer add a new precept [to the Torah]. Therefore, should person arise, whether Jew or gentile, and perform a sign or wonder and say that God sent him to add a precept or withdraw a precept, or explain some precept in a manner that we did not hear from Moses, or if he says that the precepts ordained for the Jews are not forever and every generation but rather were given for a limited time—he is a false prophet.” (Maimonides, *Laws of the Foundations of the Torah* 9:1).

⁴⁷ BT *Eruvin* 13b; Maharal, *Sefer Derekh Hayim*, ch. 5, 257–58: “One must not raise the objection of how it is possible to uphold two sides of a contradiction.” See at length (Dishon 1984).

All facilitators who face a group such as this—whether they employ the narrativist method or the unity of opposites approach—must feel that something has been lost here. Something has been lost because there was no attentiveness to the different narratives that could temper the ferocity of the competing worldviews. There was no subjective transformation of the tellers of the several stories. From the perspective of the unity of opposites approach, what is lost is that the occupants of the study hall did not come to understand that forging a link among the various forces at work is essential for achieving peace. In the present situation, the contrasting truths of fire and water engage in reciprocal exclusion and mutual destruction. The truth that initially threatened the other sages now destroys R. Eliezer. The unity of opposites approach would endeavor to channel the fire and water into a total transformation that God could fuse into one⁴⁸. “Then they took a vote and excommunicated him. They said, ‘Who will go and inform him?’ ‘I will go,’ said R. Akiva, ‘lest an unsuitable person go and inform him, and thus destroy the whole world.’”

How can they inform R. Eliezer that he has been placed under the ban? How will he accept his social death? The fear is that death produces more death: “I will go . . . lest an unsuitable person go and inform him, and thus destroy the whole world.” R. Akiva, who has not appeared in the story thus far, is now introduced as R. Eliezer’s star pupil, from whom he learned the “laws of cucumbers” (namely, the magical lore that underlies R. Eliezer’s powers in this story, which we will encounter again later). However, R. Akiva is also a seminal figure of the oral law⁴⁹ who is not associated with the conception of the Torah as completely revealed. He is not a “plastered cistern that never loses a drop” like R. Eliezer, but more like the image associated with a different sage, an “ever-flowing spring⁵⁰”, as is evident in the following story:

Rav Yehuda said in the name of Rav: “When Moses ascended to Heaven, he found the Holy One, blessed be He, engaged in affixing coronets to the letters. He said before Him: ‘Lord of the Universe, who stays Your hand?’ [i.e., is there anything lacking in the Torah that these additions are necessary].

He answered, ‘There will arise a man, at the end of many generations, Akiva ben Joseph is his name, who will expound upon each serif heaps and heaps of laws.’

“‘Lord of the Universe’, said Moses; ‘permit me to see him’.

“He replied, ‘Turn around’.

“Moses went and sat down at the end of the eighth row [and listened to the discourses on the law]. Not being able to follow their arguments he was ill at ease, but when they came to a certain subject and the disciples said to the master ‘Whence do you know it?’ and the latter replied ‘It is a law given unto Moses at Sinai,’ and he was comforted.⁵¹”

According to the completed revelation approach, Moses should have understood what R. Akiva was saying, because they are his own words. However, R. Akiva is an “ever-flowing spring” and derives new rules unknown in Moses’ world. All the same, this spring does not flow from nowhere and must draw on the serifs attached to certain letters in the Torah scroll. This image matches an

⁴⁸ “It is well known that peace is great, as the Sages said (M *Uktzin* 3:12) that ‘the Holy One Blessed Be He found no vessel that could hold blessing except for peace.’ And what is peace if not a linkage of two contraries. As the Sages expounded (*Zohar* Leviticus 4, 12b) on the verse, ‘He makes peace in His high places,’ for one angel is of fire and other of water, which are opposites, since water extinguishes fire, but the Holy One Blessed Be He makes peace between them and joins them together.” (*Likutei Moharan*, Torah 80). See also Leshem Zinger, *A Tool for Peace*.

⁴⁹ See Eisenstein (1956).

⁵⁰ “Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai received [the Law] from Hillel and from Shammai. He used to say: If you have wrought much in the Law, claim not merit for yourself, for to this end you were created. Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai had five disciples and they are: R. Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, and R. Yehoshua ben Ḥananiah, and R. Yose the Priest, and R. Shimon ben Nathaniel, and R. Elazar ben Arakh. Thus used he to recount their praises: Eliezer ben Hyrcanus is a plastered cistern which loses not a drop; Yehoshua ben Ḥananiah—happy is she that bore him; Yose the Priest is a saintly man; Shimon ben Nathaniel is fearful of sin; Elazar ben Arakh is an ever-flowing spring” (M *Avot* 2:8).

⁵¹ BT *Menahot* 29b.

intermediate position between the conception of the Torah completely revealed and the progressive theory; it is compatible with the ongoing revelation approach⁵². It is the middle ground between the world of R. Eliezer and what seems to be its total antithesis, R. Yehoshua's "it is not in heaven". Rabbi Akiva here represents the unity of opposites.

R. Akiva and R. Eliezer have in common similar paths to reaching a mastery of Torah in that both did so only in adulthood and by means of heroic efforts: R. Akiva's late introduction to Torah study required him to overcome the antagonism of his wealthy father-in-law, who disinherited his daughter for marrying him⁵³; and R. Eliezer did not begin studying Torah until he reached the age of twenty-two and his father disinherited him⁵⁴.

Neither narrativist facilitation nor the unity of opposites approach can tolerate excommunication. For both methods, the key question would not be "how do we tell him that he has been excommunicated", but "how can we return him to the study hall"? This attitude is found in the next stories that we will discuss.

3.2. Group by Group: The Beginning of a Rectification

The first stage in healing and mending the trauma of R. Eliezer's excommunication appears in a story that describes an encounter between the elderly R. Yehoshua and some of his senior students many years after the incident of the oven of *Akhnai*⁵⁵:

"On the seventh day. etc." This bears on the text, "The words of the wise are as goads, and as nails well fastened are those that are composed in groups [or: are the words of the masters of assemblies]⁵⁶; they are given from one shepherd" (Eccl. 12:11).

It was taught: Once R. Yoḥanan ben Beroka and R. Elazar Ḥisma went to call on R. Yehoshua in Peki'im.

He asked them: "What innovation was there in the study hall today?"

They replied: "We are your disciples and it is your water that we drink."

He said to them: "Nevertheless, a study hall without innovation is impossible. Whose Sabbath was it?"

"The Sabbath of R. Elazar ben Azariah," they replied.

"And on what topic was the exposition today?" They told him: "On the section, 'Assemble ...'"

"And how did he expound it?"

[They replied "The text reads:] 'Assemble the people, the men and the women, and the little ones' (Deut. 31:12). If the men came to learn and the women to listen, what need was there for the little ones? [They were brought] in order that those who brought them may receive reward."

He said to them: "You had in your possession a fine pearl and wished to deprive me of it!"

[...]

⁵² See discussion above.

⁵³ *Yalkut Shimoni*, Proverbs, §948: "R. Akiva was Kalba Savua's shepherd. He saw that his daughter was modest and excellent. His daughter said to him, 'I will marry you if you go learn.' He said, 'I will.' He married her in secret and sent her away. Her father heard and threw her out of his house and disinherited her." (Barkai 1986, pp. 50–55; Fraenkel 1981, pp. 111–15).

⁵⁴ *Avot de-Rabbi Nathan* A:6, "What were the beginnings of Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus ... " (translated by Goldin, p. 43); *Pirḳe de-Rabbi Eliezer*, 1–3; and with slight variations in *Avot de-Rabbi Nathan* B, 13 (edited by Schechter, 30–33).

⁵⁵ *Numbers Rabbah* 14:4; BT *Ḥagigah* 3b.

⁵⁶ The Hebrew expression בעלי אסופות, *ba'alei asufot* cannot be reduced to a single translation, and the translators and homilists have not done so: "composed in collections"; "arranged in groups"; "[spoken by] the masters of assemblies." All of these meanings must be kept in mind here.

[They continued,] “He also opened a discourse on the text, ‘The words of the wise are as goads. . . .’ Why are the words of the Torah likened to a goad? To teach you that just as a goad directs the cow along the furrows, in order to bring life to the world, so the words of the Torah direct the heart of those who study them away from the paths of death and along the paths of life. Should you think that just as the goad is movable, so the words of the Torah are movable [i.e., changeable], Scripture states, ‘And as nails firmly planted.’

Should you think that as a nail removes but does not add, so the words of the Torah remove but do not expand, Scripture states, ‘planted’ to signify that just as a plant is fruitful and increases, so the words of the Torah bear fruit and multiply.

‘The masters of assemblies’: these are the scholars, who sit group by group and study the Torah, some of them declaring a thing impure, others declaring it pure; some pronouncing a thing to be forbidden, others pronouncing it to be permitted, some disqualifying and others declaring fit.

Lest a man should say, since some scholars declare a thing impure and others declare it pure; some pronounce a thing to be forbidden and others pronounce it to be permitted; some disqualify while others rule fit, how can I study Torah in such circumstances? Scripture states, ‘given by one shepherd’: One God has given them, one leader has uttered them at the command of the Lord of all creation, blessed be He; as it says, ‘And God spoke all these words’ (Ex. 20:1). On your part: make your ear like a hopper and acquire a heart that can understand the words of the scholars who declare a thing impure as well as of those who declare it pure; the words of those who declare a thing forbidden as well as those who declare it permitted; the words of those who disqualify and the words of those who declare fit.”

R. Yehoshua addressed [R. Yoḥanan ben Beroka and R. Elazar Ḥisma] in the following manner: “It is not an orphan generation in which R. Elazar ben Azariah lives⁵⁷.”

The great R. Yehoshua, who once dominated the study hall, now requires his students to inform him what is going on⁵⁸. The elderly R. Yehoshua does not seem to be aware of developments in the study hall: “What new thing was said in the study hall today?” As we have seen, from the perspective of the completed revelation approach, there is nothing new to be said; the function of the study hall is the preservation of the tradition, to be “a plastered cistern that never loses a drop”, similar to the excommunicated R. Eliezer. R. Yehoshua is the outstanding representative of the opposing view that “it is not in heaven” and “after the majority must one incline”. The notion of an empty space that permits multiple voices was the core of the conflict between R. Yehoshua and R. Eliezer.

However, somehow, what the master wanted to convey to his disciples is not what they learned from him, nor does the master’s theoretical stance necessarily match his actions, which appear to have taught his students a different and perhaps totally opposing doctrine.

It is true that R. Yehoshua, faithful to his advocacy of either ongoing or progressive revelation, asks “what innovation was said in the study hall today?” His students, however, answer in a different vein that suggests that they do not want to share with their teacher in the events of the study hall and are even apprehensive about his reaction. R. Yehoshua is not exactly the exemplar of what he sought to pass on to his students and, in light of the R. Eliezer’s fate, for good reason. Hence, the visitors reply, “We are your disciples and it is your water that we drink.” R. Yehoshua’s conflicting messages, wherein he theoretically advocates an open approach while in practice participating in an excommunication, seem to have borne rotten fruit, and his students’ reply seems to indicate their adopting an ideology in which the Torah has been completely revealed and can only be learned from their teacher.

⁵⁷ *BaMidbar Rabbah* 14:4, based on Soncino translation and collated with the version of the story in *B Ḥagigah* 3b.

⁵⁸ It is interesting to compare this version of the story and that in *BT Soṭah* 7, 9–11. There the students do not come specially to visit R. Yehoshua but are just passing by. Our version accentuates the message conveyed of the connection between the students and their teacher. (We would like to thank Mordy Miller, who drew our attention to the textual variants.)

As the narrative proceeds, we discover that his students are so afraid of him that they hesitate to reveal what they are learning. The astonished R. Yehoshua does not relent: “Nevertheless, a study hall without innovation is impossible.” The visitors maintain their silence. However, R. Yehoshua knows precisely what to ask and gradually extricates them from their closed state and facilitates the release of the stifled voice inside them. A more successful facilitator would also have tried to find out what his students were afraid of. However, even with this minimal facilitation we see how he guides them to attentiveness: R. Yehoshua asks, “Whose Sabbath was it?” His pupils volunteer the bare minimum of information, “The Sabbath of R. Elazar ben Azariah”. Clearly, this is not the answer R. Yehoshua was seeking: “And on what topic was the exposition today?” and then, pushing harder, “And how did he expound it?” The students throw him a bone, as it were, by repeating one of the homilies delivered there, which has nothing in it that might threaten their teacher’s seemingly closed world in which all Torah is already revealed. They weigh his reaction and answer: “‘Assemble the people, the men and the women, and the little ones’ (Deut. 31:12). If the men came to learn and the women to listen, what need was there for the little ones? [They were brought] in order that those who brought them may receive reward.” This is a brief description of the process of transmission, learning, and listening. The story begins to hint at the reality of innovation. Men come to learn, women to listen. Learning, which has practical implications and perhaps a creative element, is not the same thing as passive listening, which lies closer to the model of “plastered cistern that does not lose a drop”. The story thus alludes to the possibility of creative dimensions of the Torah that come into play after it was initially revealed.

In light of this midrash, we can also see that when the students said, “We are your disciples and it is your water that we drink”, they were placing themselves in the status of women, who only hear the Torah so that they will be able to observe it and repeat what they have learned. However, the main message of the midrash is just the opposite: Torah requires active study and not only passive listening, and the students await R. Yehoshua’s response.

Attention to this dialogue from the perspective of dynamic facilitation leads to the awareness of the fact that the two disciples present themselves as women. This suggests that we must pay closer attention to what they say and consider whether there is perhaps a subversive element in their description of the women who come only to listen. If the women are coming to the listen, who brings the children? What is the subversive force of their bringing children, who will grow up to be the next generation of sages? Could the feminine silence, which is only listening, contain, in fact, more than mere passivity?

R. Yehoshua answers at once: “You had in your possession a fine pearl and wished to deprive me of it!” The students sense from this that they should not be intimidated and that perhaps their perception of R. Yehoshua does not reflect their teacher’s worldview. Encouraged by his response they now recount what they had not dared tell him at first. R. Yehoshua has freed them from their locked state.

His students now regale the elderly R. Yehoshua with the “group by group” homily, which discusses the Torah’s simultaneous stability and dynamism. On the one hand, the Torah is like a goad that guides the animal to the proper path; on the other hand, it is not movable but fixed in place like a nail. However, whereas the nail removes wood when hammered in, the Torah is firmly planted and fruitful. The special quality of Torah is that it is complete and fixed like a nail but also develops and bears new fruit. Although R. Yehoshua may have thought that this idea was the lesson to be learned from his conflict with R. Eliezer, it was not internalized by his students, who, cognizant of the latter’s excommunication, did not want to answer R. Yehoshua’s questions at first.

Now, the students continue their account of what they learned in the study hall:

The masters of assemblies”: these are the scholars, who sit group by group and study the Torah, some of them declaring a thing impure, others declaring it pure; some pronouncing a thing to be forbidden, others pronouncing it to be permitted; some disqualifying and others declaring fit. Lest a man should say, since some scholars declare a thing impure and others declare it clean; some pronounce a thing to be forbidden and others pronounce it to be

permitted; some disqualify while others rule fit, how can I study Torah in such circumstances? Scripture states, “given by one shepherd”: One God has given them, one leader has uttered them at the command of the Lord of all creation, blessed be He; as it says, “And God spoke all these words (Ex. 20:1).

The image of scholars sitting in groups paints a picture of what R. Yehoshua’s students learned from their master. The group dynamic in the study hall of the oven of *Akhnai* proved inadequate to the task of including R. Eliezer. R. Eliezer’s aggressive attempt to fill up the space entirely and the threat that was posed to the other sages spurred a reaction that permanently excluded him from the community. This is not the ideal according to this midrash; the expectations from those who sit on the benches of the study hall are different. Initially, the students were hesitant to share this ideal of cultural dynamism, given R. Yehoshua’s role in the earlier events. Instead they say: “We are your disciples and it is your water that we drink.” At his encouragement, they continue their report of R. Elazar ben Azarya’s homily and pointedly direct its lesson at R. Yehoshua: “On your part: make your ear like a hopper and acquire a heart that can understand the words of the scholars who declare a thing impure as well as of those who declare it pure; the words of those who declare a thing forbidden as well as those who declare it permitted; the words of those who disqualify and the words of those who declare fit.”

While this statement is the continuation of the homily, it is also a subtle reproof of the way Rabbi Yehoshua facilitated the halakhic debate over the oven of *Akhnai*. R. Yehoshua, they indicate, was not wise enough to listen and open his heart to be able to contain the opposing positions, each with its own cry. A narrativist approach would emphasize the multiplicity of voices advocated by R. Yehoshua and view it as a triumph in that it overcame the silencing of all other voices by R. Eliezer’s attempt to completely fill the open space with his voice. The celebration of multiplicity is the most important thing. The unity of opposites approach also appreciates the multivocality espoused here, but also points out that this multiplicity is possible and important precisely because all the voices “were given by one shepherd”. The unity of opposites derives from a common origin, and as such, what is required is an attentive ear and a heart that can contain a dynamic method for how to listen.

3.3. Reconciliation: R. Eliezer’s Death

The reconciliation with the trauma of R. Eliezer’s excommunication is described in the story that recounts his last day.

When R. Eliezer fell sick, R. Akiva and his companions went to visit him. He was seated in his canopied bed, while they sat in his hall. That day was Sabbath eve [i.e., Friday before sundown] and his son Hyrcanus entered to him to remove his phylacteries [*tefillin*]. [R. Eliezer] rebuked him, and he left with a reprimand. “It seems to me,” he said to them, “that my father’s mind is deranged.”

[R. Eliezer] said to them, “He and his mother are deranged: how can they neglect a prohibition which is punishable by stoning [violating the Sabbath, for which they were apparently not prepared], and turn their attention to [something which is] a rabbinic Sabbath prohibition?” [i.e., wearing phylacteries on the Sabbath].

The Sages, seeing that his mind was clear, entered his chamber and sat down at a distance of four cubits.

“Why have you come?” he said to them.

“We have come to learn Torah,” they replied;

“And why didn’t you come before now?” he asked.

They answered, “We had no time.”

He said to them, “I will be surprised if these die a natural death.”

R. Akiva asked him, “What will my death be?” He answered, “Yours will be harder than theirs.”

He then put his two arms over his heart, and said, “Woe to you, my two arms, that have been like two rolled up Torah scrolls. Much Torah have I studied, and much Torah have I taught. Much Torah have I learned, yet I but take away from my teachers as much as a dog laps from the sea. Much Torah have I taught, yet my disciples have only taken away from me as much as a paint-stick takes from its tube. Not only that, I have studied three hundred laws on the subject of a deep bright spot [i.e., leprosy], yet no man has ever asked me about them. Not only that, I have studied three hundred (or, as others state, three thousand) laws about the planting of cucumbers [by magic] and no man, except Akiva ben Joseph, ever questioned me thereon. For it once happened that he and I were walking together on a road, when he said to me, ‘My master, teach me about the planting of cucumbers.’ I said a word, and the whole field [about us] was filled with cucumbers. Then he said, ‘Master, you have taught me how to plant them, now teach me how to uproot them.’ I said a word and all the cucumbers were gathered in one place.”

They asked him, “What is the law of a ball, a shoemaker’s last, an amulet, a pouch of pearls, and a small weight?”

He replied, “They are susceptible to impurity, and if impure, they are restored to their purity just as they are [i.e., they can be immersed in a ritual bath without being opened up].”

[Then they asked him,] “What of a shoe that is [still] on the last?”

He replied, “It is pure.” And [pronouncing this word] his soul departed in purity.

R. Yehoshua stood up and exclaimed⁵⁹ (The exact same phrase introduces R. Yehoshua’s declaration “not in heaven” in the oven of *Akhnai* story), “The vow [of excommunication] is abrogated, the vow is abrogated!”

At the conclusion of the Sabbath [apparently during the funeral procession] [R. Yehoshua met [R. Akiva] between Caesarea and Lydda. [In his grief,] he beat his flesh until the blood flowed down upon the earth.

[R. Akiva] commenced [his funeral address,] and said: “My father, my father, the chariot and horsemen of Israel (2 Kgs 2:12). I have many coins, but no moneychanger to accept them.”

Apparently, he learned this [producing cucumbers by magic] from R. Eliezer.—He learned it from R. Eliezer but did not grasp it; then he learned it from R. Yehoshua, who made it clear to him.

How could R. Eliezer do so? Did we not learn [in the Mishnah], “If he performs an act [of magic], he is liable”?—If it is to teach, it is different. For the master has said, “You shall not learn to do [the abominations of these nations”] (Deut. 18:9): You may not learn in order to practice, but you may learn in order to understand and teach⁶⁰.

R. Eliezer is ill, dying; the narrative focuses on his last day. It appears that the sages are uncomfortable with leaving R. Eliezer under the ban and feel a need to correct the situation before it is too late. “R. Akiva and his companions went to visit him.” Rabbi Akiva is highlighted as a member of the party—the same R. Akiva who was the only person brave enough, close enough to the banned sage, and sensitive enough to inform R. Eliezer of his excommunication in a way that would save the world from his wrath.

⁵⁹ The exact same phrase introduces R. Yehoshua’s declaration “It is not in heaven” in the oven of *Akhnai* story.

⁶⁰ BT *Sanhedrin* 68a.

The text paints a picture of estrangement and loneliness at the moment when the sages enter R. Eliezer's home: "He was seated in his canopied bed, while they sat in his hall." The physical separation is clear. It is late Friday afternoon, with the sun about to set—a liminal time⁶¹ that is symbolically apt for the liminal event being recounted. It is the time when one can find out-of-the-box solutions that transcend familiar boundaries. This liminal hour also leads to the first halakhic discussion in this story: "That day was Sabbath eve [i.e., Friday before sundown], and his son Hyrcanus entered to remove his phylacteries [*tefillin*]. His father rebuked him, and he left with a reprimand. 'It seems to me,' he said to them, 'that my father's mind is deranged.'"

It is very late on Friday afternoon and time to remove one's phylacteries⁶². When the son comes to help his infirm father do so, the old man sends him out of the room angrily. The son, distressed by the loud and now public expulsion from his father's room, explains or apologizes to the sages: "It seems to me that my father's mind is deranged." This is a harsh statement to make about one's father and evidence of the tense relations between father and son. The statement also says something about R. Eliezer's fallen status in the world at large and among the sages: a son confident that his colleagues think highly of his father would not have made such a slighting remark in their presence.

R. Eliezer hears them. His mind, contrary to his son's disrespectful assertion, is clear, and he calls out from his room: "how can they neglect a prohibition which is punishable by stoning [violating the Sabbath, for which they were apparently not prepared], and turn their attention to [something which is] a rabbinic Sabbath prohibition?" R. Eliezer clarifies his mental state as well as the halakhic situation, showing that he is as clear and sharp as ever: Taking time before sundown to remove his phylacteries would mean not completing the preparations for Sabbath on time; and one must not give precedence to averting the minor prohibition of wearing phylacteries on the Sabbath over Torah prohibitions whose violator is liable to death by stoning.

The implication is that R. Eliezer's intellectual and halakhic excommunication is not only from his colleagues but also from his close family. His son does not understand him and is not interested in him; he treats him like a senile old man. R. Eliezer, for his part, deprecates his son and his wife (an offstage presence in the story) for their ignorance and faulty judgment.

After this confrontation, which highlights R. Eliezer's pathetic state, the sages take another step toward restoring their relationship with him by leaving the hall and entering R. Eliezer's room. He knew there were visitors, for his son had spoken disrespectfully about him to them, and he had addressed them through the door; apparently, he had not yet seen their faces.

Now "the Sages, seeing that his mind was clear, entered his chamber and sat down at a distance of four cubits." For the first time since his excommunication, the men who banned him have come near the man sitting in solitude. However, even now the vow of excommunication is symbolically maintained, and they sit four cubits away from him.

He said: "Why have you come?"

They said: "We have come to learn Torah."

He said: "And why didn't you come before now?"

They said: "We had no time."

R. Eliezer was never an easy man to get along with, as we have seen, and his years in ostracism have not mellowed him. He demands the truth, here and now: Why have you come? How is this day different from any other? Their answer, that they have come to learn Torah, acknowledges that R. Eliezer

⁶¹ On the nature of liminality, see (Van Gennep 1960; Turner 1967, pp. 93–111, 1977, pp. 36–52).

⁶² According to the Talmud in tractate *Menahot*, 36b, there are two reasons why phylacteries are not worn on the Sabbath: "It was taught: It is written, 'And thou shalt observe this ordinance in its season from day to day' (Exod. 13:10). 'Day', but not night; 'from day', but not all days; hence the Sabbaths and the Festivals are excluded. This is the statement of R. Yose the Galilean; R. Akiva says . . . One might have thought that a man should put on the tefillin on Sabbaths and on Festivals, Scripture therefore says, And it shall be for a sign upon thy hand, excluding Sabbaths and Festivals." Rashi comments, "a sign between God and Israel, as is written [the Sabbath] is a sign between me and you." See also *Shulhan Arukh O.H.* 31:1; *Mishnah Berurah* ad loc., §§3–4.

possesses Torah knowledge that can only be acquired from him and places his excommunication in a negative light, because it prevented this Torah from being shared. R. Eliezer does not take this as a compliment, as one might have expected of another man. He attacks: “Why didn’t you come before now?” If I have Torah to teach, why did you ignore me for so many years? Or in other words: who are you trying to fool? Paralyzed by fear, they offer an obviously insincere answer: “We had no time”, as if a crowded schedule was the obstacle that kept the sages away from R. Eliezer.

R. Eliezer does not hold back and curses them: “I will be surprised if these die a natural death.” You killed me, socially and intellectually, and spiritually by banning me; in the end you will die for this sin. R. Akiva cannot contain himself and asks his teacher for details. R. Eliezer does not hesitate and shows no mercy: “Yours will be harder than theirs” (foreshadowing R. Akiva’s death by torture during the Hadrianic persecutions)⁶³.

This is not enough. R. Eliezer, who is in terrible emotional pain, addressed his visitors harshly so they will understand the nature of the situation in which they find themselves in his presence:

He then put his two arms over his heart, and said, “Woe to you, my two arms, that have been like two rolled up Torah scrolls. Much Torah have I studied, and much Torah have I taught. Much Torah have I learned, yet I but take away from my teachers as much as a dog laps from the sea. Much Torah have I taught, yet my disciples have only taken away from me as much as a paint-stick takes from its tube.

The Torah scroll to which R. Eliezer compares himself is rolled up and closed; my life is approaching its end, he informs them, and you have lost the opportunity to acquire the knowledge that was found in my arms, which are like Torah scrolls. The plastered cistern that never loses a drop says that he was exposed to the ocean of his teachers’ knowledge and managed to absorb only as much as a dog can lap up; my disciples took from me no more than the brush absorbs from the tube. He tells his present visitors that you did not even absorb that much, as you were not wise enough to come and receive some of the truth I possessed. His students’ indifference to R. Eliezer’s Torah is painful, and he expresses his pain in hyperbolic terms: “Not only that—I have studied three hundred laws on the subject of a deep bright spot, yet no man has ever asked me about them.” The truth is available, and no one is troubled that such a vast treasure has been abandoned unwanted. Only R. Akiva was different: “Moreover, I have studied three hundred . . . laws about the planting of cucumbers and no man, except Akiva ben Joseph, ever questioned me thereon.” The description of the situation in which R. Akiva did so links up with the incident of the oven of *Akhnai*, when R. Eliezer uprooted the carob tree and dried up the aqueduct:

For it once happened that he and I were walking together on a road, when he said to me, ‘My master, teach me about the planting of cucumbers.’ I said a word, and the whole field was filled with cucumbers. Then he said, ‘Master, you have taught me how to plant them, now teach me how to uproot them.’ I said a word and all the cucumbers gathered in one place.

R. Eliezer does, in fact, know how to plant, alongside his ability to uproot, as he does to the carob tree in the oven of *Akhnai* story. He concludes with an act of uprooting, at R. Akiva’s request. Perhaps uprooting the carob and reversing the flow of the aqueduct are not R. Eliezer’s nature, but only a counter-dynamic reaction, to which he was pushed by the dense and confrontational space of the study hall.

R. Eliezer’s isolation from the sages and from R. Akiva his disciple is intensified by the way he talks about his life. The sages try to fill the void to some extent, though this can never be successful. They asked a question about halakha: “What is the law of a ball, a shoemaker’s last, an amulet,

⁶³ Rabbi Akiva’s death has been addressed in various contexts. See (Lorberbaum 2001; Urbach 1987, chap. 15; Lau 2006, pp. 269–70).

a pouch of pearls, and a small weight?" The great dispute that led to his excommunication began as a disagreement about ritual purity. The sages are effectively breaking the ban by asking R. Eliezer about issues of purity. He gives a clear and concise answer: "They can become impure, and if impure, they are restored to their purity just as they are."

The sages ask one final question that ends this short and tragic dialogue: "What of a shoe that is [still] on the last?" R. Eliezer answers that it is pure, and immediately "his soul departed in purity." The circle of R. Eliezer's life has closed, and the sages, with R. Yehoshua in the lead, endeavor to make the situation a story of reconciliation and peacemaking: "Then R. Yehoshua stood up and exclaimed, 'The vow is abrogated, the vow is abrogated!'"

This story clearly alludes to that of the oven of *Akhnai*, which R. Eliezer declared to be ritually pure, whereas the sages rendered that oven impure and, metaphorically, extended that impurity to R. Eliezer. Now, too, R. Eliezer rules that the object is pure, but R. Yehoshua expounds this as the purity of reconciliation, the abrogation of the excommunication and the restoration of harmony. After long and difficult years of a heavy and painful silence, the sages visit R. Eliezer, who curses them; however, the story is ultimately shaped by R. Yehoshua and the sages into one of peacemaking. All the same, the rapid resolution of the trauma of R. Eliezer's excommunication does not suit the temperament of his star pupil Rabbi Akiva: "He commenced [his funeral address], and said: 'My father, my father, the chariot and horsemen of Israel (2 Kgs 2:12)! I have many coins, but no moneychanger to accept them.'"

R. Akiva is traumatized by the prolonged silence that divided him from his teacher and by the excommunication that did not allow R. Eliezer's disciples to learn from him. To whom will he now address his questions to fill the lacunae in his knowledge? His bitter lament leaves us with the sense that the excommunication is a stain that cannot be removed. Nevertheless, the Talmud concludes the story on a positive note: "From this story we see that he learned [to produce cucumbers by magic] from R. Eliezer.—He learned it from R. Eliezer but did not grasp it; then he learned it from R. Yehoshua, who made it clear to him."

Thus, it is possible to tell the story in a different way—in the spirit of the narrativist approach—and end here, with the statement that R. Eliezer was the first source of R. Akiva's knowledge but that it was R. Yehoshua, the man responsible for the ban, who enabled him to understand what R. Eliezer had taught him but he could not quite fathom.

4. Conclusions

We have read three stories, three acts of a human drama. All three center on a disagreement that leads either to death or to gentle and painful reconciliation that recognizes the imperative of listening to the voice of the other. On our intellectual and literary journey, we have examined a number of questions: How does one cope with conflict? What religious insights can be brought into the world of dynamic dialogue? How can concepts drawn from the theory of the unity of opposites be applied to facilitation in conflictual group situations? Finally, how can these ancient tales of the Talmudic sages provide inspiration to group facilitators, teachers, and communities of learners that are at loggerheads today?

We have pointed out that the unity of opposites' approach differs from the narrativist approach in its claim that the actual telling of a story generates *events in the world* that transcend the different narratives for which space has been opened up. According to this approach, it is not enough to acknowledge the fact that there are different points of view or sensitivities in the group. The facilitator must generate a space in which each narrative is not merely someone's perspective but is also an echo of the divine voice. The openness to other narratives is not merely political, it is metaphysical.

According to this approach, in addressing deep conflict, it is important to hear all the opposing positions in full without confining or restricting them by promoting compromise. Facilitation must find the roots of each opposing position in order to create a space for a deeper and more general, unified, spiritual truth. There are those whose internal language would have them refer to this truth as G-d, *Shekhina* or God. Of course, there are those who would object to the idea that there is a God or

even a single unifying truth, and they will see this process as a search for ideals, or responsibility for shared space or fundamental values.

One way or the other, in this approach to facilitation, each participant is encouraged to express him- or herself in as full and authentic a way as possible without blurring differences or conflicts that exist between acutely diverse points of view. At the same time, they undergo a shared learning experience and gain a new sort of attentiveness that has its roots both on Earth and in the heavens⁶⁴.

This article is only the beginning of a much broader project⁶⁵ that examines the potential of spiritual discourse as a method that does not pose a threat to groups engaged in conflict but can rather bring about acceptance that without the transcendent dimension would be difficult to achieve.

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⁶⁴ See (Leshem Zinger in preparation).

⁶⁵ For more on this topic, see Leshem Zinger, *A Tool for Peace*.

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