Many of you already know that I’ve been learning *Daf Yomi* and that I like to talk about it. When I mention it to people, the most common reaction is to question how, with everything pressing going on in so many different realms these days, do I prioritize focusing on something that can feel so far removed from our currently reality. To them, my response is “If only!”. When I embarked on this ambitious project back in January, I was looking for some sort of intellectual or spiritual fantasy escape into a mystical ancient world of sages. But the connections have consistently served as all too relevant reminders of the current moment and my own present mental state. Right now, we’re on tractate *Eruvin*, the first portion of which is ostensibly about the *eruv chatzeirot*, borders or ritual enclosures that we create to determine which areas are considered part of our community for purposes of not carrying things past them on Shabbat or Yom Kippur, et cetera. This type of *eruv* links public and private domains to each other. For those keeping track at home, those two zones, *Rashut HaRabim* and *Rashut HaYachid*, are what I talked about in my *drash* about learning *Masechet Shabbat* earlier in the *Daf Yomi* cycle. The idea of rigorously measuring to define what is **in** and what is **out** feels a bit too on-the-nose for comfort in this age of social distancing, intense identity politics, tracking Covid test results, the census, the election, and what we re-open when and where and for whom. Right at the start of the tractate, on page 3b, we read:

**“**With regard to **a clearing in a vineyard, Beit Shammai say:** Its measure is **twenty-four cubits, and Beit Hillel say: Sixteen cubits.** With regard to **the perimeter of a vineyard, Beit Shammai say: Sixteen cubits, and Beit Hillel say: Twelve cubits.**”

These questions about viniculture can feel either absurdly abstruse, or incredibly all encompassing, depending upon what actual boundaries are at stake, and how literally we are reading the text. Drawing sharp lines can be important, and while it’s sometimes difficult, I think marking definitive boundaries is much easier than the alternative, which is to dwell in a world where things aren’t simply either *kasher* or *pasul* but rather exist on some sort of three dimensional spectrum that is more complex than Democrat vs. Republican or Conservative vs. Orthodox or even Shammai vs. Hillel. *Eruvin* 6b goes on to say:

“The Gemara poses a question: **But do we adopt the** respective **stringencies of two** authorities who disagree on a series of issues? **Wasn’t it taught** in a *baraita*: The ***halakha* is always in accordance with** the opinion of **Beit Hillel, but one who wishes to act in accordance with the opinion of Beit Shammai may do so,** and one who wishes to act **in accordance with the opinion of Beit Hillel may do so.** If he wishes to adopt both **the leniencies of Beit Shammai and** also **the leniencies of Beit Hillel,** he is **a wicked person.** And if he wishes to adopt both **the stringencies of Beit Shammai and** also **the stringencies of Beit Hillel, with regard to him the verse states: “The fool walks in darkness”** ([Ecclesiastes 2:14](file://localhost/Ecclesiastes.2.14)). **Rather,** he should act **either in accordance with Beit Shammai,** following both **their leniencies and their stringencies, or in accordance with Beit Hillel,** following both **their leniencies and their stringencies.”**

When there areshades of grey or apparent contradictions in the text, my personal favorite answers tend to come from the sage Abaye, who you may remember I admiringly quoted as saying “*lo kashia*” or “there is no difficulty” back in *Masechet Shabbat*. In today’s *daf, Eruvin* 19b, Abaye again saves the day, this time stepping in to an ongoing disagreement about the precise number and size of upright boards needed to construct an *eruv* around a cistern. Abaye says, “There is no need to be particular about this. [Just] **teach:** [It is kosher] **provided that he increases** the number of upright **boards.”** Abaye for the win!

He successfully clarifies the *halachic* ruling, and in so doing, also highlights the seemingly mundane ambiguities that exist all around us and therefore can define how we choose to function in the world. We can perseverate about the details, or we can remember to step back and focus on the bigger picture. In this case, just erect as many posts as you reasonably can, stop arguing, and get on with the important work of building community.

This *masechet* has not led me to start looking at my Brooklyn block in terms of *amot*, or cubits, but rather pushed me to check all the things I am silently measuring, calculating, and judging all the time. Is this person on the subway platform standing more or less than six feet away from me? Does that reckoning vary depending upon how they are dressed or the color of their skin? With the *Yamim Noraim* approaching, do I repent for the measurements that I have been making too subjectively? Do I resolve to measure even more cautiously, or instead, to just refrain from calculating and keeping score all the time, and simply observe without judgment? When HaShem writes my name in the Book of Life for the year to come, or Heaven forbid, omits my name, into which column of the c*heshbon ha nefesh*, of the accounting of the soul, will my stringencies fall? Perhaps my leniencies reflect more righteousness than my precision does. If we are to make decisions that define ourselves and our community based on generosity rather than on rigor, I’m inclined to think we are closer to building the world that we desperately desire. But ironically, that judgment call is not based on facts, or on a decisive *pasuk* of *Tanach* or a recent *daf* of *Talmud*. It is instead based on the *svara*, or moral intuition, that I am forming as I reflect on myself and on my own gut responses to reading the text of *Eruvin*. Searching for this wisdom, not specific *halachic* rulings, is why I am still engaged in this daily project of study. The Talmud is famously amazing for including dissenting opinions, not just the majority ruling or the loudest voice. That inspires me to listen to my own internal conflicts, and to give fair consideration to all aspects of an ambivalent feeling.

So this year can be both a time of intense fear and simultaneously one of unprecedented opportunity. This week’s Torah portion is *Parashat Ki Teitze* and the Haftarah is the fifth of the seven readings of consolation from the book of Isaiah. It’s a reminder that after the destruction of the Temple that we commemorated on *Tisha B’Av*, we’ll need a while to put ourselves back together. Chapter 54 verse 2 says, “Enlarge the site of your tent; extend the size of your dwelling; do not stint! Lengthen the ropes, and drive the pegs firm.” Speaking in the vocabulary familiar from the lists of required measurements in *Maseche*t *Eruvin*, Isaiah is telling us here to think of the most generous possible reading of the text. After destruction, he exhorts, aim to rebuild as big as possible! It’s a precursor to the inclusive idea of Big Tent Judaism and that we should draw our communal boundaries, our *eruvim*, to make space for as many people to dwell among us as possible. We won’t read about “A time to break down, and a time to build up” (which is again from *Kohelet*, this time in chapter three verse three) until *Sukkot*, but as I reflect and do my Elul *teshuva*, I want to focus on holding contradiction and sitting with it in search of a balance. Heeding the instructions in *Eruvin*, let’s not be all *machmir* (like the “fool who walks in darkness”) or all *makil* (like the wicked person from *daf* 6b*)*, but be fully human, and accept what we can measure, be it in cubits or in statistics, and especially embrace all that **cannot** be measured in our community. There are certainly challenging grey areas in between those two extremes, so let’s not shy away from using them as inspiration to push for expansive and meaningful growth in the year to come.

Shabbat shalom.