

Writing Memorable Characters: Elu v'Elu - These and Those

Session Two: Conflict—Developing an Internal Monologue

Opening Ritual: Welcome and Connections

Approx. 10 minutes

When you face a difficult decision driven by two competing desires, what is your practice to help you resolve the conflict? (1 minute or less per participant)

Today's Focus

Approx. 1 minute

- Connect with Others
- Explore *Elu v'Elu* (these and those) with emphasis on integration of contrasting desires or traits
- Cultivate the craft of writing memorable characters using the tool of internal monologue to resolve conflict

Jewish Wisdom: Jewish history, stories, and sources offering guidance for our writing and life challenges

Approx. 20 minutes

We continue to guide our writing of memorable characters using the Talmudic lens known as *Elu v'Elu* (“these and those”). Most often, the idea of *Elu v'Elu*—valuing “these and those”—pertains to a method of argument that honors all voices. Jewish tradition teaches that we are to hear one another, even contrasting voices, because there is insight in each perspective. We believe that a third—better—way can emerge from conflict when we listen to contrasting points of view offered in search of a good outcome.

As Jewish writers, we are invited to apply a “these and those” approach to creating characters. Today, we’ll explore writing about the inevitable outcome of characters with contrasting motivations and traits (*yetzer hara* and *yetzer hatov*): conflict. We’ll focus on giving voice to our characters’ internal conflicts (e.g., moral or psychological). Their struggle to resolve conflict becomes a powerful engine that releases insight, enabling your character to grow and change, while providing forward momentum and drama.

In the phrase *Elu v'Elu*, we bring attention to the “v,” which in Hebrew means “and.” Certainly, if the rabbis had intended a different approach to resolving conflict, they would have used the phrase *Elu o Elu*—meaning “these or those.” The challenge the rabbis set for us is not to choose one desire over another, but rather to do the work of integrating our contrasting, or dueling, desires, as all are worthy and each holds value. When attending to our dueling desires, guided by high purpose—to act in a goodly or Godly way—we can, as the rabbis note, act “for the sake of heaven” (*Pirke Avot* 5:17).

The following quote from contemporary biblical scholar and author Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg provides a window into how tradition suggests we resolve—not dissolve—contrasting desires in service of a higher purpose. Get ready to put this text into your own words.

“I think that redemption (being saved from doing wrong*) happens in listening to oneself... A deep destructiveness works within human beings, which is self-destructiveness as much as anything else. Human aggression turned against the good should at least be recognized as such. Destructive impulses cannot be totally disposed of but may be integrated to allow love to flourish.” Love flourishes, according to Zornberg: “when you enact, embrace and integrate all your heart(s) *b'chol levacha*” — that is the meaning of the rabbinic teaching, she notes, “With both your hearts, the good inclination and the evil one.”

Questions for *Hevruta* (study partner):

1. Explain the text in your own words.
2. Zornberg prescribes self-talk as a way to find resolution to one’s contrasting desires. But do you really only talk to yourself? In what ways might self-talk include the voices of the past? How do past relationships and experiences enter a conversation you have with yourself?
3. Zornberg notes that conflicting desires cannot be blotted out; rather, they are the source of a third, a better way through integration (add insight from these and some from those, then something better emerges). Share an example of what the integration of contrasting desires might sound like.

4. Zornberg’s version of higher purpose—“for the sake of heaven”—is to act so that love flourishes and overcomes destructive impulses. Reflecting on your answer to the connection question, what factors in your own life (your backstory) help you reach for a higher purpose (love, goodness, Godliness) when making decisions?

If you have time, you may want to invite others to share their answers with the larger group.

Writer to Writer: Wisdom of Seasoned Jewish Writers

Approx. 10 minutes

Today, we’ll write the internal monologue of a character struggling to resolve their conflicting traits or desires. First, review this advice from a contemporary Jewish author. What stands out for you?



William Faulkner wrote, ‘the only thing worth writing about is the human heart in conflict with itself.’ Our characters are not marionettes for our preconceived ideas; rather, writers must listen to characters, letting them express their internal contradictions. As an exercise, imagine a character sitting across from you as you observe closely, slowing down to witness their body language and tune in to their words. You may want to interview them, asking questions related to your story. If you do this exercise with patience, your character may surprise you, offering you a glimpse of their vulnerabilities and deepest conflicts.



Amy Gottlieb, author of *The Beautiful Possible*

Giving voice to a character struggling with competing desires allows the reader to know them intimately and honestly in a way that dialogue and action alone cannot.

To pull back the curtain on your character’s personal alchemy for decision-making, let your reader hear the competing forces at work within. What voices are speaking in your character’s head (e.g., a parent, a spouse)? What past experiences are shouting in your character’s mind (e.g., a betrayal, a death), influencing their internal struggle and eventual growth or change?

Consider:

- Writing in the unique voice of how your character speaks; dwell in your imagination with your character listening to them speak to you.
- Letting the character's body language and behavior reveal their internal struggle.
- Drawing on their backstory, exploring how pivotal events and significant past relationships shape their decision making.

Writing Prompts

Approx. 20 minutes

Before writing, reflect on the insights gathered from the Writer to Writers, Jewish wisdom, and your *hevruta*. Infuse those insights into your prompt. This exercise could pertain to a new project, something you're currently developing, or an idea you may begin here and continue to refine.

Consider returning to the character and backstory that you developed previously or begin by creating a new character defined by two contrasting traits or desires.

Place them before a high-stakes decision where there is no easy answer—after all, they are driven by dueling motivations or traits. Write their internal monologue as they struggle toward integration. What and who are they hearing as they strive to decide?

Allow insight to emerge, revealing the new way that moves your character forward. Pay attention to what enables your character to ultimately reach for higher purposes.

Consider making this character the focal point of your creative work, whether it's a song, a narrative poem, a story, or a play. If you're writing a memoir, you might draw inspiration from your own life or from the past of someone you're writing about.

Be open to whatever may appear on the page—this writing time is designed to be playful and a rough beginning to spark ideas you might return to later.

JWC Writer to Writer: learning from your colleagues

Approx. 20 minutes

Invite each writer to read from their work to a partner, while the other writer listens with care. (5 minutes each) Share:

- Warm feedback (something you appreciate in the writing—an image, sound, word choice, etc.)
- Something that you're curious about (something that might help in a next edit)

Join back together as a large group. Participants can share their experience of the prompt or choose to read one minute or less from their draft. Warm feedback welcomed. (10 minutes)

Next steps & Closing Ritual

Approx. 10 minutes

Today we explored *Elu v'Elu* (“these and those”) with a focus on the integration of desire as an engine for insight. By creating characters who face difficult decisions, driven by contrasting or dueling desires, you are sure to create complex, memorable characters. As a closing ritual, we invite you to pack up your computers, tablets, or notebooks and share with your circle:

- What are you taking home with you? (emotions, needs, questions, or writing ideas)
- What new perspectives on writing memorable characters are you carrying forward?
- You may want to work on the draft you generated today, bringing it next time as we continue to explore *Elu v'Elu* (these and those) and the craft of writing complex characters. When we meet again, we will focus on the tool of dialogue as a way to express your character’s insight and growth outwardly.

» **Next: Session Three: The Third Way | Crafting Dialogue** »