

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

Session Three: The Third Way—Crafting Dialogue

Opening Ritual: Welcome and Connections

Approx. 10 minutes

The rabbis say, “To change a habit is as difficult as the parting of the Red Sea” (*Talmud, Sanhedrin* 108b). Share a time when someone’s words either encouraged or discouraged your growth or change. (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 insight that emerges from integration of contrasting desires or traits
- Use dialogue to illustrate the “third way” demonstrating growth and the impact others can have on it

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

Approx. 20 minutes

Guiding our writing of memorable characters is 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.

Today, we focus on giving voice to the “third way” that emerges through dialogue with others. When contrasting desires are integrated, a new and better insight takes shape. As humans, we often share these emerging insights with those close to us, testing the waters. Dialogue offers an opportunity to receive feedback—both positive and negative—that can strengthen, refine, or challenge our motivation to move forward. *Elu v'Elu* offers a unique framework for understanding a person’s personal alchemy in decision-making. We recognize that we don’t necessarily extinguish our contrasting traits and desires; rather, we move forward in a new way, even as some conflicts remain within us.

The following excerpt from the Israeli song “New Day Will Rise” is intended to deepen our practice of exploring a characters’ personal alchemy for decision-making. It emphasizes Jewish tradition’s ancient and contemporary understanding that we must move forward, even while holding within us contrasting traits or desires—our “these and those.”

“New Day Will Rise” is the debut single by Israeli singer Yuval Raphael, who hid from Hamas for eight hours under dead bodies in a shelter at the Nova Music Festival. Of the 50 people in that shelter, she was one of the 11 who survived. The song, written after October 7 by contemporary Israeli musical artist Keren Peles, came in second place at the 2025 Eurovision competition.

This song can be understood as a conversation. Listen for 3 distinct voices. The narrator begins by speaking to the young people murdered at the Nova Music Festival. Next, you’ll hear those who perished responding with the chorus, and then a quote from the *Song of Songs* brings forth the voice of our ancient ancestors. A “third way” emerges as pain and loss coexist with love and hope, signaling a path forward. Get ready to put the song in your own words.

New Day Will Rise

And even if you say goodbye
You’ll never go away
You are the rainbow in my sky
My colors in the grey
My only wish upon a star
Sunshine in the day
The only song that my piano ever plays

And even if you say goodbye
You’ll always be around
To lift me up and take me high
Keep my feet close to the ground
Are you proud of me tonight
Dreams are coming true
I choose the light
Nothing to lose if I lose you

chorus:

New day will rise
Life will go on
Everyone cries
Don’t cry alone
Darkness will fade
All the pain will go by
But we will stay
Even if you say goodbye

Mayim rabim
Lo yechabbu
Et ha’ahava
V’neharot lo yishtefu.

scan to listen



מִיָּם רַבִּים לֹא יִכְלֹוּ לְכַבֵּת אֶת־הָאֲהָבָה וְנְהָרוֹת לֹא יִשְׁטְפוּהָ
“Vast floods cannot quench love, nor rivers drown it.” *Song of Songs*, 8:7

Questions for *Hevruta* (study partner):

1. Explain the text in your own words.
2. The song expresses the contrasting feelings and desires—the “these and those”—of the narrator. Describe the narrator’s struggle. What happens to the pain?
3. As the narrator shares her emerging, fragile insight, what role do the other voices play in her ability to grow and change?
4. Think back to a time when someone’s words either encouraged or discouraged your growth or change. What enabled—or hindered—you from hearing an outside perspective?

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 a dialogue to express a character’s growth or change. First, review this advice from a contemporary Jewish author. What stands out for you?



In the heightened reality of fiction, dialogue must sound authentic, but it should never just convey information. Strong dialogue reveals character and relationships. It can prickle with dramatic tension. You can craft that through the content of the conversation, e.g. bickering, flirtation, evasiveness, self-revelation. (Philip Roth is a master of this.)

You can also play with one of the writer’s most powerful tools, subtext. Use beats—bits of internal monologue or action—to reveal the emotional narrative going on beneath the surface: unresolved issues characters are bringing into the scene, unequal power relationships, gaps between what a character says and what they really feel.



Janice Steinberg, author of *The Tin Horse* and the *Margo Simon* mystery series

Dialogue enables you to show your character in action, in relationship with another, and to create emotional connections between characters. Accompanied by carefully selected body language, conversation can illuminate the impact that encouraging or discouraging feedback has on a character’s fragile new growth.

When your character speaks to another, you'll need to decide whether they are testing, telling, or demonstrating their new insight. Consider how their voice, language, or body changes as a result of realizing a new, better way. Think about what your character is willing or able to reveal and conceal. Attend to how their revelation is received and how your character reacts to feedback.

Consider:

- Weaving into the dialogue beats of actions or internal thoughts (e.g. slammed the door/ while saying “I’m brave”, thinking I’m afraid).
- Writing in the character’s authentic voice, vocabulary, and rhythm.
- Using dialogue to deepen relationships between characters, creating an emotional moment demonstrating the third way.

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 you developed previously (if this is your first session, begin by imagining a character with conflicting desires or traits). Place them before a high-stakes decision where there is no easy answer—after all, they are driven by dueling motivations.

Write a dialogue between your character and a meaningful person in their life, someone who either encourages or discourages their “third way,” or emerging insight. Pay attention to what your character chooses to reveal or conceal during the dialogue. In this intense moment, portray how the feedback they receive encourages or discourages their growth and change, while moving the narrative forward. Express in the dialogue how open/closed your character is to the feedback.

If you are writing a memoir, you may draw from a lived experience—either as the protagonist or as the person offering feedback—or recall a scene where you witnessed this kind of exchange. For writing a song or poem, use the format of *New Day Will Rise* to inspire a dialogue through multiple voices.

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 creating complex, memorable characters. By developing characters with contrasting desires and traits who demonstrate their growth through dialogue, you are sure to craft characters that feel real, engaging, and memorable.

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?

Mazel Tov on completing the JWC module on *simcha*!

In the tradition of a *siyyum*, a celebration marking the completion of a unit of learning—most often a tractate of Talmud—learners say **Hadran Alach** (We will return to you). This phrase reminds us that completing a study is not the end of the journey, but just another step.

Following this tradition, you may want to mark this moment with a special celebration/*siyyum*. Consider using the phrase *Hadran Alach* (“We will return to you”) to reflect on a learning or writing practice that you would like to return to as your writer’s journey continues. Like the study of Torah, a writer’s journey is a lifelong process.

Hadran Alach

הִדְרָן עֲלֶיךָ

הִדְרָן עֲלֶיךָ מִסְכָּת (יֹאמֵר שֵׁם הַמִּסְכָּת) וְהִדְרָךְ עָלֵינוּ. וְדַעְתֵּן עֲלֶיךָ מִסְכָּת (יֹאמֵר שֵׁם הַמִּסְכָּת) וְדַעְתֵּךְ עָלֵינוּ. לֹא נִתְנָשִׁי מִיָּנְךָ מִסְכָּת (יֹאמֵר שֵׁם הַמִּסְכָּת) וְלֹא תִתְנָשִׁי מִיָּנֵנוּ, לֹא בְעֵלְמָא הַדִּין וְלֹא בְעֵלְמָא דְאַתֵּי:

We will return to you, **Elu v’Elu**, and you will return to us; our mind is on you, **Elu v’Elu**, and your mind is on us; we will not forget you, **Elu v’Elu**, and you will not forget us – not in this world and not in the next world.