

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

Session One: Contrasting Traits and Desires—Writing a Backstory

Opening Ritual: Welcome and Connections

Approx. 10 minutes

Think of someone whom you consider to be “complex”. Complex, in this case, isn’t a bad thing; it just means someone who demonstrates notably contrasting characteristics or traits (e.g., teaches love and peace yet is ill-tempered with family). Share two of their contrasting qualities or traits. (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 *yetzer hara* and *yetzer hatov* (the evil and good inclinations)
- Use the tool of backstory to create a memorable character with contrasting traits/desires

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.

As Jewish writers, we are invited to apply a “these and those” approach to creating characters. When we do, we avoid writing what are known as “flat characters”—ones with a single defining trait, such as all good or all evil. Rather, our characters embody contrasting worthy desires: to do good and to be moral (*yetzer hatov*), and to reach for power, pleasure, and self-preservation (*yetzer hara*).

People are—well—complicated. Our writing needs to reflect that truth, so we'll begin our three-session journey of writing memorable characters with the Jewish idea that within each person exist multiple, contrasting desires and traits.

Our tradition names these desires as the *yetzer hatov* and the *yetzer hara*. The *yetzer hatov* is the desire to do good, to act morally. The *yetzer hara* literally means the desire to do evil, but is better understood as the drive for self-preservation, pleasure, and power. *Yetzer* can be understood as the pull between two powerful inclinations that shape a person's moral growth and change. According to Jewish tradition, all desires are necessary and valued, as they motivate us and move us forward.

In the following excerpt from *Bereshit Rabbah*, a midrashic commentary on the book of Genesis dating from approximately 200–500 CE, the rabbis celebrate the full range of human desire, emphasizing that humans contain “these and those.” Pay attention to how both *hatov* (good) and *hara* (bad) motivations are acknowledged as integral parts of the human experience—necessary and driving us forward. Prepare to put the text in your own words.

Bereshit Rabbah

רַבִּי נַחֲמָן בַּר שְׁמוּאֵל בַּר נַחֲמָן בִּשְׁם רַב שְׁמוּאֵל בַּר נַחֲמָן אָמַר, הִנֵּה טוֹב מְאֹד, זֶה יִצְרָ טוֹב. וְהִנֵּה טוֹב מְאֹד, זֶה יִצְרָ רָע. וְכִי יִצְרָ הָרַע טוֹב מְאֹד, אֶתְמָהָא. אֵלָּא שְׂאֵלֻלִי יִצְרָ הָרַע לֹא בְּנֵה אָדָם בֵּית, וְלֹא נִשְׂא אִשָּׁה, וְלֹא הוֹלִיד, וְלֹא נִשְׂא וְנָתַן.

Rabbi Nahman bar Shmuel bar Nahman said in the name of Rav Shmuel bar Nahman: “Behold it was very good” – this is the good inclination; “and behold it was very good” – this is the evil inclination. Is the evil inclination, then, very good? This is a rhetorical question. Rather, were it not for the evil inclination, a man would never build a house, would never marry a wife, would never beget children, and would never engage in commerce.

Questions for *Hevruta* (study partner):

1. Explain the text in your own words.
2. What insight does this text provide about the *Yetzer Hara*? *Yetzer Hatov*?
3. How does the text affirm or conflict with your own understanding of human desires?
4. Think back to the person or character you shared in our opening exercise who exhibited contrasting traits. You probably don't know their backstory, but what might you imagine contributing to their dramatically different traits (e.g., family of origin, formative experiences)?

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 draft a backstory for a character you create, or a person you write about (in memoir, poem, song, etc.). First, review this advice from a contemporary Jewish author about writing a backstory. What stands out for you?



You can have a sympathetic protagonist or an antagonistic or unlikeable protagonist, but the person still has to have a backstory, that is some personal history or some psychological disposition, behind his or her yearning or drive. You can slide this in as a memory passage or a full flashback passage after the action gets underway, which is what I prefer, or you can start with a time-past introduction to the story, add white space, then jump to present time.

Feel free to create an off-beat or skewed character.



Lynn Levin, poet and writer, author of the short story collection *House Parties*

Backstory, simply put, is whatever comes before the main story or characterization. A backstory—most often not used fully in the creative piece—enables a writer to understand the character they create: who they are and why they are complex individuals.

Using an *Elu v'Elu* lens, we write a backstory to explain why a character is motivated by contrasting worthy desires—to do good and act morally (these), and to strive for power, pleasure, and personal gain (those). Backstory answers questions such as: “What brought the character to this moment?” and “Why do they have contrasting traits or desires?” In memoir writing, backstory clarifies answers to these questions about real individuals.

Consider:

- Identifying two sharply contrasting or “dueling” desires or traits in a character
- Writing about why your character is driven by these contrasting traits—for example, a desire to do good (morality, acting on behalf of others) and, at the same time, a desire for self-preservation, power, or pleasure.
- Exploring what has given your character a unique voice, shaped their values, and shed light on their motivations.

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.

To craft a memorable character, begin by identifying their contrasting traits, desires, or motivations (“these and those”). The backstory you write today will explain the source of their complexity. Alternatively, you may start with a character’s backstory—contrasting traits or desires will naturally emerge.

If you’re not working on an existing character or a person from your life, create a new character by combining two or more contrasting traits or desires that you heard in our connection question.

Here are two idea starters for writing a backstory:

- Map your character’s life journey through relationships. Identify one or two defining relationships (e.g., a friend, parent, sibling, spouse). What happened in your character’s childhood, young adulthood, or current relationships that help explain their current contradictions? (Especially helpful when writing memoir or short fiction.)
- Identify one or two “triumph or tribulation” moments in the life of your character. Imagine your character’s defining events of success or failure. What deeply felt emotions did they experience that could clearly explain why they embody contrasting desires or traits? Consider that their present contradictions are a direct consequence of these pivotal moments. (Especially helpful when writing poetry or songs.)

Over the next two sessions, 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 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 *yetzer hara* and *yetzer hatov*. By creating characters with contrasting desires and traits, 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 wish to continue working on the draft you generated today and bring it next time as we continue to explore *Elu v'Elu* and the craft of writing complex characters. In the coming weeks, we will explore how contrasting traits and desires fuel conflict, with a focus on writing internal monologue and dialogue that emerge from those conflicts.

» **Next: Session Two: Conflict | Developing an Internal Monologue** »