

Leviticus *kavana* - Grassroots 2012

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And so we come, as we do every year, to the part of the service when the Torah takes a left turn and veers into the rather choppy waters of relationship advice.

The text of Leviticus, which we're about to read, presents us with a challenge of interpretation. The text itself is opaque at best. It states that a man should not lie with another man, as he would lie with a woman. Even anatomically, it's not straightforward what this means.

What is clear is that this text has become, for too long, a source of pain. There are those, both in the past and in the present, who take it to mean that same-sex sex is somehow beyond the pale.

We cannot accept that reading. We cannot accept it because it divisive. The Jew has always been the one who was *othered*. The word Hebrew - *Ivri* - literally means the *Other*, the one who comes *me'ever*, from across the river, from the other side of the tracks.

And so when some people in our community are *othered* by the tradition itself, that feels like a double rejection. If the Jewish community, the community of *others*, excludes you and *others* you because of who you are, where *then* do you find refuge and comfort? That is the painful reality for some of us.

So in encountering this text, in confronting the text, we're going to do what Jews have done since the very beginning. After the fall of the Temple, the rabbis and scholars of the first century came together in a place called Yavneh and there, away from the smouldering ruins of Jerusalem, they created a community of questions, of different perspectives, of dialogue and joyous learned debate.

We're going to walk humbly in their footsteps. Yet in doing so, we are going to be mindful that they didn't all walk in step. Some took circuitous routes. Some meandered. Several wandered off on their own, meditated in a cave for 40 years, before returning to the community with new insights and renewed strength. They all walked the journey only *they* could embark on.

We too are a community of wanderers. Of wandering and wondering and pondering, questioning and impatient Jews.

Now, our rabbinic ancestors felt a strong loyalty to the text but they understood that *Matan Torah*, the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai, meant that our textual tradition is no longer in Heaven but in our hands. God gave the torah in an act of trust - and an act of trusteeship. And in that giving, God also gave us the human sensitivity, the right - and the duty - to find a meaning and an understanding that is true for everyone and for every age.

Now, you might say, if the text is so problematic and so hurtful, why not take it out of the Yom Kippur service?

Well, the answer is that Leviticus is part of the Torah. Had it only been part of the liturgy it would be easy to discard. Yet however you conceive of the authorship of the text, the Torah is our gift to the world. That confers upon us a responsibility.

So that is why we read it: to ensure that no one should be able to open their *chumash* and read Leviticus without knowing that around them stands a community committed to reading this text in a inclusive and life-affirming way.

So what we have to do is to imbue the text with humanity and respectfulness. Not reading it would mean missing an opportunity to redeem the text from the traditional, divisive understanding. It provokes us to think of ways to live our life as redemptive commentary.

So this year, I'd like us to try something new. In doing so, we shall take inspiration and permission from other parts of our tradition where we accompany texts with performative acts. For example. think of the way our relationship to the plagues is changed by removing a drop of wine from our cup for each plague. That silent ritual, which is not part of the text of the Haggadah, becomes itself a powerful commentary on the text.

So when we get to the third *aliyah* of the Torah service, let's do this together: at the start of the reading, take off your shoes and place them on the floor in front of you.

Now, I'm not going to ask you to put on your neighbour's shoes and walk a mile in them. I'm not going to ask you to take even one step in your neighbour's shoes, although that *is* the hardest part. I want you to look at your *own* shoes. Because the truth about Leviticus is that it is not about one group being *othered*- it's about all of *us*.

All of us have a '*ger shegar betocheinu*' - as the text continues to say - an *unsettledness* that lives inside us. All of us have aspects of ourselves we feel *othered* by, that we feel are foreign to us. All of us feel, at various times, held back by anxieties that stop us of from realising our full potential.

This is my confession, my *vidui*. When I was thirteen years old, on a rainy night in November, I was on my way to an evening at BA, the Jewish youth movement. As I crossed to road to catch the train, an old Czech couple in an old Czech car rammed into me and sent me flying across the road. I was unconscious and bleeding from several fracture sites. An ambulance brought me to the hospital, from where my dear parents then received the call that every parent dreads, 'It is from the Hospital's Emergency Department. It's about your child.' My parents raced to the hospital, where they found me unconscious, with severe facial trauma, not knowing how long it would take for me to wake up. And for those hours, which must have felt like an eternity, I'd like to use this moment to say to my mother who is present here today, 'Mum, I'm sorry for the worry I caused you.' That night I underwent the first of many operations that would continue for the rest of my teenage year. From the age of 13-18 I must have at least a dozen operations on that second favourite part of a young boy's body, my face.

Why am I telling you this story? Because having spent my teenage years worrying about whether my face would fall apart or how other people would see me, I was able to learn to live with it, overcome it, and I believe use it as catalyst for something good... well, for the benefit of the NHS. As a practising doctor now, every so often I think about those doctors and surgeons who helped me back then. I know that their skill and their confidence inspired me and led me to be who I am today. As they say, life is like photography, if you're lucky, you can use the negatives to develop.

So at the start of the third *aliyah*, please place your shoes in front of you and look at them for a second. If you have complicated shoe issues, if you feel, as it were, *othered* by your shoes, just imagine them there in front of you. And ask yourself, which person would you like to fill those shoes? How are you going to walk into the world in the coming year? You're the only one who can fill your own shoes. When you step into the world and into this new year, where is your journey going take you? And then walk proudly and confidently. Strut.

And at the end of the reading, as you put your shoes back on, try to remember that feeling. Bring it into your year. So that each morning when you put on your shoes you'll remember to be mindful about the steps you're about to take.

So this is my blessing for the Torah service this year -

In the coming year, be truthful in your relationships.

Don't lie with a man as you would with a woman

Don't lie with a woman as you would with a man

Don't lie with anybody in the same way as you would with anybody else

Treat every person as unique

Treat every love relationship with the respect it deserves

Be gentle with yourself, have patience, and

Respect the people you love and make love to

Respect yourself and find ways to love yourself as well

May the pattern of our footsteps, the journeys we take and the love we make be the ultimate commentary on the text. *Shana tova.*