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## Deciding to Belong: Between Ethics, Instrumentalism and History

Rachel Burstein | Aharei Mot - Kedoshim 2015 | Bronfman Torah

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A year or so before my Bronfman summer, when I was fifteen years old, the Orthodox rabbi at my pluralistic Jewish day school called me into his office. There had been some complaints, he began, instinctively darting into the passive voice. An unnamed parent had complained.

It seemed that a parent objected to me reciting blessings over the Torah during morning services. In the parent's estimation, my status as a patrilineal Jew conflicted with his or her son or daughter's obligation to hear the Torah service conducted by someone he or she recognized as a full member of the Jewish community.

The school principal believed there was an easy resolution to the problem. "Why not just convert? It's a technicality. Just like American citizenship. You jump through the hoops and your status isn't challenged."

For me, though, it was far more complicated, far more emotional (as it is for those seeking American citizenship, as well, I can imagine). I wondered what I would have been converting from, given that I had been raised as a Jew, by Jews, from the time of my birth, what that conversion said to the community in which I had been brought up. I wondered whether I *wanted* to belong to a community that determined membership based on a fluke of birth, a community that privileged the experience of some members over the feelings of others.

I thought about this episode as I read this week's Torah portion, *Aharei Mot/Kedoshim* (Leviticus 16:1-20:27). On the face of it, the portion is a list of rules. You shall. You shall not. Moses delivers God's instructions to the Israelites. Do. Do not. The list goes on and on. If you do this, then this will happen to you.

To someone like me, rooted in modern standards of ethical behavior, many rules seem obscure (e.g. "You shall not let your cattle mate with a different kind."). Others are objectionable to my personal sensibilities (e.g. "Do not lie with a male as one lies with a woman; it is an abhorrence."). And still other rules seem obvious, the building blocks of modern ethics (e.g. "You shall not insult the deaf, or place a stumbling block before the blind.").

But what is so interesting about the list is that not one of God's commands is framed in terms of ethics. Not once does Moses say to the Israelites, "You should do this because it is the *right* thing to do, because there is some inherent goodness in this action." The Israelites are told not to do certain things because they are depravities, but there is no indication of *why* they are depravities.

Instead, the list of requirements is offered as a means through which the Israelites can distinguish themselves from other nations. Indeed, at the very end of the portion, God explains that in order to settle in the land of Israel, the Israelites "shall not follow the practices of the nation that I am driving out before you; for it is because they did all these things that I abhorred them." The establishment of a homeland further delineates

the Israelites as a people, and that status is contingent on a shared set of behaviors that other people do not follow. Thus, behaviors are not intrinsically right or intrinsically wrong, but rather a demonstration of community belonging. So God says “I the Lord am your God” after nearly every set of commandments.

For me, the painful exchange with the rabbi when I was fifteen years old was about ethical behavior. For the rabbi - as in *Aharei Mot/Kedoshim* - it was about the set of rules to govern the parameters of the community. They were neither right or wrong, good or bad. They simply were. And so we talked past each other.

Still I am not satisfied. Because to me, the vision of community that is presented in this week’s Torah portion is confusing. On the one hand, God is insistent on prohibiting mixing, a concern that continues in the Jewish community today. (A religious demographer at a major research institute once told me that when his group released reports, he could count on animated inquiries from the Jewish press about the few lines devoted to projections of intermarriage rates and questions about how his outfit had defined “Jew”; no other religious group much cared.)

So the Israelites shall not put on cloth from a mixture of two kinds of material. More concerning: “Anyone among the Israelites, or among the strangers residing in Israel, who gives any of his offspring to Molech, shall be put to death; the people of the land shall pelt him with stones.” More than that, if the people refuse to pelt the offender with stones, God will see to it that the punishment is meted out. So strongly does God feel.

But on the other hand, there *are* strangers residing in Israel who are included as part of the community. In fact the Israelites are told, “The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I the Lord am your God.”

It is interesting to me that here the rationale is neither ethical (a framework that I believed my high school principal should have used), nor instrumental (a framework that my high school principal was, in fact, using). Rather it is historical.

The historical framework makes sense to me. I am a historian by training. But using past experience as a defense for community belonging at present also concerns me. The

danger is that we only tell the stories of the community that we've created, and that in doing so, we fail to acknowledge the contexts in which they were conceived. We welcome the stranger but fail to appreciate why he has been made a stranger, fail to understand what he can bring to our community. We give refuge, even empathy, but we do not acknowledge the ways in which the experience diverges from our own. We treat him as our own, but we do not see his own history. The particulars are missing. His own past community remains unacknowledged.

The danger of the historical framework isn't merely theoretical. Recently revealed emails hacked from Sony showed that PBS and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. left out mention that the actor Ben Affleck had an ancestor who owned slaves in a recent show about genealogy. Affleck was embarrassed and requested the omission. The problem, of course, is that the show is not really about Affleck, even if he is the vehicle through which historical investigation takes place in this particular episode. By not telling the story of the slaveowner, we also deny the histories of the slaves he owned. I worry about a historical rationale centered solely on our own experience. One that potentially deals in false equivalencies.

The ethical framework that appealed so much to me at age fifteen now seems problematic, wavering with each authority and era, even as I sometimes employ it (eating meat lasagna at a friend's house, so as not to offend, for example). The rule-based, instrumental framework that this week's Torah portion offers seems unnecessarily cruel at times (as with the instruction that I convert), and sometimes arbitrary (constant only because the text tells us these rules apply). The historical approach that is also suggested in the text runs the risk of a self-centeredness that prevents us from truly welcoming the stranger.

Where does that leave us, then? Why continue to wrestle with this text that, on the face of it, fails to provide a satisfying answer to how we build community effectively as Jews living in the modern world? As I've grown older and further away from my Bronfman summer, I've either eschewed involvement in formal Jewish communities, or sought belonging in Jewish communities that embraced me wholeheartedly, without question. Now I belong to a Reform synagogue and rarely interface with anyone outside of that denomination on Jewish matters. Because, if truth be told, I am tired of wrestling, tired of defending my place in the community. I want my daughter to be a part of a community that will take her as she is, that won't be concerned with her status, that won't ask her to convert or tell her that that her voice is not worthy of inclusion.

But here's the rub: I also want my daughter to wrestle with texts, to understand that community is also what we make of it, how much we invest.

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Community is *always* messy, whether it involves relationships with family members or debates of a city council. So yes, Jews have a nearly obsessive -- and I would argue unhealthy -- preoccupation with the parameters for determining belonging and membership, but the very idea that community can be built, and that we have an active role to play in creating that community is also very Jewish, as this week's Torah portion demonstrates.

I've read BYFI applications for over a decade now, and it is striking to me that over that time, fewer and fewer applicants describe their Jewish identity in relation to the Holocaust (i.e. "I am Jewish in remembrance of the six million who perished. I have an obligation to keep their memory alive through my observance."). Part of this change is circumstantial; fewer and fewer young people have personal relationships with survivors, and fewer and fewer Jewish learning programs emphasize the Holocaust as the defining Jewish experience.

However, I would also like to think that this change in how young people think about their Jewish identity signals a new understanding of community belonging. Community is not static, a body to which we relate as insiders or outsiders, a set of obligations. Instead, it is something to be built, something to which we can contribute. God tells the Israelites that they must *make* themselves members of the nation. To me, *that* is the enduring value of this week's Torah portion. Not the list of requirements and obligations, or the frameworks for belonging that seem problematic to me as a secular American, but the very sense that we as individuals can build something, that we can *decide* whether to belong.

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