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*Bronfman Torah: commentary on the Torah that draws on the lives, skills, and insights of our community*

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# Our Ethical Laundry List

Yael Zinkow '07 | Bronfman Torah | Mishpatim & Beginning of Adar 2017

*This week we usher in the month of Adar, when we celebrate Purim. This month is marked by upside-down judgment, God's hiddenness, and general absurdity. Yael wrote a dvar torah that celebrates the parsha and Adar in all its glory.*

**Yael Zinkow** (*Bronfman '07*) is a writer living in Los Angeles, California. Currently she writes for the crime procedural "Bones" on Fox, and as a result, walks through life accidentally saying things like "Hey, this would be a great murder weapon!"

As I read through Parashat Mishpatim, which is essentially a laundry list of laws received by the Israelites following the receiving of the Torah at Sinai, one thing in particular struck me: these laws, delivered one after the other, well they don't quite...fall into the same categories. This list truly runs the gamut of ethics. "Do not mistreat an orphan" is right next to "If you come upon meat eaten by animals, don't eat it." "Do not fatally strike a man" is paired with "Take a dude's ox back to him if you find it wandering around the desert." (Oh, I translated the text myself...call it the "New Millennial Translation").

Now, the Rabbis provide their own commentary because...rabbis... as to why these laws vary so greatly in severity, but I used my own keen deductive reasoning skills (nurtured tenderly during my Bronfman summer) to arrive at my own sage conclusion. Never in my years studying Torah has this hypothesis been brought to

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the table, but there's always something new in Torah learning, right? "Turn it and turn it cause it's all in there" [Pirkei Avot 5:22] (translation again mine).

Okay, ready? I think that God... had a terrible roommate. As someone who's had her fair share of subpar living situations, it is clear to me that some of the laws listed in the text are God's way of sneaking in some passive aggressive digs at a careless roommate. Based on this hypothesis, I have written my interpretation of what may have occurred during those 40 days on Mt. Sinai:

Moses: Okay, let's hear these laws! I've got a mob waiting so make them just totally relevant and intuitive for ethical communal connection. Okay?

God: Okay, got it. So how about...Do not scheme to kill another man. [Ex 21:15].

Moses: Fair enough. Basic. What else?

God: He who kidnaps a man, must be put to death [Ex 21:16]

Moses: Yeah, that's a good one. Next?

God: If you take someone's shirt, give it back to him before sunset [Ex 21:25]

Moses: What?

God: What do you mean "what?"

Moses: It just seems a little...I don't know...

God: Seems a little what?

Moses: I don't know, I mean... Killing, Kidnapping, absolutely. I am with you but next, borrowing a shirt—God, help me.

God: Well maybe the person you borrowed the shirt from wants to wear it out that night. Or maybe if you don't set some ground rules about when to return someone's belongings, it becomes a slippery slope, and the borrower will just hold onto it until one day a month later you find it in their drawer and you're like "Hey,

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isn't this my shirt?" And they're like "Oh! Is it? I don't know" And you're like "You know it's my shirt, Greg."

Moses: Who's Greg?

God: Nobody. It doesn't matter.

Moses: Okay...so sure. Give back the shirt by sunset is in. You got any other laws?

God: Oh yeah I've got like 600 left.

Moses: Okay, then I'm having a La Croix.

God: Not the Apricot flavored. That's my favorite.

Moses: I know. You've told me a hundred times. Okay keep going. What else?

God: Do not wrong a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt [Ex 22:20]

Moses: Oooh drawing on our own experience. I love it. We are back in business. Next?

God: Do not mistreat a widow. [Ex 21: 26]

Moses: Yes, definitely. So with you on good to widows. Let's hear another.

God: If you're out of town, and you have someone watch your stuff, and something "somehow" gets destroyed, I'm coming after you so hard. [Ex 22: 6]

Moses: Again... what? Was that a law you just rattled off there?

God: I don't understand why you're so confused.

Moses: Sorry. Forgive me Lord I am just not really following your train of thought here. Watching someone's stuff? Is that really so important? Because it just doesn't seem...

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God: Doesn't seem important? Okay, let me explain. Here's an example, just... off the top of my head... Say you have a vintage Bob Dylan album, mint condition, and you leave town for a weekend, and Greg's like--

Moses: Okay, again with this Greg guy. Should I know him?

God: NO! I mean Greg's not real. It's just a name I'm using for my hypothetical. So you come back and your Dylan album is covered in beer, and Greg is like "Oh, that wasn't me. It was already like that" And you're like "Really Greg?"

Moses: Okay, I understand why that might upset someone, but--

God: Just write it down.

Moses: You got it. You are the Boss. Not like I would ever borrow your Boss album. Sorry, you got me sidetracked. Next.

God: Okay... You shall not oppress a stranger, for you were a stranger in the land of Egypt [Ex 23: 9]

Moses: You already said that.

God: I know I just really like that one.

Moses: Okay... How many more?

God: 596.

Moses: That's it. I'm opening an Apricot La Croix.

God: Okay, fine. You can have one.

Moses: Thank you

[Moses rummages through kitchen]

Moses: Huh.

God: What?

Moses: The box is empty.

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God: What?

Moses: You're out of Apricot La Croix.

God: What?! No that can't be! I just bought that box yesterday!

Moses: Let me guess... Greg?

God: I swear to me, Greg. I swear to me.

So, this may or may not have happened -- just a midrash, but either way, there is a lesson to be learned from this confounding list of laws. Most of us (thanks be to the Boss) do not walk through life with the urge to kill or kidnap. Those are fundamental ethical no-nos. But, sometimes those little things, those mitzvot that aren't as obvious, or appear less urgent, tend to fall by the wayside. Having all had a Greg, and (let's be real) having all been a Greg at some point in our lives, we can all agree that returning that shirt by sunset? It is also super sacred. Keep it on your list.

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Continue the conversation. Send Yael your thoughts:  
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