

When Truth is Cruel and Confusing, Speak Human Language

Rabbi Andy Bachman | Parshat Ki Tetze | Bronfman Torah

Reading through this week's Torah portion, Ki Tetze, with the many commandments and injunctions about proscribed behavior in wartime as depicted through the perspectives of our ancestors, one is reminded of the Tradition's unique capacity for remaining totally relevant to our own lives. While the words of Torah are ancient, its ethical dimension is eternal and ever-renewable. Though spoken long ago atop Mt. Sinai, they still matter today. How could they not?

The human capacity for cruelty ought to humble, if not shame us; and so at the very least our Torah seems to be teaching us that given the reality of our existence, we ought also to create rules for engagement, not just in the best of times but the worst of times. Sure, wouldn't it be great if our most sacred book was only wonder and poetry and beauty and peace! Alas, we come from a people who count among their greater contributions to religious discourse the ability to wrestle with what it means to be human and to strive for justice and righteousness as an act of covenantal responsibility as Jews.

Edgar Bronfman's famous story about learning Talmud for the first time, later in his life, comes to mind. At first glance he found the laws described in this week's parsha to be outmoded. Who cares about oxen and asses or birds in their nests? How is this relevant to us? But as Edgar plowed deeper into the dialogue, he found himself facing ultimate questions of justice. And as a non-believer, he often said that this gave him entree to generations of teachers and students who asked similar questions on the journey of building a better world.

I got to share that story again this summer on Bronfman with the 2015 Fellows against the backdrop of a particularly wrenching summer in Jerusalem. From the first moments of orientation to our last goodbyes at Ben Gurion Airport, we were never far from the sounds of the world calling out to us, to our identities, to our history, demanding a response. We arrived still in the shadow of Charleston and the cruel legacies of race and violence in America; we encountered speaker after speaker throughout the summer weighing in on and trying to come to terms with the many dimensions of the Iran deal and what it would mean for Israel, for America, for the Jewish people; and perhaps more than any other summer in my own experience as a Bronfman faculty member, we heard and shared the anguished thinking of Jews and Palestinians on the Right and on the Left, struggling to find the language and maybe even a new paradigm for seemingly interminable impasse on the road to an ever-elusive peace.

In typical Bronfman fashion, we listened, argued, opened up ourselves to new perspectives, push our boundaries of comfort and ease with who we were as Jews in an effort not so much to know but to understand; not to be right but to be judicious; not to win but to be kind. If you think I sound pollyannish, that's okay. All I'm saying is that when you see twenty-six Fellows' souls grow over the course of summer, you have faith in the system and the ways in which its purposeful ambiguities spur us on to new depths of understanding. To quote Rabbi Jim Diamond, of blessed memory, "If you're not confused, you're not thinking straight."

If a man as great and successful as Edgar Bronfman could be confused about his relationship to the Tradition but then digs in, engages, and learns, it seems a worthy aspiration for us as well.

Of course, and tragically, there are then times in which there is no confusion. Times when the clear, blinding light of morality calls out for our voices to be lifted up, even as our hearts are torn in grief. Because besides the stroke of genius in building BYFI around learning and dialogue, BYFI is centered in Israel, in the roiling, boiling living laboratory of Jewish history and identity. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is no mere abstraction; tenuous borders within our grasp; a taxi driver's opinion about Iran or Obama or Bibi can be as nuanced and relevant as that from some of the most skilled diplomats. Plurality, diversity, triumphs and

grievances all play out in loud and messy ways. And while most of the time this dynamic serves a wonderful pedagogic end, at other times it shocks us into clear-eyed declarations of right and wrong. No playful Bronfman ambiguity but hard truths that demand declaration.

A 16 year old girl, Shira Banki, was stabbed and killed marching in the Jerusalem Pride Parade. That dark and cruel act was a gut-punch to the Fellows and the Faculty. It stunned us into silence, sadness and shame, provoking anger that, through talking, we turned into love and the reified commitment to continue the struggle for the right to love as we love despite the twisted theologies of those who kill in the name of God. And of course, no sooner did we begin to wrap our minds around the tragedy of the Pride Parade than we were forced to confront the outrageous and disgusting murders of Ali and Saad Dawabshah by Jewish extremists, hell-bent on terror and havoc wreaking. Jerusalem yet again became the place where we as a people are commanded to explore not only the lofty, spiritual aspirations of our souls but the cruel evil expressions of our humanity as well.

It turns out that when the Torah speaks of how one behaves when one is at war or conflict, it is, in the words of the Sages, "speaking human language."

And so it was, with human language, that we kept up our talking and learning and understanding, even with tragedy in our midst, because to quote Bryan Stevenson, who quoted Martin Luther King, who quoted Theodore Parker, "The moral arc of the universe is long but it bends toward Justice." We weren't meant to figure it all out this summer; but for BYFI, we know that the more we talk and the more we learn and the more we understand, the closer we get to where we need to be going.

Isaiah seems to intuit this in the Haftarah for Ki Tetze. "In slight anger for a moment I hid My face from you; But with kindness everlasting I will take you back in love."

It was a meaningful summer; it had moments of depth and beauty and hilarity and yeah, even cruelty. But the journey we took together, the road we traveled, was one constructed on a commitment to upholding one another's inherent integrity and individuality, as part of a people, rooted in a Tradition that demands, especially in

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the face of abhorrent acts of evil, that we show our faces to one another in kindness and love.

It seems to me to be a legitimate way to get to justice. But hey, that's me. Feel free to argue. That's the Bronfman tradition.

Shabbat Shalom

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program for the many unaffiliated Jews who have made Brooklyn their home in the past decade. Rabbi Bachman was on the Newsweek and Forward 50 list. He blogs daily at www.andybachman.com.

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