

# Naso | Words of Wisdom from a Jewish Advice Columnist | Shira Telushkin ('08)

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

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## Words of Wisdom from a Jewish Advice Columnist

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We are pleased to bring you the first in our series of pieces written by some of this year's Alumni Venture Fund grantees. Shira Telushkin's ('08) AVF-sponsored project is [Within the Eighteen Minutes](#), an advice column for anyone navigating a Jewish situation about which they are unsure.

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Hey Bronfmanin,

Back in October, a Jewish friend asked me how I respond to people who act as though keeping halacha is an overwhelmingly ridiculous series of rules to follow; I

told her that I always explain it through analogy to the television series *Downton Abbey*, which follows British aristocracy and demonstrates how for people raised in a world regulated by values and customs that dictate what spoon they'll use for breakfast and what shirt they have to wear on a morning hunt (different than the outfit for a morning ride), the rules become second nature; in fact, most people are living lives regulated by customs, even if they don't think of it that way. A few weeks later, an Episcopalian priest who I know from the Harvard Divinity School pulled me aside in the hall. An Israeli family had just moved in across the street, and he and his wife wanted to invite them over for dinner. But he was anxious that they kept kosher, and it would feel rude to ask. What should he do? I told him to just ask, and we spoke about the existence of secular Israelis. Then a Catholic friend sent me a text: her Jewish college roommate's father had just died and she was going to the funeral, but she had never been to a Jewish funeral. What should she expect? Should she send flowers? We chatted about shiva and Jewish eulogies and why wearing black is never wrong but not required.

As a Jew who works in early Christianity, I've long been the go-to Jewish resource for a lot of my non-Jewish friends, and as someone who has spent time in many Jewish denominations, I often find myself serving as a resource for Jewish friends as well. As the questions kept coming, I decided to set up a [Jewish advice blog](#), and I was thrilled to get an AVF grant for the project. While I now have a build-up of questions whose answers need final considerations, the project has garnered a ton of interest and enthusiasm on campus and in my larger networks, and some of the questions I've received have been in turns heartbreaking and hilarious. Jews and those who love them can be a strange bunch—but always well-intentioned and genuinely eager to do the right thing.

This week, as we wrapped up the holiday of Shavuot, I began to consider how receiving the Torah and the welcoming of converts have shaped the way our tradition values law and social norms. On Shavuot, we read the book of Ruth, and celebrate this Moabite woman who threw her lot in with the Jewish people, becoming the great-grandmother to the ultimate ancestor of the messianic line, King David. But being a part of the Jewish people is not easy, both for those who make the choice and for those born into the tradition. And even the eventual

coming of the Messiah arrives to us on a path fraught with moral ambiguities. This year, I was struck by the extent to which this messianic line required a curious amount of deception to get going. Ruth herself comes from Moab, a people brought into existence by the eldest daughter of Lot, who after fleeing a burning Sodom with her sister and father decides to ply her father with wine and, only when he was drunk asleep, becomes pregnant by him. Her sister follows suit. (Of course, both daughters believed their family to be the last people on earth, but it was definitely sex that was intentionally coerced--the daughters know they must render their father unconscious, because if aware he would have refused.) The line of Judah, from which King David comes, is continued by Judah's daughter-in-law Tamar. Tamar first weds his first two sons in consecutive marriages, only to have each die without producing children. Needing to keep her relations within the family, she awaits being married to his third son, only to intuit that Judah is withholding him from her. And so, Tamar dresses up like a prostitute on the side of the road and intercepts the traveling Judah, tricking him not into sex itself but into having sex with his daughter-in-law. She becomes pregnant with twins, themselves messianic ancestors. These two stories are clearly behind the scenes of the book of Ruth, where Ruth needs a kinsmen of her dead husband to redeem her, and so goes and lies at the feet of Boaz late one night to make her case. She pleads well, and their subsequent marriage ensures her place in the messianic line.

The path to Messianic redemption required a lot of deception, but what does all this deception have to do with getting the Torah at Mount Sinai? In one of the most well-known midrashim associated with Mount Sinai, God coerces the Jewish people into accepting his Law. As we learn in Shabbat 88a, God held the mountain of Sinai over the heads of the Jewish people and said: Accept this Torah now, or this place will be your grave. Shavuot is also often described as celebrating the wedding between God and the Jewish people, and so many read into this image an even starker choice: Accept this Torah, and this mountain will be our chuppah, our wedding canopy. Reject this Torah, and this mountain will secure your death. In this moment, God sounds awful: Marry me, or I will kill you. This story presents the Torah as only accepted in fear and danger and compulsion. Rav Kook sees in this coercive unwillingness the inability for the Jewish people to then ever rid themselves of this Torah. As he writes in Ein Ayah, his commentary on Ein Yaakov, just as people cannot choose to reject the need to eat or to sleep, so too can they not reject the Torah; unwillingly did we accept it, and so we cannot

willingly reject it. The Torah became a part of the essential essence of the Jewish people. In this reading, God is no more awful than the everyday decisions he made as creator, except that he made us false partners in our own existence; the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai is the moment that the wandering family of Hebrews became the Jewish people, and just as we are born unwillingly, so too did this God—who created us without our consent—make us a nation without our consent.

All of this is to say that being Jewish is complicated, and so is being a good person (shocker). The Messiah will arrive on wings of deception (not to mention the social and power dynamics that forced those acts of deception). Navigating tricky aspects of Torah and Jewish identity are questions built into the very essence of who we are as a people. I don't have any definitive answers for most of the queries I'm sent (though sometimes it is super easy—like, no, don't lie to your kosher friend about the chicken stock), but it has been great fun being part of the age-old system of Jewish emphasis on questions and advice.

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***P.S.: We're always looking for more dvar torah writers. Interested? Contact [stefanie@byfi.org](mailto:stefanie@byfi.org). We look forward to hearing from you.***