

Commanded to Interpret

Mitzvot. Commandments. Sacred obligations. They're the actions and behaviors that can define Jewish living; the way we paint Torah on the canvas of life itself.

But sometimes commandments defy definition, or even create confusion. We see it in the conversation between God and Moses. God said "do not boil a calf in his mother's milk," and so Moses replied "ah, I see, so we should never eat meat with dairy. Hm. Okay."

So God reiterated Godself "do not boil a calf in his mother's milk" and Moses continued "oh, and we should use separate dishes, too? Interesting. Makes sense."

So God repeated Godself once more "do not boil a calf in his mother's milk," to which Moses added "*and* we should wait an hour after eating meat before eating dairy?! What a great idea!"

So God gave up, bellowing "OK, then! Have it your way!"

Other times commandments serve as an excuse for exclusion, or a rationale for rejecting religion.

Figuring out what to do with commandments *as* commandments—something more than generic good deeds—may be the quintessential difficulty of living a Jewish life in the contemporary world. Of course, Jews on both ends of the spectrum might not see commandments that way. Some Reform and secular Jews may not concern themselves much with commandments, for any number of reasons. Many halakhic Jews simply accept commandments as the contents of the Torah—both written and oral—given to Moses and passed to Joshua in an unbroken chain to this very day!

But there are a lot of us caught in between such extremes. We want to bring observances into our lives in a meaningful way. We want our Jewish practices to be grounded in the soil of our Tree of Life, rooted to the generations of God-wrestlers who came before us. We want to bring our whole selves to the project of Jewish living, and yet, we cannot ignore the clash of cultures between us and the text. We stand aghast at the way women are treated (or not treated) in our textual tradition. We bristle at the seeming hypocrisy of Torah legislating how to treat our slaves, when, wait a second, weren't *we* once slaves in *Egypt*?! Wasn't that the whole point of one of those stories, anyhow?!

In the face of such a dilemma, you might think to question your theology. You might exclaim "aha! the problem with command**ments** is the Command**er**!" And if that's the direction you need to

go in your struggle, don't let me stop you. But if, like me, you view our textual tradition as imbued with holiness because of the *human* hands that shaped it, and that preserved it as our inheritance, then the difficulty of commandments *as* commandments becomes that much more pressing.

How can we consider our texts holy, and accept their commanding authority in our lives, when so often they offend our contemporary sensibilities? When we cannot acquiesce to certain laws, rules or customs merely because they are *the* laws, rules, and customs of classical Jewish law, should we *not* simply reject commandments as such?!

As a future rabbi and a gay man, this is the tension I inhabit.

On the one hand, I cannot help but find beauty and meaning in our holy texts. Each time I return to the stories and teachings that contribute to our textual inheritance, I find new understandings. As I continue to learn, it feels like uncovering new layers in the archeological dig of each ancestral character or narrative.

On the other hand, the same Torah portion that commands me to “love my neighbor as myself” also seemingly legislates the death penalty for me as a gay man—not such a great recipe for self-love, let alone for life-long engagement with the text.

Just last week we read from another text with a history of hostility towards gay folks: the tale of Sodom and Gomorrah. This peculiar story has been used for centuries to condemn homosexuality. Yet there we find it, just three weeks into our renewed cycle of reading Torah each and every year, stuck like a bramble in a bicycle spoke, coming round and round, again and again, as long as the wheel keeps spinning.

Having grown up in the Reform movement, though, I only really came to struggle with the presence of this story, and the Levitical condemnations of homosexuality, as an adult. You see, the early Reformers paved one path towards resolving the dissonance with difficult texts and commandments as early as 1885. The Pittsburgh Platform accepted as binding only the *moral* laws of the “Mosaic Legislation.” By rejecting ritual observances that would not “elevate and sanctify our lives,” and by insisting that some observances were actually liable to “obstruct... modern spiritual elevation,”¹ they enshrined a value of personal autonomy which remains strong in our movement to this day.

¹ <https://www.ccarnet.org/rabbis-speak/platforms/declaration-principles/> , #3 and #4

I'm grateful for that value. I cherish the diversity of thought and practice that it has generated over the history of our movement. It's that sense of personal autonomy that eventually allowed our movement to blaze the path for inclusion of gay folks in Jewish life.

Yet the early Reformers failed to realize that it's not so easy to distinguish between "moral" and "ritual" commandments when they fall on the same page. Our texts do not distinguish in such a way.

So last year I challenged myself to re-examine the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. And as my understanding of the story grew, so too did my understanding of being *commanded*.

My first aha! moment came from re-reading the plain text of Genesis 19. I realized that it's *not* actually clear that homosexuality was the sin of Sodom. Sure, the story alludes to sex between men—the villagers insist that Lot present them the angels, his guests, that they may "know them." But the implication here isn't just sex between men—it's violent, coercive, rape of guests.

The story rightfully frightens and disturbs us, but reading this as a condemnation homosexuals was never a foregone conclusion. As Rabbi Steve Greenberg put it, the process took place "over a millennium [as preachers] **employed** [the story] with dramatic effect to prohibit" homosexuality.²

But some of our ancestral story tellers made a different choice. Take the prophet Ezekiel: as he chastised the Israelites as no better than the Sodomites, he declared:

Behold, **this** was the sin of Sodom, your sister: Arrogance; she had fullness of bread, peace and quiet for her and her daughters, and **still** she would not aid the poor or the destitute.³

I saw that even *within* our Hebrew bible, we see the work of telling and retelling the stories that came to shape the Jewish people. And I realized that if we want our texts to take on new meaning, we we cannot desist from the work of interpreting them.

Just as stories require interpreters to create meaning, so do laws. So does any holy text. Torah does not just apply herself to our lives. It takes our direct, intentional involvement to bring Torah to the path of life, and thereby create a *halachah*. I think that's why Jewish law has always

² Greenberg, *Wrestling*, 64, emphasis added

³ Ezekiel 16:49

been called *halachah*, to begin with; literally a walking. Because at the heart of it all—we're commanded to engage in the *process*. We're commanded to continue the journey that involves somehow bringing Torah to life. We are commanded to interpret.

Whether we understand it from a traditionalist perspective, or whether we take our cue from our Reform ancestors, when we take our place in the chain of Torah, telling our stories, teaching our lessons, and figuring out how or how not to apply them in our times, we are taking part in the ultimate commandment: bringing Torah to the path of our lives.

Does our tradition contain disturbing texts, laws and stories alike? Absolutely. The biblical scholar Phyllis Trible famously called some of the stories most violent against women “Texts of Terror”—an apt description. Yet I wonder if there isn't a little irony in such a designation, because Trible herself so carefully notes that while “without stories we live not, stories live not without us. Alone a text is mute and ineffectual.”

As liberal Jews, the traditional texts and practices of Jewish law exist as **our** cultural inheritance. Ignoring them abdicates the power of interpretation to those who engage. We can take inspiration from them, or we can define ourselves in contrast to them. We can accept or reject any given *mitzvah* as autonomous, contemporary people. Post-modernity does indeed make us all Jews-by-choice. But by participating in the process, we take our rightful place as interpreters. We link ourselves back to the process that began at Sinai and continues to this day.

Whether it's the question of homosexuality, the treatment of women, or any other struggle you confront in the text, being commanded means making sure that your voice isn't drowned out by the weight of a singular reading. In the words of our teacher, Rabbi Rachel Adler, we must “exercise our own covenantal authority to redefine and refashion” Jewish law “so that contemporary Jewish women and men can live it out with integrity.”⁴

May we all come to embrace that covenantal authority. May we cherish the diversity of practice and belief that our autonomy brings forth. May we always study Torah full of curiosity, seeking new meanings. May we have strength on our paths to determining whether, and how, and when, and why, to apply Torah to our lives. May we tether our actions to the tapestries of sacred obligations that our people have spun for centuries, and allow our souls to dance in the tension.

כּוּן יְהִי רַצוֹן

⁴ Adler, *Engendering Judaism*, 21