



***Parashat Re'eh***

***Going After the Unfamiliar***

by Rabbi Jacob J Staub on Friday August 29, 2008

28 Av 5768

Deuteronomy 11:26 - 16:17

*Parashat Re'eh* can be painful for the queer reader. Moses, in the middle of the farewell address to the Israelites that constitutes the bulk of the Book of Deuteronomy, lays out Deuteronomy's perspective clearly: "I set before you this day a blessing and a curse." We are blessed if we obey the commandments. We are cursed if we stray and go after other unfamiliar gods. (Deuteronomy 11:26-28)

When I read this, I feel assaulted, yet again. I am reminded of how I felt when I decided at age thirteen not to attend Orthodox Yeshiva High School and realized that my eighth-grade classmates had been forbidden to speak to me. I felt it again most recently in June, when I attended my grandniece's wedding with my partner Michael, and *frum* (traditionally observant) members of my family could not bring themselves to look at me. It's one thing to be gay and closeted; it is quite another to attend a family wedding with one's same-sex partner openly and proudly. To them, I am doing what is right in my own eyes (12:8) and have gone after unfamiliar gods. I have never asked them whether they think I am cursed, because they don't talk to me.

According to Deuteronomy, our ancestors were given the Land of Israel to possess conditionally. The terms of possession, enumerated this week, included the commandment to utterly destroy all of the places of worship of the people whom we would dispossess. We were to overthrow their altars, break their pillars, burn their wooden *asherot*, hew down their carvings. If we obeyed and eradicated all traces of their religions, then we could remain in the Land. If not...well, we would be exiled from the Land. (12:2-7)

In another Torah Queery ("Dancing at Sinai," *Parashat Ki Tissa*, March 2007), I summarized the analysis of contemporary Biblical scholars, who believe such texts as Deuteronomy were written by Judean leaders after the destruction of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. They blamed that catastrophe on the sins of the North—including the North's accommodation of non-Israelite ritual forms. The Assyrian armies that had destroyed the North and laid siege to Jerusalem might return at any time. Judea had no military defense. Instead, religious xenophobia was a strategy to enlist God in their defense.



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Here, I want to explore a queer reading of *Re'eh* that does not rely on an understanding of its historical context. If a queer perspective questions all norms, then there is no better a target than the norm-setting of this week's *parashah*. Everything in the universe, according to the Moses of *Re'eh*, is black or white, blessed or cursed, faithful or idolatrous. And whatever isn't commanded ought to be destroyed.

Thirty five years ago, a professor of mine in a graduate seminar called "Fundamentals of Biblical Thought" declared proudly that the monotheism of the Bible had introduced intolerance to human civilization. Prior to the belief in one God, he explained, people did not make exclusive truth claims. You believed in your God, and I believed in mine. Christianity and Islam, inheriting biblical monotheism, have followed, regarding the other as infidels who are to be despised, converted, or destroyed.

I'm not sure that the Torah invented intolerance. It is indisputable, however, that texts such as *Re'eh* provide a very solid basis for those inclined to intolerant self-righteousness. The rabbis attempted to ameliorate the fanaticism of Deuteronomy by explaining that the Canaanites who were conquered by the Israelites were extremely sinful and corrupt. Thus, the rabbis taught that the Canaanites were uniquely deserving of being eradicated—and such behavior is not commanded with regard to other peoples. At least not now: generations of Jews have always believed that the wicked nations would eventually be destroyed in the cataclysmic events leading up to the coming of the Messiah.

When contemporary liberal Jews read Deuteronomy 11, we are often tempted to affirm the spirit of the text (follow God's commandments) while assuming that our ancestors misunderstood God's intentions and attributed mitzvot to God that are not of divine origin. That is, we sometimes assert, we should tear down all idolatrous structures and institutions—whether they are multinational corporations that seek profits and promote inequity and poverty, or military hierarchies whose interests are served by promoting war, or religious institutions that oppress women or LGBTs. It was not the Israelites' sacrificial cult that God wanted us to defend against the sacred rituals of other peoples, we assume, but rather timeless principles of justice. Certainly, that is what the biblical prophets believed when they railed against people who were meticulous in their ritual observance but who oppressed widows and orphans. (See Isaiah 57, for example.)

In doing so, however, we are replacing one norm (obey the Torah's commandments, and attack other religious systems) with another norm (behave justly and attack economic, political, and religious injustice). The queer perspective, however, questions all norms. In other words, it is a perspective that subverts any and every assumption that some values are timelessly and immutably true. From this perspective, every value, every norm, is historically conditioned and socially constructed. And therefore, it is always changing as perceptions of reality continue to change.



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So, when the Israelites occupied Canaan, they (or at least their leaders) believed that their allegiance to and covenant with God was morally superior to their neighbors' communities, in which allegiance was given to human rulers. Their impulse to tear down the temples of their neighbors might have been related to our impulse to queer everything, to question all norms. From a queer perspective, the Israelites went astray when they identified the divine will with their own temporal, humanly-constructed institutions. They questioned everyone but themselves, and that absence of self-questioning allowed them to imagine that God commanded them to destroy their neighbors' culture.

How can we avoid that same mistake? We believe firmly in questioning all norms. We are convinced of the moral correctness of pluralism and inclusiveness. We know that the traditional Jewish condemnations of same-sex relationships are not divinely commanded but are rather reflections of the cultural values of the eras in which they were formulated. We know a lot, with much too much certainty, for people committed to questioning. We ought to be questioning the norm that queers—i.e., that questions all norms!

In fact, given our human limitations, all we can do is to recall regularly that we believe strongly in our values because we live at a particular time and place. If I lived 500 years ago, I would not be an out gay man. I would not be a feminist. I would not value interreligious communication and collaboration. If I can remember this, I can do a better job of remaining open to new, fresh, challenging, even threatening ideas. I can't question my deeply held beliefs constantly, but I can respond openly and non-defensively when they are questioned. I can remain flexible.

I am not advocating absolute moral relativism. Rather, I'm in favor of a humility that leads to openness. When I question (queer) my own convictions, I rarely abandon my strongly-held beliefs. I am reminded, however, that I don't know everything, and that I don't understand the divine will perfectly. At that wedding in June, some of my Orthodox relatives embraced Michael and me, with varying degrees of enthusiasm. They were not renouncing their acceptance of their rabbinic authorities' condemnation of homosexuality. They were, however, balancing that acceptance with their love for me. They were willing to live with the discomfort of ambiguity and uncertainty.

It is the cursedness in Deuteronomy of going after gods *whom you do not know* that I find most in need of healing reconstruction. We can never know everything, and we should never be afraid of moving towards or into the unknown. Whoever wrote the verse Leviticus 18:22 ("You shall not lie with a man as with a woman; it is an abomination.") could not have known me and so could not have been referring to me. There were no male-male couples in monogamous, long-term relationships in Ancient Israel.

It is so very important, then, that we admit what we don't know and venture into the unknown to adapt our traditions to unprecedented circumstances. Queering questions create the



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openings for flexibility and new growth. It is far more of a blessing to remain open-minded and open-hearted than it is to remain inflexibly and self-righteously bound to what we already know.



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