

Speaking of Text

A WEEKLY EXPLORATION OF THE JEWISH BOOKSHELF



Jews Behaving Badly

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Bad Rabbi and Other Strange but True Stories from the Yiddish Press by Edward Portnoy (Stanford University Press, 2017).

As a graduate student, I logged many, many hours in the old JTS Library (which has a special place in my heart) reading the seminal texts of Jewish life and history. I hunkered down next to my most beloved Jewish texts, Yiddish periodicals. While Yiddish newspapers and magazines may not be considered among traditional Jewish texts, they comprise an incredibly rich resource for the study of Jewish life from the 1860s through the 1930s.

In Yiddish newspapers one finds all the stories of the Jewish people, from those of its greatest scientists, writers, politicians, and rabbis, to its drag queens, tattoo artists, prostitutes, and criminals. As a daily chronicle of Jewish life, these papers have no parallel. The Yiddish press contains tales of Jewish success and failure, of brilliance and inept stupidity. It revealed a world of *tog-teyglekhe yidn*, of everyday Jews, and was where I found how deeply fascinating their lives were.

Within its inky pages, I discovered riveting stories of murder, deceit, and of furious Jew-on-Jew violence. I hadn't seen many stories like this elsewhere, nor heard so many tales of Jews engaged in such nefarious behavior. I had stumbled upon an embarrassment of terrible riches in the Yiddish press and knew I had to do something with these unknown stories of Jewish two-bit nobodies. They wound up in my new book.

Most Jewish history books are about elites: rabbis, writers, businessmen, and the like. You will not, however, find them in *Bad Rabbi*. Instead, you'll find a rogue's gallery of murderers, rioters, bigamists, psychics, and charlatans, among other Jewish ne'er-do-wells. Unsavory characters? Most certainly. But they are nonetheless part of the Jewish story and, at some level, deserve to become part of the historical record. Think of it this way: if you ever read in the Talmud about the pigeon racers who were banned from serving as witnesses (BT Sanhedrin 25 a-b) and wanted to know more, you can find their modern descendants in this book.

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Pesah 5778

פסח תשע"ח



The Challenges of Change

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I love Pesah, the holiday of intergenerational narrative. When we used to host the seder, our parents, siblings, and young children would join us at the table as we passed on and renewed the tradition each year. My husband's puppet show was a favorite—he would spin a story from his vivid imagination—including, in one memorable year, how the bad guys stuffed matzah into the Omphalos, the center of the world, causing havoc and chaos, and how Moshe had to get it unstuck and open the pathways. Sesame Street meets Kabbalah. On a more serious note, we would puzzle over the challenges of freedom and slavery, encouraging our children to ask the hard questions. Now my husband and I come to our children's seders, kvelling over our grandkids' learning and love of the tradition that has been passed down from generation to generation.

In Parashat Bo, God makes it clear that the whole point of the drama of the Exodus is so we will tell our children. It's not that the Exodus happened and then we recount it at the seder; the Exodus happened *so that we would tell our children*: God hardens Pharaoh's heart and shows God's signs "in order that you will tell [the story] to your children and your children's children" (Exod. 10:1-2). The Exodus is quintessentially an intergenerational story, ritually reenacted every Pesah in an intergenerational context.

So what is the story we are telling our children? It has to do with freedom, with the courage to change. And with the fear of change. Both the Israelites and Pharaoh were closed to change; God, through Moshe, kept prodding the story forward, making freedom happen despite the resistance of the other players (even Moshe was hesitant to take on this frightening mantle). Pharaoh was trapped inside his own story of power and arrogance. He could not hear (*lo shama*), was not open, to the divine narrative unfolding in front of him. His heart was *kasheh* (hard), *kaved* (heavy), *hazak* (strong). He was stuck in heavy, hard rigidity.

Meanwhile, the Israelites could not imagine freedom and were not willing players in the drama of their liberation; they suffered from *kotzer ruah*, shortness of spirit. They preferred the slavery they knew to the unknown terrors of liberation. Even after leaving Egypt, they resisted and kvetched every step along the way, wracked by fear, angry at Moshe, and nostalgic for the fleshpots of their oppressors. Despite being freed, the Israelites were still stuck in the story of slavery; they could not imagine freedom and redemption.

Each year, when I read these texts, I resonate with this fear of the new, the resistance to change in both Pharaoh and the Israelites. As a psychologist, I am in the business of change. But I see in my clients—and in myself—a deep ambivalence about change. We want to grow and learn, yet we cling to our old, familiar ways. We too get stuck in our delimiting stories. People differ in how resistant or open they are to the new. Carol Dweck, in her book *Mindset*, talks about a fixed mindset and a growth mindset. Popeye’s “I yam what I yam” represents a fixed mindset: my mind is made up, don’t confuse me with the facts. By contrast, God’s name, *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh*, is the epitome of a change mindset: I will evolve, I will change into the future.

Neuroscience sheds some light on the Exodus drama and the tension between change/no change. Humans are wired for habit. Our habits are reflected in circuits of neurons in the brain that have become associated: “neurons that fire together wire together.” Habits and these neuronal circuits recursively strengthen each other; the more you do something, the more likely you are to do it in the future. Everything you do changes the brain: you are what you do. This is rather sobering. If you regularly become impatient, angry, or anxious, you are more likely to do so in the future. If you repeatedly close off your heart in arrogance, you will become an arrogant, closed-off person. If you maintain a slave, victim mentality, you will remain a slave—to your habits.

We cling to the familiar, like the characters in the Exodus story. But we are not only wired for habit. We are wired for change as well. Neuroplasticity—the capacity of the brain to change—can continue throughout life. Neuroplasticity isn’t easy in adulthood; research shows that it can be fostered through physical exercise, paying attention, and learning new things. The alternative is what psychologist Lou Cozolino calls “hardening of the categories”—the stuck stories that trapped Pharaoh and the Israelites.

The Sefat Emet connects *Mitzrayim* (Egypt) with *metzarim*, the straits or narrow places in our hearts: “The truth is that at all times there is *Mitzrayim*-Egypt constriction, for every person in Israel. That is why we mention the Exodus, liberation from *Mitzrayim*, every day. The redemption from *Mitzrayim* is a freeing from the “narrow places,” the *meitzarim*, the straits of the soul, into an expansiveness in which all potential is realized.”

What are our own *metzarim*, narrow places? What causes us to close off to others, and to new possibilities in our lives? What makes us constricted, defensive, uncurious, *lo shama*? What allows us to be open, curious, and expansive? It takes great courage to leave behind old constraining stories and be receptive to the new. I see this courage in my clients, and I try to cultivate this courage in my own life.

Giving up old narratives and constructing new ones can be confusing and disorienting. Aviva Zornberg notes that the Israelites left *behipazon*. Usually translated as “in haste,” Zornberg cites Rashi’s view of *hipazon* as panic and disorientation. I have witnessed this *hipazon* in my clients as they let go of old, unproductive ways of seeing and acting, as they are en route to a new way. I have experienced *hipazon* myself, the confusion and lostness that precedes a new perspective. Change can be daunting and confusing.

God seems to have understood how hard it is to change, to maintain a new narrative. So we are given daily reminders: mezuzah, tzitzit, tefillin. We are charged to tell and retell the Exodus story every Pesah. Telling the story to our children anchors our own faith, our own commitment to the narrative of freedom. Each year we reflect on the miracle that freedom happened at all, given all the factors pulling toward no-change in our Exodus story, given the resistance from all around.

Maurice Friedman, in an introduction to a book on Martin Buber, spoke of cultivating the “readiness to be surprised.” Cultivating this openness to the new is a spiritual task; it can be hampered by fear, habit, or arrogance. May each of us have the courage to be open-hearted rather than hard, courageous in the face of change, willing to go beyond the constraints of our own *metzarim*, and ready to be surprised. It is an ongoing challenge, renewed each year as we reflect on freedom at our seder table.