דבר אחר | A Different Perspective

Nothing Is Enough

Dr. S. Alisa Braun, Academic Director, Community Engagement, JTS

> sitting amid your litter, feet buried
> by accumulated jars of buttons,
> glasses lost beneath a decade of bank statements
> and funny poems.
>
> —Alicia Ostriker, "Mother," *The Volcano Sequence* (2002)

The obligation to honor your father and your mother (Exodus 20:12) is never simple, but it's especially complicated when relations between parent and child are strained. In her moving poem "Mother," Alicia Ostriker gives voice to the ethical challenge of caring for her mother when the conflicts of the past loom large. Addressing her mother directly, the poet acknowledges that she has put an "ocean" of distance between herself and her mother, a separation necessitated by her mother's own attachment issues. Typical of the hoarder, her mother has held onto things that are not meant to be meaningful and as a result, lost a significant human relationship. The poet juxtaposes her mother's obsession with saving items to her own inability to save her mother from inevitable decline and becoming "blind and helpless." Ostriker sees her mother in a way her mother was never able to see her. She is "tortured" by her inability to rescue her from this "madness," to "love you enough" as an exemplary self-sacrificing daughter might. Yet the poem concludes with the stark recognition that in the face of death's inevitability, "nothing is enough."

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Can God Prohibit an Emotion?

Dr. Sarah Wolf, Assistant Professor of Talmud and Rabbinics, JTS

Part of my current research focuses on how human emotions are discussed and legislated in the Talmud and other ancient rabbinic texts, and so the last of the Ten Commandments (as counted in the Jewish tradition) raises for me some fundamental questions.

> "You shall not covet (*tahmod*) your neighbor's house. You shall not covet (*tahmod)* your neighbor's wife, his male or female slave, his ox, his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's" (Exod. 20:14).

How can God prohibit an emotion? And why would God even be concerned about how people feel as long as they are doing the right thing? Perhaps we should interpret the commandment as forbidding an action rather than a feeling?

The third century midrash *Mekhilta Derashbi* at first seems to go in this direction. It points out the discrepancy in language between the statement of this commandment in Exodus and its reiteration in Deuteronomy, which reads: "You shall not covet (*tahmod*) your neighbor's wife. You shall not **crave** (*titaveh)* your neighbor's house, his field, his male or female slave, his ox, his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's" (Deut. 5:18).

Noting the use in Deuteronomy of the word "crave" in addition to the word "covet," the *Mekhilta* interprets these verbs as referring to two different prohibitions. *To crave*, according to the early Rabbis, is to have a wish or desire, whereas *to covet* is to begin to act on those wishes by

making plans to possess the object of desire. Perhaps surprisingly, however, the midrash emphasizes that both the feeling and the action are prohibited, because of how closely they are connected: if one craves, one may then come to covet. Therefore, better not to crave at all.

This prohibition against a particular feeling, and particularly the assumption that there's not a significant distinction between emotions and actions, may strike modern readers as rather out of touch. After all, don't we now know that the real problems arise when we either repress our emotions or assume that all feelings must be immediately acted upon to make them go away? Surely any therapist would tell you that the best thing to do with a seemingly troubling emotion, such as an insatiable craving for one's neighbor's freshly-baked apple pie cooling in the window, is neither to deny the feeling nor to grab a hunk of pie when the neighbor isn't looking, but to be mindful of the feeling and tolerate it until it passes (or until the neighbor is nice enough to offer a piece of pie voluntarily).

Yet the idea that we have control over our emotional states may not be as foreign to a contemporary mindset as it would initially seem. How many of us have tried to cultivate gratitude by keeping a journal or a list at the end of the day? Or attempted to boost our own confidence by assuming a "power pose"? Our society is perhaps again realizing something that the ancient Rabbis took for granted: the boundary between our inner selves and our outer selves is not as sharp as we may have once thought, and that there is significant permeability between the two. What we do with our bodies affects how we feel, and vice versa.

As our country attempts to move forward from an emotionally turbulent year, this commandment to attend carefully to our feelings and reactions may be more useful than it seems at first glance. We may want to try to cultivate emotions like gratitude, confidence, calmness, or joy to get us through the rest of the pandemic, but we can also ask: Which emotions are helping to call us to action? Perhaps a feeling of rage summons us to work for justice, or our grief impels

us to advocate for marginalized groups suffering disproportionately from COVID. There may also be emotions whose effects in our lives are less welcome: sadness that becomes paralyzing, or fear and anger that tempt us to employ hurtful rhetoric.

Perhaps this commandment is encouraging us to remember that we live righteously not only through our actions, but by leaving behind the people, situations, and social media feeds that evoke reactions that do not serve us, and by thinking about how to cultivate and attend to the emotions that help us be the people we want to be in the world.

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Join our upcoming online class to learn more with Dr. Wolf about the emotions in rabbinic literature. Register at:

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