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# Sh'ma

A JOURNAL OF JEWISH RESPONSIBILITY

## Inside...

Four careful readers answer the question: How should we respond to sacred texts that violate our sense of what is right and good?

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## Listening to difficult texts ■ Peter Pitzele

The definition of a difficult text for a Jew is a passage of sacred literature that offends or wounds the ethical or theological principles of certain people or groups of people. Really difficult texts are those that offend or wound us personally. In the Jewish tradition, many feel that women have been wounded by religious scripture; minorities both sexual and racial suffer from religious attitudes hardened in biblical chapter and verse; and those whose mode of observance differs from what we deem acceptable are found to have strayed from the Law. Jews are not the only ones to struggle with "difficult texts," for Christians in increasing numbers are wrestling with anti-Semitic, sexist, and triumphalistic passages of their own canonical literature.

### The Chronic In Our Texts

What makes such texts difficult is the commitment on the part of Jews and Christians to preserve the immutable, canonical status of scripture. If we could delete any offending passages of scripture, the issue of difficult texts would never arise. We must deal with difficult texts because we choose, either out of a respect for tradition or a reverence for the divine status of the Word, to preserve every received jot and tittle of our sacred literature.

I am neither a rabbi nor a scholar; I think of myself as a therapist of the Torah

and for those who live under its canopy. As a therapist I think it is useful, in the first place, to regard difficult texts as something we might label as "chronic" in both the pathological and temporal sense. The chronic is, by definition, something that abides with us through time, periodic in its crises but continual in its presence. We know the chronic in terms of our character; there are certain traits and tendencies with which we struggle our whole lives, and no amount of therapy seems able to excise these "difficult texts" of the self; they are an inevitable, essential, and humbling part of our existence. Moreover, if we live in any kind of community at all, we come up against people whose persuasions offend and alarm us; they are also like difficult texts for us; we cannot excise them from our community any more than we can eliminate offending passages from the Torah. We learn to live with them.

### The Way We Speak

Given the fact that we choose to hold fast to our canon, the question then becomes how to address those parts of it that wound and offend. In that context I think there are two matters of urgency. The first has to do with the way we speak and write, and the second has to do with how we hear and listen.

Deeply embedded in the Jewish tradition is a body of teaching about right

speech, *Lashan Tov*, and destructive speech, *Lashan Hara*. Of all the ethical injunctions of the tradition none seems to me to be more pertinent to our consideration of the chronicity of difficult texts. As these texts represent loci of pain in the Jewish community, far more attention needs to be paid in every aspect of our lives to the ways in which speech aggravates that pain. Wrongly used, speech offends, hurts, abuses, and creates eddies of ill-will and animosity. As Jews we are called by our tradition to be far more aware than we are of how our opinions, our intellectual pugnacity, our fondness for argument, excoriation, blame, and fault-finding—all those traits Moses catalogued about us in the wilderness—foment a climate of harmful speech in which those who already suffer, suffer more. We are not talking here about First Amendment rights; we are talking about a sensitivity to the ways language shapes a community and about how, as educated adults, we can engage in dialogues across differences rather than arguments over them.

### The Open Ear Leads Directly To The Heart

Then there is the issue of listening. We all listen too little and too poorly, and our failures to listen well are symptoms of our failure to care deeply about one another. Conflicts in our families and communities are in many cases attributable to our preference to talk, to preach, to teach, to lecture, rather than to listen. It is not for nothing that the first word of our central prayer is: *Sh'ma*: listen. We are too noisy with one another, and our noisiness keeps us from taking in the condition of others. We have forgotten the ethos of the ear; the open ear leads directly to the heart. Speech, talk, babble keep us locked into our positions and our hearts closed. I find it noteworthy that Moses was a man of impeded speech. How much more greatly was he able to listen. And so, in turn, must we.

How can this awareness guide us as we approach our difficult texts? In what new ways might we deal with them? Take, for example, a text that is currently troublesome to many Jews, myself included: Leviticus 18:22: *Do not lie with a male as one lies with a woman; it is an abomination.*

Who does not know someone afflicted by this verse? What offends and wounds is not merely the commandment, but the judgment upon those who break it. To have one's actions cursed as "abominable" is a social judgment all too easily internalized and generalized into a curse of self-loathing. Perhaps the day will come when the toxin of this verse has been neutralized by some ingenious act of legal re-interpretation, and some very smart minds are

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at work on this matter, but until that time, the verse will remain in the Torah and its shadow will be cast over the lives of men. In this meanwhile it behooves us to consider the effect of this verse on those, visible and invisible in our communities, who feel its stigma. Ignoring it is not enough.

### A New Way Of Reading, Of Being

If I were to counsel a rabbi in how to create a context of awareness around a verse like this—or any one of a number of other passages in the Torah we euphemistically identify as "problematic,"—I would urge her or him to continue to read this passage where it is appointed to be read. Let such passages be heard, but not without a heightening of awareness and hopefully of compassion. Leave a space of silence after the reading of such texts, I would suggest; surround them with silence of perhaps a minute or two duration; and preface this silence with

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the plea that your congregants “hear” in the silence not only their own reactions to such passages, but also the personal pain and the communal conflict they incite among Jews. Put judgment, opinion, argument aside and be aware of how, in the presence of such texts, caring speech and careful listening become imperative. Perhaps with silence the implications, the repercussions, the lash of this verse and others may be felt, if for a moment, as something that falls on each of us. Silence in law may be a form of consent, but in a D’var Torah it may be a call to reflection, to grief, and even to compassion. Who knows but that in such a silence we might open, not a new interpretation, but a new way of being with difficulty and otherness.

There are two messianic dreams in our culture: one is the haven of the like-minded where there is no “other” and no “otherness,” and where all our sacred texts sweetly accord with our preferences. In the other promised land things are as they are here and now, differences and difficulties abounding, otherness galore, but in that utopia we greet the other as one from whom we may learn and with whom live in a respectful peace. The difficult parts of ourselves, our communities, our texts must be taken as challenges to tolerance, to forgiveness, to compassion. †

## Reading the difficult texts of torah

Vanessa L. Ochs

I am often asked how I deal with parts of Torah that could be considered exasperating to a Jewish feminist, exasperating to anyone. When I feel most tempted to run from the texts, most tempted to discard, the words in the *Amidah* can guide me: *Hashiveinu...l'toratekha*—Bring us back...to Your Torah.

At the very least, these words of the *Amidah* strengthen my endurance to stick around the texts so that there will be other occasions to inspect and confront them. But truly, my endurance is better fortified by the contents of a certain jewelry box I keep.

For my *bat mitzvah*, I received a jewelry box shaped like a treasure chest, and into it went the standard harvest of a 1960s celebration: the bangle bracelet, the *chai* charm, the *magen David*. The box, still sitting on my dresser, has a bottom drawer, a thin flat space, and it is

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that compartment which stores a curious assortment of items I have taken to calling “the flat treasures.” There is a letter from my mother written in fountain pen on onion skin telling her parents that she, her husband and her baby (me) are just fine in Okinawa. There is my junior lifesaving card. An old passport, my *carte de sejour* from when I studied acting in Paris, a graduation tassel from somewhere. A red floral doo-hickey that Mrs. Solomon brought back from Switzerland, and the only recent entries: teeth gathered on my tooth fairy rounds.

When my daughters were younger and were sick in bed, they’d ask for this jewelry box and would examine my flat treasures. Some I could easily explain: it took three summer to earn the JLS card, and in the end, it was awarded only for my tenacity. About the other stuff, I often cannot recall what led me to save it originally or explain why I keep holding on, particularly in this place of apparent honor. By no means are these the objects I would consciously choose as symbolizing the milestones of my life.

The treasures don’t tell my whole story, or even the key parts of it, but they do tell something. I still go through them, occasionally for the critical clues they contain. Sometimes, the meanings are revealed belatedly. They can be sentimental: When Mrs. Solomon died, her red doo-hickey immediately became the token that could evoke her outlandishness and originality. The meanings held can be more complicated in their unravelings. The chatty letter about doing fine in Okinawa disguised, I finally discovered, the story of a failing marriage.

### Hidden Meaning In Curious Treasures

This, in part, explains why I keep going back to the difficult texts of Torah: *leyning* them, studying them, teaching them. I understand that the meaning of one’s treasures is not always clear or even partially apparent. Still, I understand that if there was meaning once and a rationale for being cherished, important meaning could return.

The “keep confronting it” approach generally works for me: I make no claims about its universality. I was once lecturing on particularly disturbing Torah texts—probably something to do with women accused of adultery—when a woman in the audience said she had to be heard. She said she had overcome so much pain in order to refind herself as a Jew again. If she kept encountering the disturbing texts, the very source of her alienation, she might feel so pained she would “run off” again. So she edited those texts out. How, she wanted to know, did I keep going back to those sources of aggravation, how did I keep banging my head on the wall?