



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Emor 5770

By Rachel Farbiarz

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Parshat Emor's many directives on ritual sacrifice include one that applies to all animal slaughter—be it for human or Divine consumption. “[A] bull or sheep,” the *parshah* instructs, “you shall not sacrifice it [*oto*] with its young [*v’et b’no*] on the same day.”¹ As elsewhere, it is not only this commandment’s substance that preoccupies the rabbinic tradition. It is also its textual casing—the timbre and pitch of its words, its grammatical quirks and peculiar phrasings—that begs for the sages’ interpretation.

Thus do the commentators fixate here on a textual discomfort of their own making. The ostensible maleness of the not-to-be-killed parental beast—reflected in the verse’s use of the words “bull” and “sheep” (as opposed to “cow” and “ewe”) and the masculine conjugations for the pronouns for “it” (*oto, b’no*)—rankles the rabbis. The text does not mean what it says, they conclude, but rather, what it does not say: A *female* animal must not be killed on the same day as her offspring. Other flesh—including, permissibly, that of a sire and his offspring slaughtered simultaneously—will be required to sate God’s or man’s hunger.²

Why, then, does the text use the masculine? Why give the rabbis more fodder for their habitual hay-making? The Abarbanel, a fifteenth-century Portuguese exegete and philosopher, provides an incisive answer: Those who will be doing the slaughtering are men. The Torah uses the masculine to arouse the slaughterers’ compassion in fulfilling this *mitzvah*,³ which is itself chiefly concerned with the practice of compassion. It is not enough, however, Abarbanel’s gloss implies, to simply prescribe actions whose fulfillment we may brand “compassionate.” Compassion, instead, must be coaxed into experiential existence—accomplished here through the use of a grammatically-suspect masculine declension.

Abarbanel’s commentary presupposes an astute understanding of compassion’s mechanism, which operates most powerfully through the practice of empathy. Empathy requires more than simply imagining how we would feel were our actions turned upon ourselves. It requires that we blur the boundary of self and posit an identity with an other. The verse’s use of the masculine, in Abarbanel’s conception, nudges the slaughterer to do just that. “You share something fundamental with each other,” the text insinuates: “Allow this commonality to give you a taste of this animal’s self, and thus a small slice of his anguish.”

The extraordinary thing, of course, is that the animal is *not* male. But to help the slaughterer cross a daunting barrier of species, the text actually obscures the commandment’s dictates so as to more faithfully elicit the compassion at its core. Compassion is thus drawn out through a benign textual deceit. Create identity with an other, the text urges, and you will ultimately inhabit it.

We would do well to turn the text’s ploy back upon ourselves. Primatologist Frans de Waal has long studied empathy in primates and argues—contrary to the reigning political philosophies of the last several centuries—that we are

¹ Leviticus 22:28.

² Rashi on Leviticus 22:28; Babylonian Talmud, Chullin 78b.

³ Abarbanel on Leviticus 22:28; as cited and discussed in Carasik, Michael (ed.). *The Commentators Bible: Leviticus*. Philadelphia: JPS, 2009. p. 178.

hardwired to act empathically.⁴ The caveat to this rosy assessment is that our empathic tendencies vanish when there is not identification between actor and subject. As de Waal explains:

Identification is the window, the “portal” to empathy. The portal is always open for those whom are close to us (e.g. spouse, children, parents, friends) but for those more distant, the portal may be only slightly ajar, and for some it may be firmly closed. This is true for most outsiders.⁵

Our perceptions, however, of who is within our “in-group” of identification are situationally malleable. De Waal points to the fact that Swedish citizens were among the most generous donors to those regions affected by the 2004 Asian Tsunami. Because there had been so many Swedes in Thailand and Indonesia when the tsunami struck, de Waal explains, “they had more reason to identify with the victims, even with victims of other nationalities, than did the rest of the world.”⁶ Despite the large gulfs of geography, culture, race and language that had previously separated them, ordinary Swedes thus came to understand the tsunami’s victims as their own “in-group.”

Even given the myriad connections that bind us together in today’s thoroughly globalized world, we remain separated into just as many in-groups upon whom we lavish our empathy and out-groups to whom we deny it. *Emor’s* textual ruse for the slaughterer gives us a tactic for confusing the boundaries between these two groups.

It should not take the loss of our own kin, countrymen or co-religionists to summon the empathic compassion required to help the globe’s neediest. It requires instead small acts of moral imagination—perhaps even a touch of existential bait and switch—to get us there. It is not a long road from telling oneself white lies of identification to embracing the unshakable knowledge that we share something much more fundamental: We are, together, simply human—responsible for, and to, one another.



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⁴ For a discussion of de Waal’s latest book on the subject, see Johnson, Eric M. “Survival of the Kindest.” *SeedMagazine.com* 24 Sept. 2009. http://seedmagazine.com/content/article/survival_of_the_kindest/

⁵ Frans de Waal, comment of Oct. 13, 2009 to Batson, Dan. “Empathic Concern and Altruism in Humans.” *National Humanities Center* 12 Oct. 2009. <http://onthehuman.org/2009/10/empathic-concern-and-altruism-in-humans/>

⁶ *Ibid.*

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