Abbinic literature was written by men to be studied by men. Often, these texts are blunt reminders of misogyny and patriarchy codified in Jewish communal life. Directly addressing difficult texts remains a taboo topic, in much of progressive Jewish education. In the fall of 2012, I began coursework for Dr. Jason Kalman’s Rabbinic Literature course at HUC-JIR. Despite my role as a Jewish educator and second year masters student, this was the first time that my own Judaism had been complicated by these texts.

One day, in the course of my study, I read the following text:

One day [R Jose] saw a man boring a hole in the fence so that he might catch a glimpse [of R. Jose’s daughter]. He said to the man, “What is this?” And the man answered: “Master, if I am not worthy enough to marry her, may I not at least be worthy to catch a glimpse of her?” Thereupon [R. Jose] exclaimed: “My daughter, you are a source of trouble to mankind; return to the dust so that men may not sin because of you.”

Bavli Ta’anit 24a

I called Dr. Kalman and said, “My culture is condoning honor killings. As a Jewish woman, I don’t know how to reconcile myself with this.”

He responded, “Yes. Your tradition holds both good and what we now understand as evil. What are you going to do about it?”

I wish I could put into words how profoundly that moment affected my thinking.

Testing the Tools

In order to align ourselves with tradition, after seeing it whole, we have to come to terms with the continuity of what our tradition has been, acknowledge how it has changed, and begin to envision the changes that we yet want to see. Doing so necessitates the cultivation of a mature love of our tradition. Therefore, our role as teachers becomes providing students with jungle gyms to test out tools that help their Judaism endure, regardless of the difficult concepts they may encounter.

It is essential to both change and continuity to give our students these tools, including those that directly address gender roles. In doing so, we teach them to truly take on the obligation of K’lal Yisrael – a community that wrestles with God and tradition.

As a final assignment in Dr. Kalman’s course, I was to develop a curriculum utilizing rabbinic text. Around the same time, I had been hired by a local Hebrew high school to design a curriculum that addressed the needs of young Jewish women. I felt that combining these two tasks would be intriguing: a curriculum that empowered young Jewish women and spoke to issues “students confront and negotiate in their daily lives” through the utilization of Rabbinic Literature. Through this process, I discovered a vertical change process within progressive Jewish education.

In a vertical process of change, no avenues for the desired change are perceived within the existing system. Therefore, tradition and communal systems are utilized as a base for

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continuity. This solid foundation allows for radical change in ways that circumvent existing structures of power. The existing system is ruled as a false representation of tradition, thereby permitting a new system to be built to better exemplify the core values.

Conversely, a horizontal process of change works within existing systems and draws continuity from the strengths and norms of that system. However, in order for change to be effective on this axis, the voices of those seeking change must carry validity and power within that system.\(^7\)

With the voice for change bereft of power, only the vertical axis would be available. One could only seek to stand again at Sinai, reappropriate the tradition and bypass rabbinic Judaism.\(^8\) If texts encountered were viewed as divine in origin, it would have rendered reinterpretation for modern context as invalid. The belief that rabbinic literature is the work of human beings inspired by the words of Written Torah made it easier to access multiple axes of change in addressing these concerns. Simultaneously, an entirely horizontal approach would not be sufficient. In existing progressive Jewish systems, some of the strongest messages about rabbinic literature come from these difficult topics not being addressed.\(^9\)

**Stepping Back from the P’shat**

Keeping in mind the historical context in which the rabbis were writing allowed me to step back from the *p’shat*, the literal meaning of the text, and to identify underlying principles that could be reconciled with contemporary values. With this critical distance established, one could honor continuity and the horizontal system by distilling the text to core values and principles. Simultaneous, the opportunity for vertical change was utilized by assessing the direct actions rabbis proscribed according to those same core values. This allowed them to be translated for contemporary understandings of Jewish communal life.

I arrived at this approach to text and change through the work of Jacob Neusner. Neusner offers that, when examining a given rabbinic text, the key is to ask: “What principle, what ideal, stands behind the [text] and behind your agreement with the [text]?\(^{10}\) I believe that it is this willingness to engage with ideas that are in tension with our own beliefs that defines us as *K’lal Yisrael*. This wrestling is a vital component in managing continuity and change.

There are vast consequences for choosing to strike a balance for continuity and change through engagement with rabbinic literature. Within rabbinic literature lies a patriarchal structure that defined Jewish life for millennia. It is rooted in the view that these texts are sacred, God’s Oral Law, given to Moshe at Sinai, along with all the gender roles they proscribe. If we change and study these texts, it might mean we need to abide by what they say in order to honor continuity. We might need to believe that the traditional gender roles as outlined in these texts are Divine decree and binding.

However, as our teachers say, a text can be sacred to us because it is of divine origin or a text can be sacred to us because it was held sacred by those who came before us. As we learn from scholars as diverse as Plaskow and Mordechai Kaplan, a tradition can be evaluated and reinterpreted for its core truths. Doing so honors its continuity even in the face of change.\(^{11}\)

The history of misogyny and patriarchy within Judaism is a reality. When our learners, especially our young women, encounter these truths for the first time, these hard truths should be faced in a space that provides the support to incorporate new understandings of what it means to be a Jewish woman. Rabbinic literature is a jungle gym to be explored, rather than a china shop to be studiously avoided.\(^{12}\) Placing these texts in historical context allows for an understanding of core principles, while providing opportunities to celebrate the challenges our matriarchs overcame. ✤
Footnotes:


