

The Legitimacy of Transformation

by Carl Mikkelsen

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Good Shabbos.

A few months ago, Terri Swartz-Russell asked me if I would speak on a topic of my choice. As someone always comfortable with a microphone, I wasn't a hard ask. I could spend 15 minutes talking about the acoustics in the sanctuary, or how self-driving cars would transform eldercare, or the impact of monopoly practices in medicine.

After some thought, I drafted a talk about the Parasha. About how history is reframed and retold as a way to shape the future. This Parsha is rich with many things, but most acute to my reading is the story of the Golden Calf. Do you remember the Golden Calf? Of course you do! We all know the incident of the Golden Calf to be one of the greatest transgressions against God Israel ever makes.

Except, the very phrase "Golden Calf" is a rewrite of history. The Torah never mentions a golden calf, only a molten calf.

In Exodus, we find that Aaron makes a molten calf, and includes the golden jewelry he requests from the people. The Deuteronomy version doesn't mention gold, and repeats "Molten Calf".

In Exodus, the Israelites are uneasy. Moses lingers on the mountain with God, the people feel abandoned and nervous, so Aaron suggests making an image of God in the form of a calf to calm them and restore hope. He asks the people for their gold. In Deuteronomy the story changes. Moses wastes no time on the mountain. The people demand of Aaron that he make the calf, which he does reluctantly.

Exodus places responsibility on Moses and Aaron. Deuteronomy shifts responsibility to the Israelites.

Also, please note that since this was before the giving of the law at Sinai, making an idol wasn't against the rules. There was no second commandment to violate.

The telling in Deuteronomy is fake news as a form of social control -- just like today.

But, I'll save that drosh for another time, and hope our recent experience of rewriting history, ignoring facts, and the unfounded propagandic manipulation of everyone by everyone will cease. Intelligent listening and speaking will render that drosh moot.

I've been distracted by situations that have crossed my path over the last month or two, brought to a head by some YouTube video surfing. These confluent events have stimulated my thinking, and left thoughts of sexism, religion, and birth tumbling in search of harmony.

I stand here today to talk about changes -- specifically changes in people, and in peoples. Transformations large and small, and how these transitions are met by others, including God.

Transformation is found everywhere in religion.

Buddhism began when Siddhartha Gautama left his home and his family, and transformed himself into an aesthetic monk, following the path of other groups in India of the day.

Judaism began when Avram trashed his father's business, changed his name to Abraham, and sought to develop his own relationship with God. Judaism changed again through the transformations of Jacob and Moses.

Christianity began with a few Jews, but its rise was promoted when Saul changed his name to Paul, and went from suppressor of Christianity to promoter and prime apologist. Some sects of Christianity today proclaim that personal transformation, or rebirth, is a mandatory step in approaching God.

Hinduism transforms the soul with each reincarnation. Walking the eternal path of samsara, each reincarnation provides the soul with a transition into a new being, to learn new lessons, to work through its karma.

Baptism and Mikveh are transformative. A person is purified by immersion in water, and changed by passing through the ritual. I know. I've been through both.

My life has been a series of transformations. These transformations are real, true, and heartfelt, yet I carry anxiety that they are not awash with legitimacy.

The transformation relevant today is my transformation from whatever I was before to a Jew. Like some others in this congregation, I was not born a Jew. I chose to be a Jew. I went through a long process of being curious, beginning in high school and carrying into my early twenties. Of trying to be comfortable in my non-Jewish identity, and failing. Of learning what I

could about being Jewish. Of finding that I was drawn to dating Jewish women, including one who didn't know until years later that she was Jewish, and another whose grandparents strongly disapproved because I was of the Goyim.

Sometime later, I began my transformation by approaching the Boston Orthodox Beit Din and began sporadic meetings with a young, single Rabbi. A few meetings left me unsatisfied. He told me that when I truly became a Jew, I couldn't stay with my new Jewish girlfriend -- I would reject any Jewish woman who would ever be with a non-Jew. I wasn't about to break up with her, so I stopped meeting with him. To him, my transformation to Judaism would never be legitimate.

So, I approached a Conservative Rabbi. What happens next is not the practice of Conservative Rabbis I've since met, so maybe I didn't understand either his meaning, or his cold tone. He told me it was simple: a hundred twenty five bucks, take a class or two, and I would be a Jew in weeks. To me, this did not support the learning and self-discovery I knew was needed. It seemed superficial, transactional, and commercial. It was a process that could not lead to a transformation I would find legitimate, and so I rejected it.

These are not surprising stories. Becoming a Jew is difficult by plan -- perhaps to test a person's resolve. I intend no criticism of the Rabbis I met with, so long ago. I mention it because it relates to the question of the legitimacy of transformation.

Let me change subjects for a moment.

There are some here who might think I am a bit of a geek. I am not the academically credentialed practitioner of the technical and mathematical arts that many of you are, but instead a relatively unschooled solver of problems and inventor of necessary schemes. An MIT dropout, supporting myself by abusing technology since 1972, when I was hired by a laboratory at MIT to develop software tools. Professor Joel Moses was probably one of my first users (or victims). I've supported myself by bending technologies for forty-five of my sixty-three years. 71.43% of my life.

I value geekiness. I value understanding things, and relish the ironic humor when I sense the deep inconsistencies that move the world. The will to good vs. the evil impulse. The yin and yang that fill the bright and dark places, and the mathematics and symmetry that keep it all in balance.

My wife, Barbara Posnick, in addition to being a compassionate soul, is also a geek. She will try deny it, but she is a math major -- almost the definition of geek. Every problem she applies her

mind to be dissected, studied, and understood. Marrying Barbara is, for me, an uncountable blessing of infinite cardinality -- Aleph Null. I am fortunate to have met her and to have somehow attracted her attention, her acceptance, and her partnership.

I encourage my son to spend time with geeky people. He does, and has now a music-geek girlfriend.

But, the supply of truly geeky, engineering-focused women is severely limited. Maybe one in twenty of the people I've worked with are actually geeks, and one in twenty of them is female. This is a preciously small set, overrepresented here at Emunah.

So, it was with some glee that I found a woman on YouTube who makes thoughtful, educational, detailed videos explaining engineering concepts, as demonstrated by clever things she builds. I discovered her by following videos of a song my chorus sang for the competition in Las Vegas, "My Romance", as played on large theater organs. She had posted a behind-the-scenes tour of the Wanamaker organ in the former Wanamaker department store (now Macy's) in Philadelphia.

She is into everything. She is reproducing in detail the Apollo guidance computer display and keyboard, the DSKY or "dis-key," including firing in her oven the electroluminescent displays. She teaches the implications of diode logic, and the difference between germanium and silicon devices. She is an encouraging role model for young girls to find identity in their intrinsic geekiness. She is an uber-geek. Largely self-educated. Entrepreneurial. Driven.

And transgender.

Physically a boy for the first 20 years, she transitioned to woman for the last 25.

My brain was kerfuffled. I read her writings, which described the overt sexism she faced as a woman engineer, and the hatred and bullying she faced when people knew she was transgender. She has lived a fascinating, thoughtful life. And, she is undeniably a legitimate geek.

But I was left with a question, and I recognized that to ask this question was presumptuous, and bordered on being inappropriate. It was perilously close to magnifying stereotypes and committing shades of both sexism and transphobia. Still, I asked myself, was she a legitimate FEMALE geek, especially as a role model for young girls?

And thus began my contemplation of legitimacy.

Am I a legitimate Jew?

I've certainly spent much more than half my life as a Jew, and have been Jew-curious since I was Bar Mitzvah age.

Eventually I went through a conversion process, directed by Rabbi Lawrence Kushner of Congregation Beth El of Sudbury, my shul at the time. This involved some classes, much reading, meeting with him for discussions, and was completed with Conservative and Orthodox supervision of certain critical steps. He made certain that the documentation was right so that, for purposes of marriage and emigration to Israel, my transformation was legitimate.

But curiously, was this even necessary? Years later, my father's sister, only after my grandmother died, shared the family secret -- my grandmother's mother was a Jew from Eastern Europe. By some Jewish movements and in the eyes of eager SS officers, I was a Jew! My transformation was barely a transformation at all. Legitimacy became irrelevant.

A few years later, my sister did the genealogy analysis of her DNA. It showed no Eastern European Jewish content. None. It should have shown 12.5%, but it showed nothing. So, maybe my transformation does matter, and I don't have the convenience of birth to shield me from the question of legitimacy.

Which brings me back to the Parasha.

The Israelites were slaves. They had lived in Egypt for generations, exposed to the culture and gods of the Egyptians. They had some connection with the God of Jacob, but it was old and out of practice. Suddenly, they were thrown out of Egypt. Shown signs and wonders in the name of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob's God. Crossed the Red Sea. Three generations before Egypt, many generations in Egypt, and now camped at the base of Sinai. Confused about God, and trying every way they knew to worship.

With all this personal experience, witnessing these events first hand, were these people legitimately transformed from Egyptian slaves to be Jews?

God's answer was No.

With only two exceptions, no one alive at the time of the Molten Calf entered the Promised Land. God found their transformation to be insufficient. Illegitimate. Unworthy of being the recipient of God's generations-old promise. God culled them from God's people through plague and old age until they were gone. And with them, their memory of God's role in the Exodus.

Where did that leave the next generations -- those entering the land, fighting for territory, planting vineyards, and crops, and following the Temple practices?

Or later, even more remote from the God of Abraham, those who lived through the waves of change that roiled Judaism -- the destruction of the temple, exile, return, the destruction of the second temple, exile again, the growth of Rabbinic Judaism, and skipping ahead, the Holocaust?

Through all of these transformations, I claim that the legitimacy which flowed from Abraham's experience has grown fainter. Harder to discern. It requires a specially tuned heart to receive the direct line-of-descent connection with Abraham's ecstasy today. When I imagine the binding of Isaac, I don't resonate with the religious joy Abraham felt as he prepared to do God's will. I wasn't with Abraham, nor was I at Sinai. Passions that bloomed at Sinai are stories, only a bit more real in my imagination than Zeus throwing lightning bolts from Mount Olympus.

Yet, Judaism is alive today. Thriving. Constantly renewed. Unceasingly transformed. Unquestionably legitimate. How?

Lets step back again to the transgender geek.

She is a vital role model for our daughters. She is a talented female geek who has suffered the trials of being a woman in America. Her actions, her passion, and whole her life's work builds and testifies to her legitimacy.

I am a Jew. One may add adjectives and qualifiers, but a Jew I am. I sometimes feel like an outsider, but that is only my own insecurity. I have the ability to study Torah, to learn, to love, and to repair the world. I am a legitimate Jew.

So, what about us?

As a community, we have a precious and undeniable role in this world, yet there is no external authority that confers legitimacy upon us. We create our own group legitimacy through the good we do, and the community we build. Our hearts are forged by the hammer of our experience on the anvil of our principles. Our strength comes from our inter-connections. Our sages, scholars, and Rabbis transformed a fragile system of animal sacrifice into a robust system of ethical engagement with the world, and we strive constantly to keep this system relevant to the world's problems.

Whereas God found us to be illegitimate and punished us at Sinai, we built our own system and defined what it means to be a Jew.

A Jew yesterday, a Jew today, and a Jew tomorrow.

Our legitimacy is strong and grows, even as our transformation continues. God willing, or God not willing, we have work to do.

Perhaps God is watching.

Good Shabbos to those with whom we make and support this community.

Good Shabbos fellow geeks -- you know who you are.

Good Shabbos my friends.

And an especially hopeful "Good Shabbos" to my fellow Jews.