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What are they afraid of?

D'var Torah for Parshat Emor

by ORA NITKIN-KANER • 5/13/2022 | 12 Iyar 5782

Sometimes Torah makes me tired. Sometimes when a verse is so egregiously at odds with my values that I have to turn it or myself into a pretzel just to make it approachable (never mind holy), I get tired. One of these verses appears in this week's parsha, Emor:

> "When the daughter of a priest defiles herself through harlotry, it is her father whom she defiles; she shall be put to the fire." (Leviticus 21:9)

This verse appears in a series of laws on how priests should behave. They establish the priest's relationship to his own body (no head shaving, no cutting his own flesh) and the bodies of others (no contact with corpses other than those of close relatives). The underlying fear seems to be that what is holy ('tahor') can easily transform into what is impure ('tameh'). And so a priest's daughter who 'defiles herself' through relationship, by virtue of the familial relationship, somehow defiles her father as well.

Part of me feels tired when I read this verse, a verse so weighted with millennia of fearful misogyny that it smothers my anger into embers. But part of me also loves the power in its premise: that a single person can be so transgressive that she transforms the identities of those around her.

I write this d'var Torah in the wake of learning that the Supreme Court will likely overturn Roe v Wade: another attempt in millennia of fearful attempts to control the bodies of the powerful. And I write this dvar Torah in the wake of Mother's Day, a holiday that began as a woman-led anti-war movement and is now confined to Hallmark cards and brunches. I share these reflections to remind us how powerful and feared we are—we who challenge the status quo with our otherness, with our actions, with our ideas, with our values, with our bodies, with who and how we love.

As we feel all the tiredness, rage, or fear: let's also remember how powerful we are. To harness some of that power this Shabbat, consider attending your local Bans Off Our Bodies protest this weekend, or donate to a local independent abortion fund.

I'll end with a poem, 'Lament' by Barbara Jane Reyes, as a reminder of what those in power are afraid of:

Lament
Barbara Jane Reyes

when the mother was eggs, blood, and salt
when the mother was bud, blossom, and fruit

when the mother was migraines, cysts, and sacs
when the mother's lit firecracker in her arteries

when the mother was stone was bone cancer
flowering lung, liver, from flowering womb

when the breast branched into berry brambles
did she feel her heart chambers darkened

when the mother was a uterine entombment
when the mother was not goddess not golden

when the mother was not silken but sutured
serpentine stitches edging her sisters' quilting

when her landscape withered, hot, and parched
when birds dispersed her burs (her diaspores)

when the mother lamented rivers, so dammed
her whole earth's inertia shifted, axis tilted up

and all the water spilled, spilled and filled her
did she know her spirit was shedding her flesh

transfiguring into cool pinpricks of midnight
did the mother know she was already in ascent

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