

Parshat Acharei Mot-Kedoshim: On Boundaries

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At the end of *Acharei Mot*, the Torah instructs:

Do not perform the practices of the land of Egypt in which you dwelled, and do not perform the practice of the land of Canaan to which I bring you, and do not follow their traditions. (Vayikra 18:3)

כְּמַעֲשֵׂה אֶרֶץ-מִצְרַיִם אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁבַּתֶּם-בָּהּ לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ
וּכְמַעֲשֵׂה אֶרֶץ-כְּנָעַן אֲשֶׁר אָנִי מְבִיא אֶתְכֶם שָׁמָּה
לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ (ויקרא יח:ג)

What are the abominable practices that God commands that we stay away from? The Torah goes on to list the *arayot* (forbidden sexual liaisons) that one must refrain from—more specifically the prohibition of engaging in incestuous relationships. These incestuous relationships, the Torah explains, are the unethical practices of the Canaanites. *Ma'ase Ca'naan*, incestuous relationships, are practices that degrade and debase the individual. The term describes practices that eradicate any notion of cohesive family; one that does not allow for individual and committed expression of love.

The Torah, however does not explicitly explain what *ma'ase Mitzrayim* are. What are the ways of the Egyptians that we must shun?

One of the first time that the Jewish people engaged with the Egyptians, even before the Jews became slaves, is when the brothers came down to Egypt to acquire food from the viceroy, from their brother Yosef. Yosef invites his guests to dine with him. The Torah illustrates the scene in *Bereishit* 43:31-32. Yosef commands his servants to serve food (שִׁימוּ לָהֶם). They served Yosef's food separately and the brothers' food separately, and the Egyptians who ate with them separately. Why? The *pasuk* explains that the Egyptians could not bear to eat with the Hebrews because it was an loathsome to them (כִּי-תוֹעֵבָה הוּא לְמִצְרַיִם)

Ma'ase Mitzrayim, which God commands the Jewish people to avoid, is the audacity of separatism. It is hard not to think of the separatist laws passed in Nazi Germany—forbidding Jews from eating with, sitting with, working with or marrying Aryans. This separatism was a natural progression towards complete oppression. So too with *Mitzrayim*. First, the Egyptians demanded that the Jews eat separately. Then, they insisted that they settle in a separate area in Egypt, and ultimately, the separatism lead to oppression and slavery.

But what, if anything, does this imperative have to offer us today? After all, we live in a world that for the most part, does not condone illicit sexual relation. In the US, every state has some form of codified prohibition against incest. And, since the Civil Rights movement, discrimination is outlawed and hate crimes against others of

different race or religion is severely punished. Surely this plea, not to be like the Egyptians and the Canaanites cannot apply to each of us today?

And yet, the essence of *ma'aseh Ca'naan* and *ma'aseh Mitzrayim* do still exist today. The *ma'ase Ca'naan*, who engaged in these *arayot* (forbidden sexual relations) is describing a society that eradicates any sense of boundaries. The natural order of relationships is shattered, making way for unions with parents or siblings that are unnatural and unsustainable. It describes a community with no prohibitions or laws. And the *ma'ase Mitzrayim*, the practices of the Egyptians, who are bent on oppression is a society that upholds separatism as its greatest value. Unlike the Canaanites who know no boundaries, the Egyptians, are on the other extreme—they embrace distinction, categorizing one group of people as more superior and distinct than another. We must not be like the *Mitzrim*, a people bent on discrimination. And we must not be like the Canaanites who don't discriminate at all between appropriate and inappropriate relationships. Rather, we should strike a balance, and uphold the Torah's mandate, just a few *pasukim* later of

And you shall live by them (Vayikra 18:3)

וְחִי בָהֶם (ויקרא יח:ג)

Using the Torah and God's decrees as our guiding principles, we must carve out a life that is tenable, one where we can fully function and live. It is, I believe, a call to find the right balance—a balance between a life that knows no boundaries and one that looks to create too many strictures and limitations. A life of shunning, entirely, *ma'aseh Ca'naan* and *ma'aseh Mitzrayim*.



Rabba Sara Hurwitz, Co-Founder and President of Maharat, the first institution to ordain Orthodox women as clergy, also serves on the Rabbinic staff at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale. Rabba Hurwitz completed Drisha's three-year Scholars Circle Program, an advanced intensive program of study for Jewish women training to become scholars, educators and community leaders. After another five years of study under the auspices of Rabbi Avi Weiss, she was ordained by Rabbi Weiss and Rabbi Daniel Sperber in 2009. In 2013 Rabba Hurwitz was awarded the Hadassah Foundation Bernice S. Tannenbaum prize, and the Myrtle Wreath Award from the Southern New Jersey Region of Hadassah in 2014. In 2016 she was the Trailblazer Award Recipient at UJA Federation of New York. She was named as one of Jewish Week's 36 Under 36, the Forward50 most influential Jewish leaders, and Newsweek's 50 most influential rabbis. In 2017 Rabba Hurwitz was chosen to be a member of the inaugural class of Wexner Foundation Field Fellows.