

## GENDER POLICING

A commentary on *Parashat Nitzavim*

By Dalia Fleming

I do not enjoy traditional Jewish dancing. I struggle to follow the actions and join a circle. At Summer Camp I would DJ to avoid having to do it. Recently I have been pushing myself out of my comfort zone.

Picture the scene - I am at a wedding. I am wearing brogues, trousers, button up shirt and a bow tie. I walk up to a circle to dance and get physically pushed out of it. I explain that I am not a man and dancing in the women's circle was the most appropriate place for me and get pushed out the circle again. I am turned away. Physical and emotional rejection from a space.

My understanding of *Parashat Nitzavim* is that Moses talks to the Israelites and, to paraphrase, "if you agree to the covenant with G-d you will be taken care of. If you do not - you will be punished and everyone will know it. But if you then return - and really mean it - you will be more prosperous than those who originally agreed the covenant."

The initial interpretation I took was that sometimes your relationship with G-d is not healthy. I do not believe you should be threatened and punished for taking your own path in life. I do not believe you should feel pressured to return to something you have

turned your back on. However, the more I read this section, the more I read the implications this can have on gender policing.

Gender policing is when people (whether actual police or more commonly - the public, friends, family or anyone else) enforce gender expectations based on what they assume 'normal' gender presentation or behaviour to be. For example, when you dismiss a man for liking 'feminine' colours or when a woman who is more masculine looking goes into a women's toilet and

gets asked to leave.

The text says if you covertly disobey G-d, G-d will be the one to punish you. But if you overtly disobey G-d, it's up to 'us and our children' to police this behaviour. The policing of LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Queer) people by communities is common. Why reward those who align with your expectations and punish those who do not? I am not saying all Queer people want to align with expectations or be welcomed. But those who do - do you expect them to assimilate to what your expectation of being a human is?

People who agree to the covenant (or not) include Jewish LGBTQ people. Often communities reject them for being different to them, not for disobeying. The idea that you should be punished for walking your own path in life goes against other Jewish principles - such as treating others as you would want to be treated. The idea that our communities should judge these decisions - when we can never know what someone is thinking - seems dangerous. Where can queers stand, if no matter where they stand - punishment is inevitable?

The way I express gender is not "conventional" and the gender I have is not always binary - either woman or man. The text asks communities to police people for overtly disobeying G-d but how can we and, when we really reflect - why should we? I was going into a space I was already nervous to be in. I was aware gendered dancing was going to take place. I made a judgement call on what space was most appropriate and "safest" to be in. LGBTQ people do this all the time: participating with love in their hearts and anxiety pumping around their bodies. And yet - rejection.

Perhaps if spaces were more inclusive, understanding and open people may not want to 'turn away' and could find space in a community. How can spaces be made to be more inclusive, more safe - when we can have such strongly held assumptions about who people are and what our spaces need to be. Would you reject people from your community because you see them as "other"?

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