

Shabbat Ki Tetze
September 17, 2016
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Occasionally, I am reminded about the danger of translating Torah verses too literally or interpreting them in stark black and white with no grey in between.

Reform Judaism was never a movement that embraced simplistic or linear thinking, nor are we comfortable with fundamentalist approaches to scripture.

Reform Jews seek to explore and decipher text to understand its simple meaning (*peshat*) as well as its deeper meaning (*derash*).

It's easy to be a fundamentalist-everything is clear- there is no grey-the need to struggle with the meaning of the text is eliminated. Some find security in this rigidity- it just makes everything so easy.

We see a good example of "Black and White" Torah in *Parasha Ki Tetze*, Deuteronomy, Chapter 21, verse 5: In the Rabbi Plaut commentary, we read- "A woman must not put on man's apparel, nor shall a man wear woman's clothing-whoever does these things is abhorrent (*tohah-vat Adonai*) to the Lord your God."

Prof. **Everett Fox** in his Torah commentary translates the last part of the verse as follows-"for an ABOMINATION to Adonai your God is anyone doing this!"

Prof. **Richard Friedman** in his commentary writes-"It is an OFFENSIVE thing to Adonai."

Our first thought might be- these are very strong adjectives- abhorrent, offensive and abomination. There must be something very bad occurring here.

When we read the text literally (*peshat*) it is straightforward- the woman can't wear man's clothes, visa versa, and whoever does so is committing a _____ against God. To engage in transvestite behavior (or the medical term, *transvestic fetishism*) is clearly a horrible sin against God.

Torah does not tell us why-some Rabbis taught that in a segregated Biblical world where the sexes did not mingle freely, the man did this to gain access to the closed world of the woman for sexual purposes. To other Rabbis, it was simply that wearing clothes of the opposite sex blurs the sexual differences that God created.

To dress up in woman's clothes to sneak into a place where women are so you can be a sexual predator is not a minor or a small thing.

And yet, religious fundamentalists, Jewish and Christian, see this verse as evidence of the Torah prohibition against homosexuality, which is ironic because medical literature proves transvestites are generally male heterosexuals.

But I still wonder-is this truly an abomination against God? Is this really what God finds so abhorrent? Why would God be so outraged by this? Are there other Torah verses where God reacts in a similar way?

There are many verses in the Torah where God is similarly disgusted and all of those verses are connected. And what connects them is what God finds truly repugnant, offensive, and abhorrent- IDOLATRY, WORSHIPPING FALSE GODS, BUILDING ALTARS TO THEM, and FOLLOWING THEIR RITUALS, WHICH INCLUDED SEXUAL ACTIVITY WITH CULT PRIESTS, SUCH AS WEARING CLOTHES OF THE OPPOSITE SEX.

Why doesn't the Torah simply explain that the prohibition against wearing clothes of the opposite sex was connected to the sin of worshipping idols?

I'm not sure of that, except to say that maybe this is a clever little cosmic test given by God, who wants to see if we will be lured in by simple answers, or will we figure out that if there is a danger here, it will be found in the spiritual transvestite, the one who dresses in the clothes of the God believer, but after they leave the synagogue, they remove those clothes and replace them with the clothes of who they really are-secret idolaters who worship false Gods of money, possessions and status.

Is there part of us who is a spiritual wolf that dresses in sheep's clothing?