

CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP



UNNATURAL DESIRE?

By Rabbi Aryeh Klapper

According to Aristotle, two-headed calves are a rebellion of matter against form. Two-headed calves diverge from the form of calves and are therefore **unnatural**.

Midrash Rabbah to Bereishis 1:11 may contain an echo of this idea. G-d commands the land to bring forth *עץ פרי עושה פרי למינו*, but in verse 12, the land actually brings forth *עץ עושה פרי אשר זרעו* *בו למינהו*. Rabbi Yehudah ben Rabbi Shalom explains that G-d's command was for the trees to taste like their fruit, but the land chose instead to produce tasty fruit on inedible wood stalks.

The midrash explains that the land could therefore legitimately be cursed in response to Adam and Eve's sin – it deserved punishment for its earlier disobedience. I am not fond of this explanation. Land is not volitional, although I imagine some form of metaphorical/allegorical/Maharalic reading could be constructed to evade or obfuscate that issue; but even if that were done, the commanded 'land' is identified as *aretz*, whereas the cursed 'land' is identified as *adomoh*.

Note that Talmud Sukkah 35b declares that the etrog conforms to G-d's original command. It is (almost?) irresistibly tempting to associate this with the position that the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, Good and Evil was an etrog. However, honesty compels the admission that the Talmud makes the same claim about pepper (Berakhot 36b), fenugreek (Beitzah 13a), and myrtle (Sukkah 32b).

Moreover, the Aristotelian concept of "unnaturalness" can be challenged in at least two ways.

The first, possibly associated with Ramban, contends that the idea of "nature" places an unacceptable limitation on Divine Will. Each moment of existence is a separately willed act of G-d that has no necessary connection with the moment that we experience as preceding it. This position is sometimes known as occasionalism.

The second is full-bore empiricism. This contends that "nature" is a descriptive rather than a prescriptive term – whatever is, is natural. "Forms" are patterns that the human mind imposes on data but that may have no direct connection to physical reality.

Full-bore empiricism is incompatible with assigning any normative value to naturalness or opprobrium to unnaturalness. To the extent that empiricists believe in right or wrong, they must argue for the correctness or incorrectness of an action on other grounds, for example consequences. Occasionalists similarly must explain rightness and wrongness directly on the basis of G-d's Will rather than via mediating categories of natural and unnatural.

In good Aristotelian fashion, Ramban analogizes Biblical laws to laws of nature and defines each in relationship to the overall Divine Will; just as the laws of nature are calibrated overall for maximizing human good, but in specific instances may cause great harm to individual human beings, so too the laws of the Torah.

It seems plausible that in Rambam's system the people most likely to be harmed by Torah laws are those he regards as the human analogs of two-headed calves. Note that exceptionalism can go both ways – for example, Rambam's son seems to acknowledge that halakhah restricts the spiritual development of people who pray better in silence than by verbalizing.

Occasionalism and Aristotelianism are not the only philosophic options available. But I think they are useful poles for framing a discussion about whether Chazal saw the axis natural/unnatural as having descriptive and/or prescriptive significance. I'll discuss this issue below in the context of sexual desire, but – spoiler alert – not in the context of homosexuality.

Chapter 11 of Bamidbar is a strange, difficult, ineluctably Freudian or at the least Zornbergian text. One can taste its flavor in the name given its location – *Kivrot Hataavah, The Graves of Desire* (because there they buried the *עַם* that desired). Who desired what, and why did it lead to death? Or HaChayyim to 11:10 provides a fascinating answer:

*Moshe heard the עַם weeping by their families, each (man) toward the entrance of its/his tent
Hashem's anger was stoked, very much,
and in the eyes of Mosheh – bad -
The meaning of "very much"*

is that all who do wickedness owing to overpowering seduction and the sweetness of the prohibited – one should judge them under the aspect of compulsion, but these who wished to return (to Egypt) – they were like people inciting/arousing the evil inclination within them,
and there is no category of evil greater than this.

... וַיִּשְׁמַע מֹשֶׁה אֶת-הַקֹּלֶם בְּכַף לְמִשְׁפָּחָתָיו אִישׁ לְפִתְחֵהוּ אֲהֲלֵן

וַיִּסְר-אֶף יְקִינֵל מְאֹד

וַיִּבְעֵינִי מִזְּעֵה קָרַע -

טַעַם מְאֹד,

– לצד שכל עושה רשעה לצד תגבורת הפיתוי ועריבות האיטור -

יש לדון בו צד האונס,

אבל אלו שמבקשים לשוב -

הרי הם כמגרים בהם יצר הרע,

ואין גדר רע גדול מזה.

Describing a desire as requiring deliberate arousal seems similar to calling it unnatural. Or HaChayyim connects this to the text's previous mention of weeping, in 11:4-5:

The hangers-on that were amidst them
caused themselves to desire a desire
They returned and they wept,
the Children of Israel as well,
and they said:

“Who will feed us meat?”

We recall the fish that we would eat in Mitzrayim for free...

וְהָאִסְפָּסְפָּ אֲשֶׁר בְּקִרְבֵּנוֹ
הִתְאַוּוּ תַּאֲוָה
וַיִּשְׁבּוּ וַיִּבְכּוּ גַם בְּגֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל
וַיֵּאמְרוּ מִי יֵאָכְלֵנוּ בָּשָׂר:
וַיִּכְרְנוּ אֶת-הַדְּגָה אֲשֶׁר-נֹאֲכַל בְּמִצְרַיִם הַהֵם . . .

For Or HaChayyim, it is the desire to return to Egypt that was unnatural. Possibly this was true only for the Children of Israel, who had been enslaved there, whereas the desire was natural for the *hangers-on that were amidst them*.

Or Hachayyim’s identification of the relevant *desire* takes no notice of the people *weeping by their families*. One position in Chazal however made that phrase central. Perhaps the clearest statement of that position is in Midrash Aggadah:

Weeping by their families –

Why were they weeping?

They were not weeping about the bread, but rather about ‘family matters’,

and they also had no need to eat meat, as they already had much cattle and flocks,

rather they were seeking an excuse to separate from after the Omnipresent,

so as to permit themselves the incestuous relationships that had (just) been forbidden them,

such as aunts and paternal half-sisters,

such as Amram, who had married his aunt,

and when they were commanded about incest – these separated from their wives . . .

בוכה למשפחותיו –

למה היו בוכים?

על הלחם לא היו בוכים, אלא על עסקי משפחותיו,

וגם לא היו צריכים לאכול בשר, שכבר היה להם צאן ובקר הרבה,

אלא היו מבקשים עלילה היאך לפרוש מאחרי המקום, כדי להתיר עצמם

מן העריות הנאסרות להם,

כגון דודתו ואחותו מאביו,

כגון עמרם, שהיה נושא דודתו,

ובעת שנצטוו על העריות - פרשו מנשותיהם . . .

In a reverse Back-to-the-Future, Mosheh Rabbeinu is the conduit for a declaration that his parents’ marriage is forbidden. The subtext of their separation in Egypt is thus a kind of spiritual foresight, akin to the Forefathers observing all the Torah, which Miriam overcomes via her authority as prophetess to command temporary breaches of the Law.

Plugging this midrashic narrative into Or HaChaim’s interpretation that the *desire* at the *Graves of Desire* was unnatural, we might easily conclude that even the additional forms of incest forbidden by Mosaic over Noahide Law are unnatural to desire, so that the crying over being forced to separate was culpable, and merely an excuse for separating from G-d.

But I think that would be jumping way ahead, for two reasons.

The first is that Or HaChayyim attaches his interpretation to Hashem’s being *very* angry, without explaining the contrast between His anger and Mosheh’s seeing it as evil. Other commentators see that contrast as essential to the story. Rabb Y. S. Reggio, for example, states – perhaps in conscious contrast to

Or HaChayyim – that Mosheh reacted to them as evil because he mistakenly thought that their desire was artificially aroused as an excuse. Meshekh Chokhmah suggests that Mosheh’s reaction was in fact grounded in the implications for his own family. Both of these readings deemphasize the *very* and suggest that no high concepts about the ‘nature’ of sin should be derived from here.

The second is that Talmud Sanhedrin 64a reports that just after the Second Temple was inaugurated, the Jews prayed for the *יצרא* = inclination-to-(sexual) sin to be given into their hands, and it was surrendered to them. Avoiding precipitous action, they imprisoned it for three days - and discovered that no eggs were being laid. It seems that the inclination-to-sin cannot be separated from all sorts of positive desires. What to do? They blind it (compare Cupid’s blindness), which, the Talmud tells us, was effective in preventing men (I believe that Cupid is always male) from being incited/aroused with regard to their relatives.

Rashi seems to understand the narrative as referring to all potential-incest relationships. Incestuous desire was therefore natural until the Second Temple, when it became unnatural (I think for all humanity).

With trepidation, I suggest instead limiting this narrative to the additional relationships prohibited as incest by the Torah over Noahide Law. In other words: There is a category of desires that can be viewed as unnatural, but that category can be – very gradually - expanded or contracted by social changes such as the introduction of Divine or possibly human legislation. It took the entire First Temple and Exile before these additional categories could be added to the unnatural category.

But if these categories can be affected by social changes, and by laws, it seems to me that the terms natural and unnatural are infelicitous, because they lock us unnecessarily into an Aristotelian straitjacket.

For example: I don’t think that an Aristotelian framework can coherently sustain the following set of propositions, which I think are compatible with my analysis of the texts above and worth considering as a package:

1. Desires can be objectively differentiated into prescriptively significant categories;
2. A specific desire may not be stably categorized across time and cultures;
3. The categorization of a desire may be affected by culture and social choices;
4. Cross-cultural instability of a desire’s categorization does not imply instability within a particular culture or individual;
5. The ability to affect a desire’s categorization culturally does not imply the ability to affect it within individuals.

I hope I am also clear that this package or propositions is also incompatible with frameworks that make desire immune to prescription. Even if desire itself is never halakhically proscribed (although see Ibn Ezra regarding *lo tachmod*), Or Hachayyim assumes that culpability for acting on the basis of desire can depend on the extent to which we judge the action “under the aspect of compulsion”. But the categories ‘natural’ and ‘unnatural’ are not the correct framework for making that judgement, and the ability to make a cultural judgment about a desire does not necessarily imply the ability to judge individuals, and vice versa.

Shabbat shalom!

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