

Misplaced Matriarchs Addendum: Crammed Beats and Displaced Genderqueers

In “[Misplaced Matriarchs](#)” – nominated for the *Least Interesting Rabbi’s Essay Award* of 2014 – I elaborated on the problematic and incorrect insertion of the word “ve-immotenu” (“and our matriarchs”) in the opening blessing of the Amida (the main prayer of every service, after the Shema). Those problems were the improper or awkward (or blasphemous) use of the *semikhut* (attached noun) structure in Hebrew, the disruptive and confusing editorial choice of enclosing the word in brackets in some books, and the undesirable ways the insertion forces the reader to interpret the word “avoteinu” (especially as “our patriarchs” thereby *excluding* women).

It turns out that the problem is worse than I thought.

A Hazzan friend informed me that the addition of the word in this location, along with other “improvements” to the text, wreak havoc on cantorial presentations almost as much as on congregational singing. That is, it throws off the music, or throws the people off the music. It turns out that the melodies we use for these prayers are carefully crafted, elegantly evolved, and recorded in the memories of congregants like grooves on a vinyl disk. For congregants (including some rabbis amplified by a microphone) who are musically illiterate or otherwise challenged, it is very difficult to change from what was learned. It is not simply a matter of substituting a word, but of cramming five beats (ve-im-mo-tei-nu) into a musical phrase or of utterly restructuring the piece. As my childhood friend Mark Freeman said in sixth grade, when our cantor introduced a new (and beautiful) melody for the Shabbat Amida, “By the time the congregation learns the

new melody they will be dead.”

A further consequence of adding the word “ve-immoteinu” derives from the disambiguation of the preceding word “avoteinu,” which, as explained in “Misplaced Matriarchs,” could mean either “our ancestors” or the specifically masculine “our fore-fathers.” The word “avot” can mean a generic group head, or can mean “fathers,” as in “male ancestors.” This word “av” (“father”) is grammatically masculine (as Hebrew is a “gendered” language) but oddly takes a plural form (the “-ot” ending) that is typical of feminine nouns and participles – like your father wearing a pink suit. But when it is “paired” with “ve-immoteinu,” (“our matriarchs” or “our fore-mothers”) it is hard to read “avoteinu” as anything other than “our fore-fathers.” Noted previously is that this encourages us to think of every other instance of “avoteinu” as masculine-specific, driving out the possibility of viewing it as a word including female ancestors.

But there is another expulsion effected by this disambiguation.

Instead of the phrase “our ancestors,” we are forced to read “our fore-fathers and fore-mothers,” establishing and reinforcing a binary gender regime that is not even demanded by normative Jewish culture which legally recognizes four or five main genders (though “male and female” predominate). This phrasing, while intended to include women, ends up excluding people who are [genderqueer](#) (non-binary) and otherwise disturbing those



Continued on **Page 18**

Misplaced

Continued from **Page 17**

(myself included) who believe the binary gender regime is harmfully over-promoted. That is, there are some people who do not identify as, or identify with, being of a masculine or feminine gender. The insertion of “ve-immoteinu” removes the broad term for our ancestors and replaces it with a narrow binary choice of male or female.

One might say that genderqueer people constitute such a small or exceptional segment of the Jewish People that we need not consider them – which would be the same line of reasoning used by our surrounding American culture to ignore Jewish holidays, diet and cultural practices inasmuch as Jews are generally only 2% of the population, less in some locales, and less if we exclude Jews who do not observe the holidays or other particular practices. You can't structure everything to take into account every minority. Yet our sages have taught us that we do not at this point have a surplus of Jews and for that reason every single one has to be treated as a dignitary – welcomed and honored. That means that even people who are uncomfortable with

other Jews' gender presentation would do well to adapt (get used to it) and to spiritually embrace our fellow Jews.

My early experience as a Jewish male included some degree of differentiation from the models of masculinity in our surrounding culture. The male Jewish students at our high school were distinct as non-hunters and as youth who aspired to academic adequacy if not excellence. Even being in shop class was pushing it; auto mechanics was beyond the pale. Like my fellows, I was a descendant of Jacob (“yoshev ohalim”) and not Esau (“yode'a sayid”), that is, a kid who was more likely to be making rather than shooting bucks, and in that way not matching the gender-norms of our class. The rare Jewish boy who played football might have been thought of as a hero (Gary Starkman was the team's kicker) but that was as close as we came to emulating the manliness of the masses. The vague sense of alienation that I felt is nothing compared to the danger and estrangement experienced by many of our people, particularly youth, who are not gender conformists. Our synagogue community, reflected in everything including the liturgy, should be safe and affirming.



PHOTO BY STEVE WERLIN

Bees & Honey on Rosh HaShana Workshop 2017