



TEXTing

a Hartman podcast hosted by Elana Stein Hain

Episode 5

Code-switching

Study Guide

Elana Stein Hain and Yonah Hain

How to use this guide

This resource is meant as a tool to facilitate learning grounded in the sources discussed in each episode of TEXTing. The study guide includes an opening question and “The Text Message,” which breaks down the texts mentioned in the episode with quotes from Elana Stein Hain’s conversation with her guests and questions for conversation. Learners can listen to the episode before or after engaging with this guide or use the guide as a stand-alone tool for learning.

Episode Description

Many Jews have found themselves frequently code-switching, altering their speech to fit in, during the ongoing Israel-Hamas war. In this episode of TEXTing, Elana Stein Hain and Yonah Hain take a close look at an instance of code-switching in the rabbinic midrash, Pesikta DeRav Kahana 4:7-8, and what it can tell us about communicating with different audiences today.

Opening Question

In the introduction to “Code-switching,” Elana explains, “Code-switching is when we adjust our speech and mannerisms to blend into a broader cultural context... [M]any of us likely code-switch all the time... sometimes it can feel disingenuous like checking a part of your identity at the door in order to belong or for someone else's comfort... [S]ometimes it feels like playing up a part of yourself to strengthen a connection. And sometimes it feels like a little bit of both. Many of us find ourselves in that position of code-switching right now about Israel, changing the way we explain ourselves, the way we act, what we wear, depending on the audience.”

- Share a story of a time when you found yourself code-switching to feel a sense of belonging to a group or a community. In what ways did code-switching benefit you and in what ways did it cost you?

Elana describes this text as depicting both “an insider and outsider lens.” As you study the excerpt from the midrashic collection Pesikta DeRav Kahana, consider who is playing the role of insider and outsider and how those roles are played differently throughout the midrash.

The Text Message

Part I: The Red Heifer

1. Pesikta DeRav Kahana 4:7

[ז] ויקחו אליך פרה (שם). לולינס בר טיבריס בשם ר' יצחק קאטריקו, ר' עזריה א' לה ר' יצחק ור' יוסה בר חנינה, א' לו הקב"ה, משה לך אני מגלה עסקי פרה אבל לאחרים חוקה...

“And they shall bring you a red cow...” (Bamidbar/Numbers 19:2) Lulinas son of Tivris said in the name of Rabbi Yitzchak Katriko, R. Azariah, R. Yitzchak, R. Yosa bar Hanina: God said to Moshe: Moshe, I’m revealing to you the aspects of the cow, but for others it will remain a hok [a law that has no explanation].”

The midrash centers around a law from Numbers 19 about a mysterious purification ritual involving a red heifer. No one understands the mechanics of this ritual, but, according to the midrash, God does explain it to Moshe.

- Yonah raises a question here: Is Moshe allowed to share what he knows about the red heifer ritual? What are the implications if he can share it? What are the consequences if he can't?

Part II: The Outsider

2. Pesikta DeRav Kahana 4:7, cont.

גוי אחד שאל את רבן יוחנן בן זכיי א' ליה, אילין מיליא דאתון עבדין נראין כמן כשפים, מביאין פרה ושוחטין אותה ושורפין אותה וכותשין אותה ונוטלין את אפרה ואחד מכם מטמא למת ומזין עליו שתיים שלש טיפים ואומרין לו טהרתה.

A gentile asked Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, "These rituals you do, they seem like witchcraft! You bring a heifer, burn it, crush it up, and take its ashes. [If] one of you is impure by the dead [the highest type of impurity], two or three drops are sprinkled on him, and you declare him pure?!"

א' לו לא נכנסה רוח תזזית באותו האיש מימיו, א' לו לאו, אמ' לו ולא ראיתה אחר שנכנסה בו רוח תזזית, א' לו הין. א' לו ומה אתם עושין, א' לו מביאין עיקרין ומעשנין תחתיו ומרביצים עליה מים והיא בורחת.

He said to him, "Has a restless spirit ever entered you?"

He said to him, "No!" "Have you ever seen a man where a restless spirit entered him?" He said to him, "Yes!" [Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai] said to him, "And what did you do for him?" He said to him, "We brought roots and made them smoke beneath him and pour water and it flees."

א' לו ולא ישמעו אזניך מה שפיך מדבר, כך הרוח הזה רוח טומאה היא, דכת' וגם את הנביאים ואת רוח הטומאה וג' (זכריה יג:ב)

He said to him, "Your ears should hear what leaves from your mouth! The same thing is true for this spirit, the spirit of impurity, as it is written, "Even the prophets and the spirit of impurity will I remove from the land." (Zachariah 13:2) They sprinkle upon him purifying waters, and it [the spirit of impurity] flees."

Here a entile, in other words the rabbinic embodiment of an outsider, comes and questions this strange-looking ritual. It can be uncomfortable to have the outsider's gaze turned upon something that is familiar, but it can also help us see in new ways. Elana notes, "Ritual without context [can] look strange to you, but... rituals without context [can] sometimes look very familiar to you."

- **Consider a Jewish ritual with which you are familiar and then take away the context. In what ways might it look strange from an outside perspective? In what ways might it be like other kinds of rituals or behaviors? How might an outsider's gaze deepen our understanding of this or other rituals? How might it threaten our relationship to the ritual?**
- **In discussing this section, Yonah argues that Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai has a role as a translator of Torah, someone who makes Torah and Judaism comprehensible to others. How might you imagine this role impacts his relationship to Torah and his relationship to outsiders?**
- **Elana points out that sometimes this role of translator/educator is intuitive, but sometimes it is exhausting being tapped to explain or represent all of the Jewish people or Torah or Israel. In what moments have these roles felt empowering for you? Are there moments where this kind of role has been thrust upon you and you have rejected it?**

Part III: The Insiders

3. Pesikta DeRav Kahana 4:7-8

וכיון שיצא אמרו לו תלמידיו ר' לזה דחיתה בקנה לנו מה אתה משיב, א' להם חייכם לא המת מטמא ולא המים מטהרים אלא גזירתו של הקב"ה הוא, א' הקב"ה חוקה חקקתי גזירה גזרתי ואין אתה רשאי לעבור על גזירתי זאת חוקת התורה (במדבר יט:ב).

After he left, our rabbi's students said, "You pushed him off with a reed. What will you say to us?" He said to them, "By your lives, a dead person doesn't make things impure, and the water doesn't make things pure. Rather, God said, 'I have engraved a rule, I have decreed a decree (hukah hakakti, gezeira gazarti), and you have no permission to transgress what I decreed, as it says, "This is a hok (rule) of the Torah."

[ח] מפני מה כל הקרבנות באין זכרים וזו באה נקיבה, א"ר אייבו לבן שפחה שטינף בפלטין של מלך, א' המלך תבוא אמו ותקנח את הצואה בחיקה, כך אמ' הקב"ה תבוא פרה ותכפר על מעשה העגל.

Why are all the sacrifices male and this one is female? R. Iyvo said, "This is like the son of a maid who soiled the king's palace. The king said, 'Let his mother come and clean up the excrement.' So God said, 'Let a cow come and atone for the golden calf.'"

Elana outlines the midrash by identifying four approaches to explaining the ritual of the red heifer:

1. Moses knows the reason. Not everyone needs to know, but you can trust him.
2. This needs to be something that can be explained across difference, because if you can't, you might lose your allies and your sense of yourself.
3. There is an important value of loyalty to God here, so you should obey even if you don't understand it.
4. Maybe we can't explain everything, but we can explain some pieces of the ritual.

The midrash opens with God explaining the law of the red heifer to Moshe (an insider) and then Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai (another insider) explains it to a Gentile (an outsider). In the final section of the midrash, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai is confronted by his students, who are insiders, but not quite as inside as Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai.

- **Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai is able to explain the ritual to the outsider, but his approach to his students is very different. Elana points out that there are different stakes in the two cases. What are the stakes to an outsider's accusation of witchcraft versus a group of students' demand for knowledge?**
- **Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai responds very differently to his student than the gentile, essentially saying there is no rational explanation for this ritual. Do you think one of these responses is more authentic than the other or that he believes one response and not the other?**
- **Right after Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai tells his students not to worry about understanding the ritual, the midrash concludes by explaining one piece of the ritual. What might this explanation do for Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, the gentile, or the students?**

Synthesis

At the end of the podcast episode, Yonah describes the way his students at Columbia/Barnard Hillel engage in code-switching among their peers in relation to the term “Zionism.” He describes this code-switching as “self-censorship that is about Jewish discomfort, not about Jewish communication and Jewish expression,” to which Elana responds, “Sometimes code-switching allows you to belong and sometimes the price of that belonging is losing a little bit of yourself.”

- Can you map these different expressions of code-switching—belonging and loss of self—onto the different elements of the midrash? How does analyzing the midrash in this way change your understanding of the midrash? How does the midrash affect your understanding of code-switching?
- When you think about code-switching in your life, have you experienced what Yonah describes as paying a price? If so, how have you balanced your perceived need to code switch with the cost to your sense of self?