

We Don't Talk About Bruno

Mishpatim 5782

At first glance, a song belted out by an ensemble cast about a weird and creepy relative would not be a likely candidate for billboard success. Yet the song “We Don’t Talk About Bruno,” another hit from Lin-Manual Miranda, reached #2 on the Billboard Hot 100, surpassing “Let It Go,” which peaked at fifth place. It has been translated into 40 languages; in Japanese it is called “Secret Bruno” and in German, “Just Not a Word About Bruno.” A Yiddish version- *mir redt nisht veigen Bruno*- has yet to be produced, but I’m sure it will be in good time... The catchy lyrics are about Bruno, an oversized relative who spends too much time with rats and is endowed with the gift of prophecy. He shares his visions of low-grade doom with everyone, regardless of whether they are actually interested in hearing them. What is it about this song that makes it so popular? Its co-director, Charise Castro-Smith, thinks it’s because of the universality of the subject matter. In an interview in the Wall Street Journal, she asserted that

“I think this video actually proves that everybody in the world has a black sheep in their family, It’s such a relatable concept of the person in your family that you really aren’t supposed to talk about, but he’s like the biggest deal, right?”¹

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<https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-encantos-we-dont-talk-about-bruno-became-bigger-than-let-it-go-11642608106>

Last week, we watched Encanto with the kids, and I agree with her. Everyone *does* have a relative who is weird, embarrassing or annoying, and if you don't think you have such a relative, it likely means that you *are* that relative. Furthermore, family drama afflicts everyone. Leo Tolstoy famously began the book Anna Karenina with the classic sentence

Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.

That applies even to the families that the most well-adjusted, or apparently so. But aside from the familial aspect, I think there is something else that makes this song so universally relatable. Bruno represents something that can be found in every culture and every country: Taboos. What does the Torah have to say about them? Does the Torah *have* them?

At first glance, it would appear that the Torah has plenty of taboos. Think of all the food items and mixtures that are prohibited, all the relationships that are forbidden, all that which is described in the Torah as שקץ, as abhorrent, or as חרם, or strictly off limits. I think that a closer look at this week's Parshah reveals a rather different perspective.

At the end of this week's Parsha, the Torah resumes its account of the revelation of the Torah. A mass purification of the Jewish people takes place, as everyone beholds the Divine Presence and famously declares נעשה ונשמע - we will do and we will hear. Yet the beginning of the Parshah interrupts the *Mattan Torah* narrative, as it begins to give a list of laws, ones that seem fairly randomly organized and unrelated. Why does it do that? Doesn't the Torah compromise its impact when it interrupts itself in this way?

I'd like to suggest that the Torah is arranged this way to teach us an important and powerful lesson. Consider what the Torah pauses to speak about. First, it begins with a discussion of indentured servitude- addressing economic inequality, class and power dynamics. It then continues with a discussion of gender equality, as it describes the responsibility of a husband to provide his wife with a marriage that satisfies *her* financial, physical and sexual needs. From there, it moves to the sordid underbelly of society, talking about kidnapping, human trafficking, murder, theft and property damage and seduction. The Torah talks about xenophobia and racism when it prohibits oppressing the convert, and it talks about graft and corruption when it cautions judges against taking monetary or emotional bribes. It talks about religion when it lists the festivals we are commanded to observe. It discusses ecological sustainability when it speaks about Shemittah for the first time, and it even talks about ethical consumption- according to some commentaries, the Torah's prohibition against cooking meat and milk is designed to instill sensitivity within us. Only a barbarian would cook an animal in the that which nurtures it.²

Why does the Torah interrupt its account of revelation now? Firstly, because it wants us to know that a Torah life is not just about the Shabbat meals, the holidays and the festive occasions- it is about firmly drawn boundaries and rules that inform our ritual and interpersonal lives. More than that, the Torah wants us to understand that when trying to live a Godly life, *there are no taboos*. All the subjects that are usually avoided in polite company- sex, money, class, race, the environment, ethics and religion- are addressed openly in this parsha, because there should be no subject that is off limits for discussion and

² Rashbam, Bechor Shor

questioning. Of course, that doesn't mean that any of these sensitive issues can be discussed however one sees fit. In teaching about intimacy, for example, our sages cautioned against licentious conversations³, but they never confused prurience with discussing the subject openly and honestly. The fact that they gave us guidance on how to talk about sensitive issues means that they must be addressed.

The thing about treating important subjects as taboo- as Brunos that we don't talk about- is that they will come out anyway, whether we like it or not. It is our choice, therefore, in how to address them- proactively or reactively. There is a parable attributed to the Dubno Maggid⁴ about the legendary wise men of Chelm. The main street in Chelm was a winding road carved out of the side of a mountain, and it had no guard rails. Whenever people would arrive in town on a horse and buggy, the punishing turns would be too much for the animals, who would fall off the side of the road and crash to the bottom. As you can imagine, many people were severely injured, not to mention horses dying and buggies being totalled. The Jewish Community Council convened an emergency meeting to solve this serious problem, and, of course, a committee was appointed. After painstaking research and deliberation, the committee proposed a motion that won the enthusiastic and unanimous approval of the community. The motion read: "Whereas the road leading down the mountain has no guard rails, and whereas this leads many people to fall off the mountain causing serious injury, we hereby resolve that a hospital be built at the bottom of the mountain." Do we build a guardrail, or a hospital? It shouldn't take a Chaim Walder to have serious conversations with

³ Shabbat 33a

⁴ I thank Rabbi Mitchell Wohlberg for this parable

our children about sexuality, about their bodies belonging to them, and about boundaries that they and others must observe in their interactions with other people.

At the beginning of this month, Rabbi Yisroel Goldstein, the Chabad shaliach in Poway, was sentenced to 14 months in prison for defrauding his community to the tune of several millions of dollars. He was being investigated for this misappropriation *at the same time of the Poway attack*, for which he was hailed as a national hero. If the emails and calls I've been getting this week have been any indication, shul security is on everyone's minds. Did you know that on the day of the attack, there was no security guard present? Do you know *why* there was no security guard present? Because there was no money for it. Rabbi Goldstein had raised funds for security, and then diverted the funds toward other ends. When things like this happen, it is an important opportunity to discuss honesty, ethics and cheating- both as a community and with our children. It is also too late. Conversations about integrity- academic and otherwise- begin at a young age and are imparted through modeling as much as by words. If we consider these subjects and so many others to be taboo, to be a shandeh, and then have to discuss them when they are exposed, we are playing defense. We will always be fumbling for the right language to address these issues, and scrambling for the right leaders to guide us when they inevitably explode.

There is another reason why it is important to have these conversations. When do we talk about the Exodus from Egypt? In two different places, the Torah tells us we do so

when, in due time, your child asks you.

How are we supposed to transmit the Torah? וּשְׁנַתָּם לְבְנֵיךָ, you should tell the words of the Torah to your children. *The only way the Torah is sustained from one generation to the next is if parents can speak openly and comfortably to their children about it. All of it.* If we create healthy dialogue with our children about sensitive subjects, they will feel comfortable confiding in us when they are in situations that are uncomfortable, dangerous or prohibited. If we convey the attitude that something is shameful, forbidden or otherwise off limits, then when our children are inevitably confronted with it, will deal with it on their own without our guidance, or will seek guidance from other, more counterproductive sources.

Let us learn the lesson of the list of laws. The Torah guides us even, and especially, in the uncomfortable yet necessary subjects. May it guide us, too.