

FICTION AND FILM ANALYSIS

Disobedience: Reading the sacred text otherwise

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Abstract

In this article, I reflect on the violence of sacred texts towards the lesbian community, drawing on insights from Naomi Alderman's novel *Disobedience* and the 2017 film of the same name directed by Sebastián Lelio. Alderman's novel has a striking point of difference to the film, and this is the strangely affirming arrangement of each chapter around the Torah (Jewish sacred scripture) and the interpretive writings of the Jewish sages as the plot evolves. This positioning rests subtly on the wings of a particular kind of creative, resistant reading of the sacred text. It is a compilation and interpretation of sacred texts in such a way that their violence against women expressing same sex desire is neutralised and transformed.

Key words

Sexuality, Disobedience (novel), Bible, Judaism

[Rav]: In the beginning Hashem made three types of creatures. The angels, the beasts and the human beings. The angels He made from His pure word. The angels have no will to do evil. They cannot deviate for one moment from His purpose. The beasts have only their instincts to guide them. They, too, follow the commands of their maker. The Torah states that Hashem spent almost six whole days of creation fashioning these creatures. Then just before sunset, He took a small quantity of earth and from it He fashioned man and woman. An afterthought? Or His crowning achievement. So, what is this thing? Man? Woman? It is a being with the power to disobey. Alone among all the creatures, we have free will. We hang suspended between the clarity of the angels and the desires of the beasts. Hashem gave us choice, which is both a privilege and a burden. We must then choose the tangled life we live. (Opening lines of *Disobedience*, Lelio, 2017)

The relationship between tradition and sexual freedom is a tangled space, particularly for those identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning and otherwise (LGBTQT+). Naomi Alderman's 2006 novel *Disobedience* explores this space, particularly the signal themes of faith, truth and freedom in the context of lesbian desire. In 2017, the cinematic realisation of the novel was directed by Sebastián Lelio. Like other films of its kind, Lelio portrays the disconnect between the *frum* (religious) world and the secular world and traces with great effect the personal cost of this divide in terms of sexuality. Alderman's novel has a striking point of difference to the film, and this is the strangely affirming arrangement of each chapter around the Torah (Jewish sacred scripture) and the interpretive writings of the Jewish sages as the plot evolves. This positioning rests subtly on the wings of a particular kind of creative, resistant reading of the sacred text. It is a compilation and interpretation of sacred texts in such a way that their violence against women expressing same sex desire is disempowered. In Alderman's novel, and similarly in Lelio's film, the role of speech in defining and realising women's sexual freedom is at the fore. Alderman's presentation of this real struggle as the narrative progresses is heart-rending. The twist is when the reader discovers that the freedom to realise one's true sexual self is incarnated from within the very texts and traditions that repress it.

Alderman's novel is set in an orthodox Jewish community in North London and begins with the death of the revered Rav Krushka, which is then followed by tumult over the appointment of a successor. This appointment is a contentious process which is cast into further disarray when the Rav's estranged daughter Ronit returns from New York for the Hespel (her father's eulogy). Ronit stays with her cousin Dovid, the ascendant rabbi, and is surprised to find that he has married her best friend and first love, Esti. Ronit finds herself falling in love again with Esti and this presents a crisis for them all.

Joseph Nacino of *Lesbian News* describes Lelio's film *Disobedience* as 'a transfixing consideration of love, faith, sexuality, and personal freedom' (2018). Stephanie Zacharek from *Time Magazine* describes the two female protagonists, Ronit and Esti, as 'circling each other warily, each cautious about disrupting the pattern of the other's life' (2018). For Zacharek, these very patterns and cycles of Orthodox Judaism bring comfort but can also lead to alienation and intense loneliness for those who are estranged. Zacharek describes Rachel Weisz's character Ronit as assertive yet dreamily wistful, and Rachel McAdams' character Esti as subdued and pragmatic about her life in the Orthodox community. Esti has kept her true desires and sexual identity tamped deeply down and this fiercely suppressed part of herself is about to burst out.

In the film, Alessandro Nivola plays the character Dovid. Dovid is deeply observant and, in terms of tradition, a good husband. However, for Esti, Dovid's generosity, patience and benevolence are suffocating. Captivation and care are entangled. As Zacharek notes, 'In *Disobedience*, three people reckon with the cost and meaning of freedom. Everybody pays. But if it were free, what would it be worth?' (2018). Joel Streicker, who reviews the novel for the journal *Shofar*, suggests that 'the novel's sympathies shift from Ronit's anger and bitterness to Esti's unfolding self-understanding and self-assertion' (2008). While Ronit seems to have found a certain troubled freedom in New York, and certainly one on her own terms, Streicker points out that for Esti, it is in fact God who makes space for every creature's freedom to disobey tradition – though one 'cannot escape the consequences of disobedience' (2008, p. 204). There will always be a price. This is the crux of the theology both in the film and the novel – God might be an ally. For Streicker, Alderman's novel enacts 'a reconciliation between Orthodoxy and lesbianism, between individual desire and collective constraints on it' (2008, p. 205).

Lesbianism is not strictly considered an infringement of the law in Judaism. Lesbianism is not mentioned in the Hebrew Bible and only became a concern to the sages in later periods. Thus, in Sifra, the midrash (post-biblical commentary) on Leviticus, in its commentary on Leviticus 18:2-3,¹ there is reference to a prohibition against lesbianism, or *mesolelot*. In the Nashim ('Women') section of the Talmud, the sages consider whether lesbians could marry priests and try to answer the question of whether lesbians are 'virgins' (*Yevamot* 76a). The Mishnah contains the text of a debate over whether lesbianism is a minor or major infraction for the Jewish community. And in probably the strongest denunciation, in the Mishneh Torah, medieval Torah scholar Maimonides associates lesbianism with an ambiguous Torah reference to the 'practices of Egypt' and prescribes flogging. Maimonides says:

It is forbidden for women to enmesh [play around] ... with one another and this belongs to the 'practices of the Egyptians' [of] which we have been warned: 'you shall not copy the practices of the Land of Egypt' ... However, a flogging for disobedience (*mardut*) should be given, since they have performed a forbidden act. A man should be strict with his wife in this matter, and should prevent women who are known to engage in this practice from visiting her, and prevent her from going to them. (Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Issurei Biah 21:8)

Lesbianism was outlawed by the sages primarily because it is considered a danger to the community and to men's control of their marriages, as well as being symptomatic of the apparently rebellious nature of women. It is ironic that while clearly not a capital offence, it does, for the sages, make a woman impure for a period of 12 days; at the end of this time, she

is considered ‘straightened out’ enough to return to her husband and community.

While in the novel, Alderman does quote the sages on ‘the practices of Egyptian women’, this is not where she begins what could be a futile battle against tradition’s status quo. Rather, she begins in the unlikely place of the Shabbat (Sabbath) service with the most unlikely companions of the creation accounts in the book of Genesis. She begins with an exploration of wonder in a portion of prayer from the Mishnah Tamid 7.4 chanted during the Shabbat morning service: ‘And on the Shabbat, the priests would sing a song for the future that is to come, for that day which will be entirely Shabbat and for the repose of eternal life’ (Alderman, 2006, p. 1; see also Neusner, 1998). On the theme of the creative power of speech, Alderman offers the possibility that one might create one’s own world through speech and she does this through the old Rav’s *drash* (exegesis) on Genesis 1:

‘Speech’, said the old Rav. ‘If the created world were a piece of music, speech would be its refrain, its recurring theme. In the Torah, we read that Hashem [God] created the world through speech. He could have willed it into existence. We might have read: “And God thought of light, and there was light.” No. He could have hummed it. Or formed it from clay in His hands. Or breathed it out. Hashem, our King, the Holy One Blessed Be He, did none of these things. To create the world, He spoke. “And God said, let there be light, and there was light.” Exactly as He spoke, so it was ... The Torah itself. A book. Hashem could have given us a painting, or a sculpture, a forest, a creature, an idea in our minds to explain His world. But He gave us a book. Words ... What a great power the Almighty has given us! To speak, as He speaks! Astonishing! Of all the creatures on earth, only we can speak. What does this mean? ... It means we have a hint of Hashem’s power. Our words are, in a sense, real. They can create worlds and destroy them. They have edges, like a knife.’ (Alderman, 2006, pp. 7-8)

Alderman recalls that the sages compare the Torah to the primordial water that covered the world (Genesis 1:2). Without it, they say the earth would be nothing but a desert. In a way, these waters of the Torah serve as a *mikvah* (ritual pool) for the world. As a *mikvah*, Alderman hints that the very impurity that is created and attributed by the sages (for example, the laws that magnify Esti’s feelings of guilt) can also be washed away by the sages’ own sayings. Here, Alderman celebrates the sacred without allowing the strictures of a violent text to cultivate shame regarding a woman’s desire for another woman:

Without Torah, man too would be only a shell, knowing neither light nor mercy. As water is life-giving, so Torah brings life to the world. Without water, our limbs would never know freshness or balm. Without Torah, our spirits would never know tranquillity. As water is purifying, so Torah cleanses those it touches. Water comes only and forever from the Almighty; it is a symbol of our utter dependence on Him. Should He withhold rain for but a season, we could no longer stand before Him. Just so, Torah is a gift which the Holy One Blessed Be He has given the world; Torah, in a sense, contains the world, it is the blueprint from which the world was created. Should Torah be withheld only for a moment, the world would not only vanish, but would never even have been. (Alderman, 2006, p. 18)

Yet while water covered the earth, chaos exists too. Even from the beginning, God wrestled between order and chaos, life and death. In *tohu vabohu* (‘waste and void’) and the *ruach elohim* (‘spirit of God’) of Genesis 1:2, there are tensions and balances that all beings are fated to navigate, as God did too in the beginning – this very tension is written into the fabric of the world. Alderman takes the reader to the *shacharit* morning prayer: ‘All say: Blessed are you, Lord, our God, King of the Universe, Who did not make me a slave. Men say: Blessed are you, Lord, our God, King of the Universe, Who did not make me a woman. Women say: Blessed are you, Lord, our God, King of the Universe, Who made me according to His will. from shacharit, the morning prayer’ (Alderman, 2006, p. 58). This prayer and its troubling gender binary invokes a familiar kind of negation, but Alderman links this prayer to the story of the Sun and the Moon and deconstructs the presumed inequity from within the tradition. In that first great chapter of Torah, on the fourth day the sun and the moon were made by

God (Genesis 1:14-19), just as man and woman were made (as per what is written) and were originally of equal status, a mirror image of each other (Genesis 1:27):

For it is written, 'And God made the two great lights.' But the moon complained at this, saying, 'Two rulers may not use one crown.' And Hashem replied, saying, 'Very well, since you ask for one to be lesser and one to be greater, your size shall be diminished, and the size of the sun increased. Your light shall be one-sixtieth of its previous strength'. The moon complained to Hashem at her plight and, so that she should not remain utterly without comfort, Hashem gave her companions – the stars. (Alderman, 2006, p. 58).

In this story, at the end of days, the Moon will be returned to her former glory, and be once more equal with the Sun. Alderman suggests that one might learn from this that God listens to creatures and these creatures can sometimes be in the right. 'In the first place, we learn that the moon was correct, for Hashem hearkened to her words' (Alderman, 2006, pp. 58-59). But we also learn that Hashem is merciful – that this God recognises the plight of those considered lesser and gives comfort to those in need. Esti muses that the stars are God's gift to the moon. Ronit and Esti's girlhood love and desire could be storied as a gift of Hashem, as if the Moon (the motherless and abandoned Ronit) was given Esti, who was like a constellation of stars to her. As the narrative of Ronit and Esti winds through Alderman's bricolage of the Torah and the sayings of the sages, Alderman reminds the reader of God's propensity to hear, to listen and to change God's mind. In the whimsical stories of the sages, she offers the possibility that God hears and answers the cry of the soul (Psalm 66:19):²

God instructed the moon to make itself new each month. It is a crown of splendour for those who are borne from the womb, because they are also destined to be renewed like her. from the kiddush levana, recited every month after the third day of the lunar cycle and before the full moon What is the shape of time? On occasion, we may feel that time is circular. The seasons approach and retreat, the same every year. Night follows day follows night follows day. The festivals arrive in their time, cycling one after the other. And each month, the womb and the moon together grow fat and fertile, then bleed away, and begin to grow once more. It may seem that time leads us on a circling path, returning us to where we began. (Alderman, 2006, p. 101).

Alderman describes a beautiful scene that relates to the Haftarah readings (the cycle of readings from the prophets) associated with the new moon. What is felt here in the writing is the rhythmic constancy of the Jewish calendar, its unceasing movement, as if the cycle of readings was tidal. These patterns of practice are deeply embodied, finding kinship in the lunar rhythms of the womb. These cycles are thus interior and hold the observant reader in a cultural and maternal embrace. There is a sense that these cycles cannot be held back from their return. They are as inevitable as the seas and, just as these same cycles draw forth Jewish practice, Alderman wants to suggest they will inevitably draw forth the truth of oneself. Esti is sitting at the Shabbat service in the balcony reserved for women, and the Haftarah is to be read. The reading happens to be from 1 Samuel 20. It is as if even the seasonal readings from the Tanakh arrive as gifts to support Esti's realisation of her desire for Ronit and what that might mean for the elemental truths of her sexuality and, moreover, her own community's failure of love: 'The tones of the Haftarah, more melodic and more poignant than those of the Torah reading, speak so often of faithlessness and betrayal, of Israel's failures of love towards God' (Alderman, 2006, p. 101).

Esti is pictured following the English story of 1 Samuel 20 with her eyes. She is captivated when Jonathan says to David 'Tomorrow is the New Moon, and you will be missed because your seat will be empty' (1 Samuel 20:5). Jonathan is the son of the mercurial King Saul, but also in a deep and abiding relationship with David (1 Samuel 20:17). David is King Saul's favoured musician. In the Haftarah reading, King Saul's anger at David inexplicably grows, and the king's increasing aggression has the courtiers on eggshells. Incredibly, Jonathan, the king's own son, has made an escape plan with David. He cautions David to hide in the countryside nearby. David

would miss the start of the feast to celebrate the new month. Jonathan would wait to see how Saul took it. If all was well, Jonathan would send word that David could attend after all. But as it turns out, Saul was incensed, and when Jonathan tried to calm his father, Saul humiliates his son in front of the entire court: ‘Do you think I don’t know that you have chosen this David, son of Jesse, to your shame and the shame of your mother’s nakedness?’ (1 Samuel 20:30).

In Esti’s recounting of this tale, she notes the Haftarah reader was talented, that he could even reproduce King Saul’s rough and anguished voice. It speaks to her, and she wants it to speak to Ronit: “‘Do you remember?’” she whispers ... “It’s Machar Chodesh. Tomorrow is Rosh Chodesh, the new moon. Do you remember what you told me once about this day?” (Alderman, 2006, p. 108). Through the cadences of the reader’s voice, low and melodious, Ronit and Esti remember David and Jonathan’s meeting in the fields outside the city, telling of a love which the sages record was the greatest that had ever been known. Alderman writes, ‘the notes fluttered up and down the scales, falling like tears and rising like an arrow sprung from the bow. “Machar Chodesh [says Esti]. When we read about David and Jonathan?”’ (2006, pp. 108-109).

In a later chapter, Ronit will reflect on this same text again with Esti. It has poignant meaning for Esti and her initial reasons for choosing to marry Dovid. She had been trying to sublimate her desire for Ronit through the only legitimate avenue available to her, by marrying Ronit’s own cousin. She asks Ronit:

‘Do you remember “tomorrow is the new moon”? The story of David and Jonathan?’

I [Ronit] nodded.

‘And do you remember how much David loved Jonathan? He loved him with “a love surpassing the love of women.” Do you remember?’

‘Yes, I remember. David loved Jonathan. Jonathan died in battle. David was miserable. The end.’

‘No, not the end. The beginning. David had to go on living. He had no choice. Do you remember whom he married?’

I had to think about that one. It’d been a good few years since I last learned Torah. I sifted around the facts in my brain and eventually came up with it.

‘He married Michal. They weren’t very happy. Didn’t she insult him in public, or something?’

‘And who was Michal?’

It clicked. I understood. Michal was Jonathan’s sister. The man he loved with all his heart died and he married his sister. I thought about that for a moment, taking it in. I wondered whether Michal and Jonathan had looked anything like each other. I thought about King David and his grief, his need for someone like Jonathan, near to Jonathan. (Alderman, 2006, p. 210)

Esti finds the cycle of synagogue readings have nurtured a kind of liminal journey to the truth of herself, though it has taken years of such cycles. The novel and the film coalesce at this point. The Haftarah of Machar Chodesh, and the intimate meeting of Jonathan and David in the field, coalesces with scenes from the Hebrew Bible’s Song of Songs. In Lelio’s film, Dovid appears in a scene with his religious students (*talmidim*) quoting and commenting on the Song of Songs 1:13-15.

Dovid: 'A bundle of myrrh is my beloved to me, that lies all night between my breasts. My beloved is to me as a cluster of henna blooms ... in the vineyards of Ein-Gedi'.

Talmid: Is it about sensuality? That is, the way in which true love manifests itself?

Dovid: But it might also be that between a male and a female, there is something higher than that?

Talmid: But isn't it that the references to sensual pleasures celebrate physical love here? The enjoyment of that love becomes, in this context, the highest ...

Dovid: 'See, you are fair, my love. You are fair. Your eyes are doves. See, you are handsome my beloved, yea, pleasing, and our bed is verdant'. (Lelio, 2017)

This scene segues into the next on the image, 'Our bed is verdant'. This image then acts as a foil when Dovid and Esti appear in the intimacy of their home with the words 'our bed is verdant' still drifting in our minds. We see Dovid's and Esti's careful attention to one another, as if the other was so fragile they might break. The ground between them is a desert. Even with their attentiveness and extraordinary care for the other, they both seem to know there is little flourishing there, that they are the companions of the other's slow grief – two fig trees that never bore fruit. As if to intensify the contrast, there is a lovers' interlude in Hendon, the grassed space of Golders Green in North London. The parkland is transformed via the elemental passion of Esti's and Ronit's love into the gardens and wild spaces of the Song of Songs – true joy. Esti and Ronit walk down dark paths and into a wintry domain, into the somber North London streets in the evening, as if they were the Song of Song's lovers searching for each other in Jerusalem's alleyways (Song of Songs 3, 5). Ronit and Esti share the intense beauty of their remembrances, their secret places, the scent of hydrangeas. They listen at the door of their hearts for one another, revel in the rising of desire, searching the other out. Eventually, the inevitable culmination of their renewed relationship takes place.

As in chapter 5 of the Song of Songs, there is danger too in the shape of watchers (Song of Songs 5:7),³ guardians of the community's way of life, those who seek to maintain a certain way of life, those whom Alderman might suggest have misunderstood the Torah all this time. Thus, pressure is brought to bear on Dovid by a community of brothers and uncles. Dovid will need to keep the order of his own house and to 'straighten out' the outré sexuality of his wife if he wants to lead the community. What transpires, then, is a scene between Esti and Dovid reminiscent of Moses before Pharaoh in Exodus 9:13 ('Let my people go'). In the film, the narrative of freedom is a spoken thing. Esti, as the supplicant Moses, asks for her freedom – that is, the freedom to live in the dignity of who she is, to live and love truly – and Dovid grants it. In the novel, Alderman also draws on Exodus and the Moses narrative when she has Ronit dream of the Passover, where God swept over Egypt, killing the firstborn in every household (Exodus 12). But in this dream, Ronit is the angel of death who flies over the city of London, watching God lift the roof from each house, 'as if with a mighty hand and outstretched arm. And the Lord spoke in turn to each person in each house, filling their hearts with His light' (2006, p. 253). Ronit watches, and notices that, despite God's intervention, 'nothing much changed'. She asks God what this means, and he answers her, 'My child, my joy, things here are slow to change, for this is a stiff-necked and disobedient people, but at least they are still willing to listen' (p. 254).

Alderman concludes her novel with the curious Talmudic tale called 'The Caving Walls of the Study Hall'. The story itself is based on an interpretation of Deuteronomy 30:11-14, where Moses passes on God's commandments to the Hebrew people and offers them this advice:

This instruction ... is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach. It is not in the heavens, that you should say, 'Who among us can go up to the heavens and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?' Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who among us can cross to the other side of the sea and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?' No, the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it.

Found in Talmud Baba Mesia 59:2, 'The Caving Walls of the Study Hall' tale is set as a classic debate on Torah, and concerns theology and the proper interpretation of the law:

On a certain day, regarding a certain interpretation of the law, Rabbi Eliezer brought them all sorts of proofs, but the other sages kept rejecting them. Said he to them: 'If the law is as I say, may the carob tree prove it'. The carob tree was uprooted from its place a distance of 100 cubits. But the sages to him: 'One cannot prove anything from a carob tree'.

Said [Rabbi Eliezer] to them: 'If the law is as I say, may the river prove it'. The water in the river began to flow backwards. But they said to him: 'One cannot prove anything from an river'.

Said he to them: 'If the law is as I say, then may the walls of the house of study prove it'. The walls of the house of study began to cave in. But Rabbi Joshua rebuked the walls and said to the walls, 'If Torah scholars are debating a point of Jewish law, what are your qualifications to intervene?' The walls did not fall, in deference to Rabbi Joshua, and nor did they straighten up, in deference to Rabbi Eliezer. They still stand there today at a slant.

Then said Eliezar to them: 'If the law is as I say, may it be proven from heaven!' There then issued a heavenly voice which proclaimed: 'What do you want of Rabbi Eliezer – the law is as he says...'

But Rabbi Joshua stood on his feet and said: "'The Torah is not in heaven!' ... We take no notice of heavenly voices, since You, G d, have already, at Sinai, written in the Torah to "follow the majority."' (Exodus 23:2)

Rabbi Nathan subsequently met Elijah the Prophet and asked him: 'What did G d do at that moment?' [Elijah] replied: 'He smiled and said: "My children have triumphed over Me, My children have triumphed over Me."' (Talmud Baba Mesia 59:2)

'The Caving Walls of the Study Hall' is a profound text that holds the matter of the love of Esti for Ronit gently, and even more gently, Esti's journey of self-realisation and sexual liberation. The delicate turn in reading here is in the image of a Hashem that smiles. It is as if Hashem is at this very moment the embodiment of Ronit's father, raised up with face alive with mirth: 'My [daughters] have triumphed over me'. What is striking in the novel (and also in the film) is the way in which the narrative calls on the Torah and the Talmud as allies on behalf of Ronit and Esti and their desire. These two women are, each in their own way, alienated and estranged from their community. They have also been a precious awakening to each other. This is regardless of Ronit's separation from her father, cousin and community and Esti's attempt to live an observant life as a *Rebbetzin* – a *frum* wife and a teacher. This love is made even more challenging in a sheltered community that cannot accept the truth of the otherwiseness of Esti's desires. 'I have always felt like this', Esti says to Dovid in Lelio's film (2017), 'I will always feel like this'. The way in which the film and novel draw upon the sacred text to frame Esti's untangling and unfolding acceptance of herself and her sexuality is deeply moving, similarly the resolution of Ronit's quandary over her troubled love for Esti and the community of her childhood. This connection is tender and honours an age-old and beautiful set of sacred texts and traditions, without forfeiting the sacred human right to dignity, freedom and the expression of one's whole self in ways otherwise to that tradition. It is in this kind of reading that Alderman finds a liberating trajectory of scriptural interpretation on behalf of lesbian desire, that is, the possibility of finding sexual freedom in the very texts that violate it.

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Notes

1. Leviticus 18:2-3: 'The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: "Speak to the people of Israel and say to them: I am the Lord your God. You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you. You shall not follow their statutes.'"
2. Psalm 66:19: 'But truly God has listened; he has given heed to the words of my prayer'.
3. Song of Songs 5:7: 'Making their rounds in the city, the sentinels found me; they beat me, they wounded me, they took away my mantle, those sentinels of the walls'.

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