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Lara Burton

Brigham Young University - Provo, sundanceburtons@gmail.com

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On deserts, loneliness, and handshakes

Man could not have attained his present dominant position in the world without the use of his hands, which are so admirably adapted to act in obedience to his will.

-Charles Darwin

Last week at a professor's request, I covered his junior-level Classical Hebrew course while he was away from campus. (I admit that it is unusual that I, one of the *goyyim*, can teach Hebrew at a university level, but that is a topic for another essay.¹) When the class ended on Wednesday, another class filed in. As I was gathering my books, a student—as it turned out she was the graduate instructor of a freshman English class that was about to commence—approached me. “Are you Lara?” “Uh . . . yeah.” I am always wary of people I don't recognize who seem to know me—especially when they call me by name. I'm no Pynchon, but I do prefer anonymity. “You're the essayist?” (I've never been called an essayist before! But, how would she know about me?) Before I regained my composure, she extended her hand trying to shake mine. I grabbed my books (my *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, my Brown, Driggs and Driver *Hebrew Lexicon*, my notebook), attempting to fill my hands to preclude accepting hers. She probably announced her name, but I was so put off by the prospect of touching her hand that I don't remember it. I do remember her wide stance, firm jaw and steady gaze,

¹ When not writing, I study and teach dead Semitic languages; my working title for the other essay could be: “Jews, 613 Rules, and Me,” although I've also considered: “Of Course Jots and Tittles Matter” and “The Masorites and Me: Rules Rule.”

her forceful approach. I retreated a few steps. She pursued me, hand extended—almost poking me in the chest. I backed all the way into the whiteboard several steps behind me.

I don't like to shake hands. I go to uncommon lengths to avoid shaking hands. Close friends know to give me the "elbow tap," a sort of upper-middle class white version of a ghetto handshake: make a fist with your right hand, touch the front of your right shoulder with your fist (you aim for the clavicle, close to the AC joint) and rotate your elbow to tap mine.

In the end, I did shake her hand, although I don't know why she didn't withdraw her hand after seeing the pallid shade of fear on my face. I was cornered and I didn't want to offend. I offered a weak hand (presumably the "dead fish" limp handshake that Miss Manners and high-powered salespeople disdain).²

Handshakes are an old custom. Their genesis often is credited to the Romans, though a recent article traces them to the Hebrews claiming that Biblical references to "striking hands" are actually describing committal handshakes. (I became sidetracked by the Hebrew article and pursued Hebrew terms until I realized I had wandered away from my topic.) Handshakes, commonly viewed as a disclaimer of aggression (*Look: no sword!*) are called *access rituals*—sociologists view them as symbolic markers between humans of "a period of heightened access to each other." History and jargon aside, handshakes are taken for granted in our society. Despite its seeming inconsequentiality, handshaking reenacts and reestablishes a human-to-human connection—the need for such

² Upon exiting the classroom, I immediately found the closest washroom and proceeded to wash my hands six times—a gesture that does more to relieve anxiety than to cleanse. (Although the CDC in its "Clean Hands Save Lives!" campaign recommends 20 seconds of soap and clean running water as the best prevention against "germ" spreading and, of course, "to save lives!")

having existed for thousands of years. *It's OK. I will let you experience a little more of me.*

Originally I intended to explore the sociological meaning of the handshake, but in the process of preparing this essay, I found a 1929 nursing journal with an article entitled “The Bacterial Significance of the Handshake.” The author, a Miss Leila Given, MS, RN, is my voice crying in the wilderness. After an elaborate experiment involving swabbing students’ hands with bacteria, and meticulously charting (neat rectangles and straight lines) the epidemiology of bacterial transference after multiple handshakes, she declared, “One may well ask why sanitary America persists in a custom which has nothing to justify it from the sanitary standpoint.” (Miss Given later established the nursing department at South Dakota State University and worked there until 1939. Afterwards she fell off the Google radar; I was never able to determine if she ever married, progressed to or beyond handshakes, or what otherwise became of her.)

Because of my general aversion to handshakes, I maintained my research heading in an anti-handshake direction and found a 1976 article published in *American Ethnologist* entitled “Greetings in the Desert.” While it is a typical academic article with the appropriate jargon (social keys, contextual restraints, status reflective nonreferential politeness exchanges) and a good dose of Chomsky, a passage in it describing the nomadic African peoples, the Tuareg, stood out:

Much of the life of the adult male Tuareg, or Targi, is spent in the desert—in its infiniteness, and its eternalness known as *tenere* and in its loneliness and desolation characterized by *asuf*, a Tamāshaq word which can be glossed as ‘homesickness’ or, more precisely, as a desperate effort to put up with the absence of men, to ignore one’s human insignificance and fragility.

This unexpected depth of emotion on the jargon-riddled passage haunted me.

The Tuareg are a desert people. They inhabit, or rather travel—they have subsisted as traders for thousands of years—through a wide swath of land in the Sahara of Northern Africa. Their desert, the *Ténéré*, is essentially an ocean of sand, presented on most maps as a vast blank space. Almost 2500 years ago, Herodotus called them the *Garamantes*, describing them as pacifist isolationists who “avoid all society or intercourse with their fellow-men, have no weapon of war, and do not know how to defend themselves;” whose cattle walk backwards; and who hunt cave-dwelling Ethiopians (a strange people whose language is “unlike that of any other people; it sounds like the screeching of bats”).

The Tuareg live in one of the most isolated places on earth. The legendary and remote Timbuktu is located within the *Ténéré*. The Tuareg also are called the “Blue Men” (about whom I remember reading years ago—February 1998 to be exact—in *National Geographic*—I was intrigued by the “blue” description, which I originally thought described their actual skin color, but in actuality comes from their habit of wearing indigo-dyed veils—which dye may transfer to the skin and give it a bluish tint). Older Tuareg men wear the veil at all times—even sleeping in them, and so infrequently are their faces seen that many cannot be recognized by members of their own family *unless* the veil is on.

The authors of “Greetings in the Desert,” Youssouf, Grimshaw, and Bird, elaborately describe the various cues and protocols followed by lone Tuareg (who may go days without seeing another human being) when encountering another—this *other*, perhaps, at first, identified as only a far away blur on the horizon; a smear merging with the heat waves and resulting mirages. Youssouf, et. al. describe the conflict that the lone

Targi³ feels: lost in the *asuf*, desperately alone, he wants human contact, but (as they so aptly put it) he has a profound “awareness that interaction is not always harmonious and the knowledge that most of the harm done to men is done by other men.”

Loneliness and fear. The conflict of the Tuareg. The conflict of us all.

According to the authors, some Tuareg try “to get in touch emotionally through physical contact. This may be expressed by holding the hand either firmly or softly and releasing it little by little.” This passage caused me to change the focus of my essay. A lonely traveler, not wanting to let go. But, the man must let go, for anything out of the ordinary in that desolate land “can be interpreted as a furtive way in which to get a hold on someone in order to pull him from his camel.”

Though a Targi is constantly wary of others, a greater concern is to ascertain exactly who the *other* is. The Tuareg fear meeting the *Kal-tenere*, “those of the *tenere*,”—the *djinns*. The djinns are spirits—the ghouls, the genies, the succubi of lonely places. They can be identified by a simple handshake; the djinns have no thumbs.

This however, was the desert of fifty years ago when solitary men rode camels, before the crisscrossing of vehicles. It was the image of the lone traveler in the wasteland: endless sand, scrub, and heat, that stayed with me. His desire to feel the touch of another human being, if only for a moment.

Back to handshakes, and more precisely my aversion to them. The controversial and often unconventional Scottish psychiatrist, Dr. R.D. Laing (who was also a surprisingly good essayist) defines ritual as “a formal patterning of the encounter, the meeting of human beings.” In a well-written article, he describes one patient who

³ Singular form of Tuareg, which is a broken plural, common in Semitic languages. Which, of course, I study when not being an “essayist.” The plural is formed not by appending a suffix, but instead by changing the internal vowels of the word.

demanded that he follow a written script word-for-word, and another patient who invited him to lunch but refused to eat. Dr. Laing described these actions as “refusal of roles within ritual context,” one who does so is “thereby invalidating one[’s] self by invalidating the ritual.” I find myself in the role of invalidator when I refuse a handshake. I worry that I am seen to be thumbing my nose at complex, evolved, human communication.

Greetings I can handle: the bow, *namaste*, *salaam*, head nod, chin up, “eyebrow flash,” sticking out of tongues, and the elbow tap. Greetings I have difficulty with: *abrazos*, back pats, nose rubs, knuckle taps, embraces, and handshakes—both single and double-clasped. That being stated, I am intrigued by my loss of aversion to handshakes during Mass. I’m not Catholic—I’m a product of long-established Lutheran and Mormon lines—but I attend Mass occasionally because I’m awed by its beauty. Perhaps it’s the reverence, *the peace of the Lord be with you always*, but for a moment I lose my aversion and I can exchange a handshake (a sign of God’s peace) with my unknown neighbor, *and also with you*. Or in another context, *salaam alaykum*: peace be with you.

Humans by nature are ritualistic beings. While in our post-modern enlightenment many discredit elaborate religious rituals, we remain slaves to other rituals (which, I suppose, makes it no surprise that when the brain malfunctions, one often engages in ritualistic behavior—hand-banging, rocking, repetition, etc.). Native speakers of a language internalize the rules of speaking (*Why don’t you place the adjective after a noun? How do you know when to assimilate a sound? What is the role of lenition in your language?*). While linguists identify the rules that govern language, sociologists (at least those of the symbolic interactionism school) identify the rules that govern the complexity

of human behavior. And rules abound. Breaking social rules can place an individual outside the limits of “normal” behavior. Our previously introduced unconventional psychiatrist, Dr. Laing, explains, “Behavior is usually seen as deviant not just because the content *as such* is strange, but because it is out of context.” Laing concludes:

I hope these examples have succeeded in conveying something both of the extraordinary complexity of the rituals and pararituals known to psychiatrists, and the fundamental simple fear of and longing for communication that underlies them.

In 1960s England, Laing’s patients suffered from “the simple fear of and longing for communication.” A flaw of the disordered? Desert travelers fight *asuf* (desperate loneliness), but at the same time, they fear encountering danger. A flaw of the lonely? Or not a flaw at all?

I am told that my aversion to handshaking (and various other problems ranging from aversion to the color red; problems with even numbers, patterns, phones, counting, moustaches, large crowds, whistling, computer keyboards, doorknobs; repetition of odd phrases; various other “out of normal context” problems; and my own elaborate maintenance of a complex system of behavior rules—many of which seem to the observer to be nonsense) occurs because the chemical soup in my brain lacks adequate serotonin. And I have static in the lines between the basal ganglia and the orbital cortex. And that which should be reuptaking is reuptaking too much. And my brain functions like a CD (or LP record, for those of an earlier era) skipping. I am the subtle neurotic trapped by small obsessions and doubts and strange patterns of numbers. And I don’t like handshakes.

On the surface, I write off my aversion to handshakes as a product of “fear of germs.” In a way, it is.

My most recent desert experience: a rest stop in a small Nevada town—a miniscule smudge in a sea of dust and scrub; 100-degree weather. I stopped at a filthy truck stop in the town with a forgotten name because my nine year-old son *really needed to go*. Through the convenience store with candy, potato chips, portable hot dog cookers and cheap electronics made in China, through the stale, dim, smoked-filled backroom with slot machines and obnoxious country music (my version of hell, only with more body odor), past the dirty, the overweight, the women talking back to their husbands, “I ain’t only goin’ one more time,” I took my son to the restroom (complete with showers). . . . *Do Not Touch Anything* (the problem here is not the dirt, it is the prospect of touching something that someone else has touched—the handshake by proxy) . . . I pushed open the door with my foot. A strange anxiety gripped me—there was no soap. No soap. No soap. No soap.

As I came back from the bathrooms, the cashier watched me through dust-coated bifocals. She had tight leathery skin, thinning hair pulled back tightly, wrinkles around her eyes and around the corners of her mouth. An expression, I couldn’t tell, of disinterest or resentment, or maybe both on her face. I had both hands raised. Most likely I was titling my head to one side—a sort of shrug I do when I’m upset. She gave me a bar of soap from the shelf of sundries. I carried this bar with me and used it repeatedly all the way to San Francisco.

“How can you be so smart, and have something like that wrong with you?” my friend Boyd asked me once. Of course, I know that “germs,” while problematic at times and best avoided, aren’t the root of the problem. (Although as a side benefit of repeated hand washings and mania over contamination, I rarely get sick.) I struggle to understand

why my brain functions the way it does. With the holistic nature of the body—the emotional manifestation of a physical defect—often it is difficult for me to determine the origins of my thoughts. This thought is my own. That thought is a product of a complex chemical chain reaction caused by a biologic defect deep in the warm recess of my brain. Another thought is a product of my fears. Or is it? Perhaps the reason I felt so deeply when I read about the *asuf* was because when reading about it, I was looking directly into the face of a fear carried by humans for thousands of years. A fear not solely my own.

What is safe? If you believed djinns existed, experienced silent fear shrouded in heat waves and dust, and the desert around you stretched beyond imagination, would you be wary of handshakes? How alone and isolated must one be before the need for human contact overcomes all fears?

What compels you to hold out your hand?

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