

Cultural Boundaries and Bindings

A study in group identity

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I grew up in a town named Yeruham, in southern Israel. Population at the time, about 4000, everyone knew everyone and they all were known by their background. Not so unlike Sheridan and Polish, or Buffalo and the Basques, about three quarters of the town either came from or were only one generation removed from Morocco. Almost everyone else likewise came from India, Tunisia or Persia. For the most part they were hastily removed from these places, leaving their homelands in the 50's and relocated. Upon arrival in Israel they were placed in this development town which is so called because the government meant to develop it from its refugee camp origins. In the 80's when I was growing up this was still a work in progress. They all resented the Israeli elites which came mostly from Eastern Europe. Both the Eastern European elite and the residents of the development town were Jewish and I am sure were identified as such by the majority Moroccans/ Tunisians/Persians, back in the villages and cities they originally came from. After living for generations as a Jewish minority community in Morocco they became part of the Jewish majority community in Israel but the minority mindset was so ingrained that they instead became a minority Moroccan community in Israel downplaying or maybe just taking for granted the Jewish common-denominator that bound them all in the first place. Many in the town were identified by the town or village they came from, next they distinguished between urban Moroccans and country Moroccans. While Alan Jackson in his song 'Where Were You' might not have known the difference between Iraq and Iran, I certainly knew the difference between Moroccan and Tunisian.

I imagine similar group hierarchies exist among native American bands and tribes and Native Americans as a whole vs the rest of us Americans. Also, probably here in Sheridan 100 year ago or more when we had Poles, Italian, Basques, Croatians and many others.

Academics speak of Cultural Boundary Maintenance or simply Boundary Maintenance: The ways in which societies (or social systems) maintain distinctions between themselves and others. Many have suggested that, by studying the ways in which a society attempts to define its inherently ambiguous—and hence potentially dangerous—peripheral areas, it is possible to obtain a better understanding of what constitutes its key cultural values.

It follows then that the cultural boundaries are the definitions of the culture. The ultimate tearing down of these identities occurs with intermarriage and having future generations that can identify with both parent groups. It is a chicken and egg problem though since people marry within the culture so do the marriages break up the culture barriers or do the breaking down of cultural barriers result in intermarriages?

There is an alternative vision to the one I described in my home town, that of World Citizen,

Some insist on not belonging to any group, surrendering their identities on a local and national levels. The 'Global Citizen' movement has been around for a long time. Diogenese of Sinope, founder of the Cynical school of Greek Philosophy in the 5th century BC was asked once where he came from and answered 'I am a citizen of the world'- literally using the word *Cosmopolites*'. He was a cynic but just this once was not being cynical.

My fellow Deist, Thomas Paine said 'my country is the world and my religion is to do good'.

Bahá'u'lláh, the founder of the Baha'i faith lived in 19th century Persia is quoted as saying: "The Earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens."

Albert Einstein is quoted as saying "Nationalism is an infantile disease. It is the measles of mankind".

So over the centuries and across many cultures wise people have come up with this notion. Nevertheless, I humbly disagree. Thomas Paine after writing revolutionary essays that help galvanize public opinion against the crown in 1776, rotted in a Revolutionary France prison cell for years. George Washington didn't take too kindly to world citizen Paine, and didn't do much to help him in his predicament. Some historians think this was because of Paine's adopting the French Revolution with its Universal 'world-wide' proclamations, superseding those of the US which made claims only to the territory of the US and to American Citizens, alienated Washington.

Lowering cultural barriers is not the same as eliminating them entirely, as the Cynics and Paine tried to do.

World Citizen might work well for a species that hatches from abandoned eggs, goldfish for example. Humans are born into families. Even though I left my family, I do not deny they and it is a great loss not to have a family. In similar way humans have a culture which they belong to. Some of us span two of these, being dual citizens or having hyphenated adjectives 'African-American', 'Canadian-American', Latino- (American).

This past Thursday was St. Patrick's day. It is widely celebrated in the United States. As many as 33 million Americans consider themselves 'Irish'. Eating corned beef and cabbage and proclaiming your Irishness suffices in America. Alas Ireland Irish do not consider yanks as Irish. The 4.5 million Irish have continued to evolve and do not need corned beef to know they are Irish, they have a passport.

Another example cultural boundary maintenance:

Rollo or in the Old Norse Ganger-Hrolf born about 846 belonged to a noble Scandinavian warrior family, raided Ireland, England and France. The founding of the Duchy of Normandy is attributed to him, though the title of Duke of Normandy is anarchistic to his time. He was christened as Robert. Rollo and his son, William Longsword are both titled Principes (chieftains) of the Norse. His grandson was Richard the Fearless Count of Rouen he definitely was Catholic, some would say a Christian, spoke the local French dialect and had nothing more to do with Scandinavia. There follow two more *Richards*, and one *Robert*. Next is Guillaume, better known as William the Conqueror. In 1066 he

leads the Normans to take over England. His lineages rule a combined Norman-English kingdom for the next four generations. *Guillaume, Henry, Stephan, Henry, Richard, Henry and Jean*. King John, the last of these, finally loses the last toe hold on the continent; all these kings speak French, not English. It is John's son who is the first to even consider himself English, born in 1272 over two hundred years after the conquest. Edward sports an Anglo-Saxon name, though still speaks French. Not until Henry V, born 1387 does the king of England actually speak English as his mother tongue. For centuries the nobility of England retained their Norman (French) identity and culture resulting in abundant synonym in the English language where both the old English (Germanic) term and the French term exist side by side: Cow/ Beef; Smell/ Oder; Freedom/ Liberty.

That was a long sag-way. The point is that the same family under similar circumstances of conquest behaved very differently with regard to the culture they faced. The earlier Scandinavians had low culture boundary maintenance, changed their religion, language and names, in other words adopted their culture to their new surroundings, though did not try to hide their heritage, the name Norman means Norseman. The later Normans had a high culture boundary maintenance and kept their names and language, more generally keeping to themselves and not mingling with the English.

I believe names are a very good indicator, in times of great change the names change with the times. So we see for example, after the reformation a surge in biblical names in general and old testament names in particular, among the Protestants, while Catholics mostly kept to more traditional names. A raising of a cultural boundary. In the 1950's Israel many Jewish emigrants adopted Hebrew names some of which have not been used for thousands of years thus indicating a new Israeli culture. In contrast, in the late 19th century some leading Native Americans adopted the most WASP surnames for example (Ira) Hays and (Billy) Mills and in early 20th century America many emigrants adopted Anglo-Saxon names in an attempt to merge into the dominant culture: (Frank Lloyd) Write or Drumpf becoming Trump. Both these indicate lowering of cultural boundaries. The great variety of given names in America today indicates the end of the melting pot and the rising maintenance of sub-culture boundaries.

Where else do we see cultures clash? In the bible, the ultimate 'other' or counter culture are the Philistines. According to the bible, the Philistines, are distinct from the Canaanites, and are associated with islands in the Mediterranean. From the start both groups and cultures are well defined. Philistines live in five cities on the coastal plain and are iron workers. The Israelites live in the hill country, in a rural setting. Some of the cultural boundaries between the two groups are evident in the archaeological remains, the five cities have all been identified and there is a lack of any rural settlement in their vicinity, the cities have abundant Mycenaean (or Greek) ceramics and a high proportion of pig bones, these are almost entirely absent in the hill country. In general the archeological record concurs with the biblical narrative. We lack much of the Philistine perspective but I will attempt to reconstruct the attitudes of both sides of the divide, based on the bible.

In the Samson saga the Philistines are oppressing the Israelites, never the less Samson has an affinity to Philistine women, marrying in sequence two of them. His parents object when he first proposes, but the Philistine girl it seems, said yes and at least thirty Philistine men come to the wedding. The biblical narrative takes it for granted that Philistines and Israelites share the same language. Samson dies in his own personal struggle with the Philistines. The conflict proceeds with the Philistines having the upper hand. It is this pressure from the Philistines which causes the Israelites to ask Samuel to anoint a king, to lead them against the Philistine adversary. Samuel warns them thus: *'Your flocks he [the king] will take a tenth of, but you will be his for slaves.* (1Sam 8: 17)

Fast forward several years and nine chapters and we are again in the midst of an Israelite-Philistine conflict. There is high cultural boundary maintenance. The Philistines and Israelites gather for battle and for forty days morning and evening Goliath speaks truth to the Israelites. *'He stood and called out to the ranks of Israel, "Why have you come out to line up for battle? Am not I the Philistine, and you the slaves of Saul? Choose for yourselves a man and let him come down to me. 9 If he is able to fight with me and to strike me down, then we will be your servants. But if I prevail against him and strike him down, then you will be our servants and will serve us." 10 The Philistine said, "I defy the battle lines of Israel this day. Give me a man, and let us fight together."*

So Goliath, while acknowledging the clear division between the Philistines and the Israelites, never the less treats the Israelites as men, as worthy opponent, and proposes an even handed 'fair' outcome. He calls the Israelites 'slaves of Saul' just as Samuel did.

What does Saul the king of Israel have to say about Goliath? Not much, the only reference is: *Saul said to David, "You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him. For you are but a youth, and he has been a man of war from his youth.* (1Sam 17:33).

Saul accepts Goliath as a man, as a worthy opponent and respects Goliath for what he is.

Saul and Goliath both maintain the cultural boundaries, never the less, they do, in many respects exhibit what Ronn Smith called recently 'pragmatic pluralism' and accept the other culture's legitimacy.

Now lets examine young David's attitude: The most common reference to Goliath is 'this Philistine' which is neutral unless you add a dismissive tone, and I do this every time I read anything David says about Goliath. 'Who is this Philistine?' Secondly the term 'uncircumcised'. He doesn't even say 'unconsidered man'. This focus on a cultural divider is an act of high barrier maintenance in itself. Thirdly, the likeness of Goliath to an animal:

David said to Saul, "Your servant was a shepherd for my father's flock, and the lion came and the bear, and took a lamb out of the flock. 35 And I went out after

him, and struck him, and delivered it out of his mouth. And when he arose against me, I took hold of his beard, struck him, and killed him. **36** Your servant slew both the lion and the bear. And this uncircumcised Philistine will be as one of them, because he has reviled the armies of the living God.” **37** David said, “The LORD who delivered me out of the paw of the lion and out of the paw of the bear, He will deliver me out of the hand of this Philistine.” (1Sam 17:34-37).

This animal motif continues and is picked up even by Goliath, who, while was disdainful of the Israelites, never the less accepted them as human. **42** *When the Philistine looked and saw David, he despised him. For he was a youth and ruddy with a handsome appearance.* **43** *The Philistine said to David, “Am I a dog, that you come to me with sticks? (1 Sam 17:42-43).*

Next David the youth turns into David the man. David suffers from Saul’s jealousy and rejection by his own king. David has a long fall in his standing. He has to flee his household, his own wife describes him as sick. we see David going to Gath, Goliath’s hometown and pretend to be crazy, even though his identity is known. **10** *David arose and fled that day from Saul. And he went to Achish the king of Gath.* **11** *The servants of Achish said to him, “Is this not David the king of the land? Did they not sing with dances for him, saying:*

*Saul has slain his thousands,
and David his ten thousands’? ”*

12 *And David took these words to heart and greatly feared Achish the king of Gath.* **13** *Therefore he changed his behavior before them and pretended to be insane in their hands. And he scratched on the doors of the gate and let his spittle run down his beard.* **14** *Then said Achish to his servants, “You see the man is acting like a madman. Why then have you brought him to me? **15** Am I one who lacks lunatics, that you brought this one to behave as a madman in my presence? Will this man come into my house?” (1Sam 21:10-16).*

This first attempt to cross the culture barrier fails, Achish rejects David. David though immediately following this entrusts his parents with the Moabites, another outsider group, though not as diametrically opposed to Israel as the Philistines, they share a common heritages and David in particular has an even closer connection to them through his ancestor Ruth.

David continues in his downward decent, again and again trying to find his way back to Saul’s graces. Saul is his own kinsman, both were anointed by Samuel. David confronts Saul in a cave and says: **14** *“After whom has the king of Israel come out? After whom are you pursuing? After a dead dog? A single flea?” (1Sam 24:14)*

So, after David has described himself in the same terms as Goliath, both being dogs, indeed David less than a dog. Finally David’s circumstances change: Chapter 27 starts

thus: *'Then David said in his heart, "Now I will perish one day by the hand of Saul. There is nothing better for me than that I should escape to the land of the Philistines. Then Saul will despair of continually seeking me within all the territory of Israel. So will I escape out of his hand."*

2 David arose and passed over with the six hundred men that were with him to Achish, the son of Maok, king of Gath. 3 And David lived with Achish at Gath, he and his men, each man with his household, even David with his two wives,. (1Sam 27:1-3)

Here David seeks a physical change in his location to protect him. But David got more than he bargained for because crossing the physical border meant crossing the cultural boundary, with lower cultural boundary maintenance.

The number of days that David lived in the country of the Philistines was a year and four months. (1Sam 27:7)

David's decent has stopped now he is on the rise, There develops a mutual respect between him and Achish. Finally the tables have turned, Chapter 29 pits David in the ranks of the Philistines, preparing for battle against Israel. So David has almost betrayed his own culture, The cultural boundaries are maintained now by the Philistine captains who force Achish to turn David back from joining the battle:

4 But the princes of the Philistines became angry with him. [Achish] And the princes of the Philistines said to him, "Make this man return and let him go again to his place which you have appointed him. He will not go down with us in battle, lest he might be an adversary to us in the battle. For with what could he make himself acceptable to his master, if not with the heads of these men? 5 Is this not David, whom they sing for in dances saying,

*'Saul has slain his thousands,
and David his ten thousands'?* "

6 Then Achish called David and said to him, "As the LORD lives, you have been upright, and your going out and your coming in with me in the camp has been pleasing in my sight. For I have not found evil in you since the day of your coming to me to this day. However, you are not acceptable in the eyes of the lords. 7 Therefore now, return and go in peace, that you do not displease the lords of the Philistines."

8 David said to Achish, "But what have I done? And what have you found in your servant, from the day which I came before you to this day, that I may not come and fight against the enemies of my lord the king?"

9 And Achish answered and said to David, "I know that you are pleasing in my sight like an angel of God. However the lords of the Philistines have said, 'He shall not go up with us in battle. (1Sam 29: 4-10)

Are you surprised that the Bible describes David as almost going to battle against Israel? You would be excused if you thought that was the end of the story. David, of all the characters in the bible is the most human and the one with the most understanding of the human condition. I think I have shown how David had gone through a complete turn around. But David's saga with the Philistines continues. He fights them and subdues them as King David. Finally, David as an old man is betrayed by his own son Absalom, who declares a revolt. Who is more on the inside and closer to you than your son? As David is fleeing Jerusalem, we read one last time what his inclinations are towards the Philistines:

17 So the king left with all of the people after him, and they came to a stop at the furthest house. 18 Now all his servants passed on beside him, all the Kerethites, all the Pelethites, and all the Gittites, six hundred men who had followed him from Gath, passed on before the king.

19 The king said to Ittai the Gittite, "Why are you also going with us? Go back and dwell with the king, for you are a foreigner and, moreover, exiled from your own place. 20 You came only yesterday. Shall I cause you to go roaming around with us today? I am going where I go. Go back, and take back your brothers with you. Mercy and truth be with you."

21 Ittai answered the king and said, "As the LORD lives and as lives my lord the king, only in the place where my lord the king is, whether for death or for life, there alone will your servant be."

22 So David said to Ittai, "Go on, pass by." So Ittai the Gittite passed by, along with all of his men and all of the children and elderly who were with him. (2 Sam 25: 18-22)

In the end David is surrounded by his most loyal subjects, not Israelites but the Kerethites and Pelethites who ever those were and the Philistines of Gath. He accepts them and they accept him.

The richness of the experience is not in having an amalgamated homogenous culture, say like that of 18th century England, with Norman and Anglo Saxon aspects completely blended but rather like David on the run, or Ittai the Gittite having a foot on either sides of a cultural boundary, having crossed it for yourself; Accepting and appreciating each as well as the boundaries. Maintaining boundaries not for exclusion of others but for appreciating diversity.