

JUDGING ISRAEL

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We sat around a long rectangular table in the local church building. It was tapered at one end, almost trapezoidal. Five men lined each of the long sides, four more flanked the wide end, and I sat alone at the narrow end. The room was just big enough to encompass the table and chairs. The cinder-block walls were painted an off-white. They were bare except for a few paintings of Jesus and photos of the then-prophet, his two counselors, and the twelve apostles. We dressed in suits with white shirts and ties, just like Mormon missionaries. The demographic of the group reflected that of our suburban locale: white and middle-class. The room was air-conditioned, but the air had a heaviness to it typical of mid-August.

We had gathered at the local stake center for a disciplinary council to decide whether a person's sins merited excommunication from the LDS Church or some other form of membership restriction. I was one of twelve high councilmen who, along with the three members of the stake presidency, would function as an ecclesiastical court. Our job was to penalize the offender, protect the innocent, and shield the Church's reputation. I had participated in a disciplinary council a decade prior at the ward level. It was small in comparison, consisting only of the bishop and his two counselors. I attended as a clerk to record the proceedings. That experience was uncomfortable, and I wasn't looking forward to this, but I'd been asked to come, and I felt obligated, so I was there.

The stake president began the proceedings by describing the offense. The man whose membership hung in the balance that day faced charges of repeated adultery and homosexual activity. Across a decade and while in a heterosexual marriage, the man had been sexually active with at least a hundred other men.

My heart sank. When I agreed to serve on the disciplinary council, I had not realized I'd be weighing in on a gay man's standing with the Church. I was no stranger to unease, but anxiety hit me like the wave of humidity that greets every Midwesterner when they move from inside to outside in the summertime. It was thick, my breathing felt labored, and I started to sweat.

The last six weeks had created a perfect storm in my world. At the end of June, the US Supreme Court unexpectedly legalized gay marriage, sending the global Mormon community, as well as my local congregation, into a state of moral alarm. Shortly afterward, fuel was added to the fire when the Boy Scouts of America, the organization leading activities for LDS male youth, dropped their ban on gay Scout leaders. I had accepted LGBT folks as equals for several years. But my efforts to encourage better treatment of gay people in my ward had received substantial pushback from congregants and leadership. On the home front, these efforts stoked marital tensions, as my wife and I held differing viewpoints. The disciplinary council was the confluence of these things. It put personal conviction on a collision course with religious belief.

A prayer was offered, and the man was introduced to the council. He looked like the rest of us, with his shirt, tie, coat, and a modest haircut. He confessed to the charges and then council members asked questions.

"How did you meet these men?" asked one member of the council.

"On the internet, usually Tinder or similar apps," said the man. "I've had hookups and late-night meetups in all sorts of places."

"Did you put your wife at risk?" asked another council member. "Did you use protection?"

"We didn't usually use condoms," said the man.

"When did this begin?" asked another. "When did you first feel attracted to men?"

"In my late teens," he said. "Especially as a missionary, when I was nineteen and twenty, spending all of my time with my male companions.

I tried to suppress my feelings, hoping they would go away. I was told they would when I married my wife. But even then, I couldn't stop thinking about men."

There weren't many questions. The man was dismissed to a separate room, and then the council deliberated.

By way of Mormon scripture, a stake president leading a disciplinary council is tasked to be a "judge in Israel" and members of the council function as a jury (D&C 107:72-74). Deliberations are meant to explore the case from the perspective of the Church and that of the accused, similar to legal proceedings but without the same training, formality, or expertise because all Mormon clergy are unpaid volunteers who spend their professional lives doing other things. Six of the council members were randomly assigned to advocate for the Church's position, and six others to stand up on behalf of the accused. I drew the former. Each of the twelve spoke in turn. The general sentiment from those who spoke for the Church was that we have an obligation to look out for the innocent, which in this case meant the man's wife and children. The sentiment from those representing the man was that God loves him and wants the best for him despite what he's done.

My personal feelings at that moment were scattered. On the surface, I wondered if this was about monogamy or homosexuality or both. The man wasn't dating other men, and he wasn't seeking relationships. It was clear he enjoyed sex, anywhere and with anyone, and had no concern for his wife's sexual safety. Gay or straight, having sexual relations with so many partners is a major violation of LDS moral standards, and of most people's, including my own. This would be the overwhelming position of the council and sufficient reason to excommunicate.

But there was another angle to the situation that wasn't being discussed, one that poked at my own wounds. The church this man grew up with not only pushed him toward traditional family, it pressured him to marry young and have children right away, possibly before he'd acquired the maturity and experience necessary to make those

decisions. I knew this firsthand. In my late teens and early twenties, addresses from Church leaders often included an admonition to marry now and start a family immediately, no matter what. In my LDS circles, it was not unusual to find couples my age engaged after only a few weeks or months of dating, married shortly afterwards, and then with their first child nine months later. The cultural stigma was so strong that to delay marriage was to be labeled as an outsider. Literally, there are separate congregations designated solely for single Mormons. Membership in these congregations is voluntary, but the family-oriented focus of the conventional LDS congregation often excludes single people.

I jumped into marriage with a woman I didn't really know, and before I had enough life experience to really consider that decision. My marriage wasn't arranged. No one forced me into it. It was entirely my choice, even if naive. This worked splendidly for some, but not for me. Resentment is too strong a word, but I often wondered if my mismatched marriage and long-standing marital tensions could have been avoided if my faith leaders had pushed me toward healthy relationships first, rather than as an afterthought to marriage and family.

I think it's impossible for me to walk a mile entirely in another man's shoes. Not because empathy is unattainable but because my own shoes are stuck to my own two feet. I couldn't wrap my head around this man's choices without projecting my own experiences and biases. Perhaps this man's loyalty to his faith not only pushed him to marry at a young age but simultaneously discouraged a healthy reckoning with his sexual orientation. And if so, to what extent was his Mormon upbringing responsible for his current position? If his religion had encouraged a thorough courtship, would that have slowed things down enough for the man to come to terms with his homosexuality before marrying a woman? If the Church had said to have children only when you're good and ready, would this have spared his kids the difficulty of an inevitable divorce? Should the faith at large share any accountability for the man's actions?

All of this was coming to me in raw emotional form and across a matter of minutes, an impossible amount of time to process such deep-seated feelings, much less transform them into cogent statements. Though I'm not sure this would have mattered. The council had gained momentum. Like an avalanche tumbling down a mountainside, the result seemed inevitable. I knew I was unlikely to sell other council members on my perspective, so I spoke not with the hope of convincing but with the aim of assuaging my conscience. "Just like you and I feel a God-given attraction toward women, this man feels the same for men. It's disingenuous to expect him to ignore that. Can the church that pushed him so far in one direction acknowledge its role? Is there room for an element of grace in the council's decision?"

The ensuing silence answered my questions. Eventually, the stake president responded. "Our prophets and leaders are not disingenuous. Their direction is inspired." His tone was firm.

None of us condoned what the man did, but we were about to pass judgement without really considering the circumstances that led to his actions. When we judge someone's choices with the benefit of hindsight, as the council would do that evening, we tend to discount the difficulty of real-time challenges and decisions. Think of a televised sporting event with aerial cameras and instant replay. It's easy for the at-home spectator to spot a hole in the defensive line or a player who was open, all while sitting on a sofa with food and beverage within arm's reach. But put yourself in the arena, and all the sudden you're facing a six-foot-four, 280-pound lineman or a full-court press, and things are much harder. We idolize professional athletes who can barely hit a ball three out of ten at bats, but for some reason when we see a regular guy fumble around in the middle of a personal mess, our inclination is to be critical.

What did the council members expect this man to have done differently? Should he have made a clean break by divorcing his wife before embracing his sexual orientation? Did they expect him to fully

recognize and understand his identity earlier in life and avoid marriage to a woman in the first place? It might have been more orderly to wrap things up nice and neat, but he'd probably have been excommunicated for homosexual relations. Most likely they expected him to suppress his feelings to the point where he could live in disguise as a heterosexual, or else commit to lifelong celibacy. But this isn't sustainable for everyone, and it's entirely possible he'd find himself back in the same situation. They expected this ordinary man to throw a Hail Mary pass, from the opposing team's thirty-yard line, with no time left on the clock. Anything less would come up short. There was no clear path for this man to be both gay and Mormon.

It was time for the council to vote. Each of us would indicate whether we supported excommunication. My insides were in turmoil. Humidity was still the right analogy for my anxiety, but it had gone from Midwest- to jungle-level. I felt sick. To vote in favor was to ignore my divided conscience. To object was to formally withdraw support for my local Church leaders, an action that would be frowned upon. So I balked.

"All those in favor of excommunication?" said the stake president. Fourteen hands went up.

"All those opposed?" No hands.

"I abstain," I said, with a lump in my throat. All heads turned toward me. From my solitary seat at the end of the table, I felt like I had been staring down a gauntlet the entire evening. Now the gauntlet was staring back. I took a deep breath. "Respectfully, I don't want to formally object to the action, but I'm not comfortable condoning it."

The silence that followed was unnerving. Heads turned 180 degrees to the stake president. Had this ever happened before? There was a procedure for what to do in the case of divided votes, but clearly no one was familiar with it.

Eventually a member of the stake presidency asked, "Would you feel differently if the man was heterosexual? If he cheated with women instead of men?"

I thought for a moment. “Yes, it would make all the difference. In that case it’s easier to pin actions to the individual. The institution doesn’t play as much of a role.”

He furrowed his brow and looked away.

“You can’t abstain,” said the clerk recording the meeting. “The options are in favor or opposed.”

I wouldn’t be pushed to one corner or the other. “Count my vote however you see fit,” I said, “but I choose to abstain.”

The stake president indicated he would proceed with excommunication. The man was brought in and informed of the decision. He wasn’t surprised. Separation from the LDS Church was almost a formality at this point. But he was saying goodbye to what had been a significant part of his life. Though he would not be barred from attending church services, he would not be allowed to participate: no comments during Sunday School, no public prayers, no opportunities for church service. Even donations would be turned away. His baptism was void.

“Is it possible to get a copy of the letter I received from the prophet calling me to missionary service?” asked the man. “I’ve lost it and I’d really like to have it.” I can’t know what he was thinking or feeling, but this came across as more than a request for a souvenir. He seemed to value his former membership, and with only limited prospects of ever recovering it, I think he wanted to hold on to the memory of it.

“We’ll make a request to Salt Lake City,” said the stake president. “We wish you the best.”

The council concluded with the man going around the oblong table and shaking the hand of each council member. I wished him well and left. It was late when I pulled my car into the garage. I didn’t speak to my wife but instead went straight to bed. My gift in life is an ability to fall asleep without much effort and be dead to the world until morning. Sleep was my escape that night, a short reprieve before sunrise.

Some describe disciplinary councils as deeply spiritual, for both council members and the person on trial, with feelings of love, sorrow, and hope prevalent throughout the proceedings. This was not my

experience. Something inside me that was not me—the part that is somehow connected to other people—broke. If I had known what was in store that evening, I would have opted out despite the obligation I felt to serve. It would be months before I could think about the experience without my stomach rising into my chest.

I might have felt better about the outcome if there had been some consideration given to my concerns. Something like, “Yes, it’s complicated and there’s enough blame to go around, but we can’t ignore the choices he’s made.” Whether the council couldn’t or wouldn’t go down that road, I don’t know. Were we so defined by our religion and experiences that we couldn’t imagine such a perspective? Was the group so loyal to the faith that we didn’t dare suggest accountability for the institution? Or perhaps I’m so glued to my own views that I pursue persuasion to the point of manipulation.

In any case, it wasn’t just the offender’s relationship with the Church that changed that night. I’d made good to my conscience, even if the execution was lacking, but my relationship with my congregation and local leadership would never be the same. If my pro-LGBT position over the past few years had branded me as someone who might not be loyal to the faith, then my display during the disciplinary council decidedly tipped the scales. A few weeks later, the stake president thanked me for my service in various leadership roles and formally released me from those responsibilities. It’s been years, and I’ve not been asked to serve in any leadership capacity since, despite a long history of such. I hadn’t committed adultery or homosexual acts, and my membership status was unchanged, but judgement was passed all the same.

Half a dozen humid summers have come and gone since the night I sat at one end of a table, surrounded by my peers, with a gay man on the other side. We judged a man who sat only a few feet away but whose circumstances couldn’t have been further from our own. It was like playing a game of connect-the-dots, but with half the dots hidden. At best we were able to assemble only a distorted picture of his reality.

The actions of the council, whether right or wrong, ignored the thing so many of us need from one another: understanding. Not a grasp of what pushes us to do this or that, but an acknowledgement that our lives are complex. So many of us struggle to know how even our own choices are influenced by our own experiences and emotions. The understanding we need is recognition that others face the same challenge.

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