

The Don Imus Controversy

*(Parashat Shemini)
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I have some breaking news to share with you. Just before Shabbat I received word that CBS and MSNBC have decided to simulcast all our services from now on, to make up for the programming gap caused by the cancellation of “Imus in the Morning”.

We are considering names for the show – and the one they seem to like the most is “Minyan in the Morning.” In consenting to do the show, I told them I had certain standards and made it clear that I would not agree to wear a dumb cowboy hat instead of a yarmulke when conducting services. That might be a deal-breaker, so we will have to wait and see if they will accept my terms.

I know that by now many of you may be sick of this whole story and wondering why there was so much interest in this in a week when there are so many other important news events, so much more deserving of our attention. There should be a special on Sunday night – the news you may have missed, or that wasn’t broadcast. It was after all, a week when a top Iranian official said that his country is making serious progress towards achieving its goal of acquiring nuclear capability. There were significant developments in the war in Iraq, and almost forgotten in all the coverage of the Imus story, it was also a week when we finally learned that Larry Birkhead is in fact the father of Anna Nicole Smith’s daughter Danielynn.

Why so much attention to such an unimportant figure as a shock jock?

I for one am glad that he is gone and that his racist and anti-Semitic rants will no longer be heard. But rather than consider whether or not the firing was justified or an over-reaction; whether the whole thing was blown out of proportion or not; or to debate the purity of his most vocal critics, Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson, both of whom have made anti-Semitic and incendiary comments of their own, and the questions of free speech

raised by the response, I actually believe the controversy has been helpful, therapeutic, and that there are important lessons all of us can learn from what transpired.

And of course, somehow, my challenge is to find those salient themes and messages, and show you how it is all related to our torah portion and the teachings of our faith. Sometimes I wonder why I don't just take the easier path and discuss the debate between Rashi and Rambam over the reasons for the laws of kashrut, in this week's reading.

This incident with all its nasty implications once again forces us to have a conversation about race in America, and the role of minorities. His downfall was sparked when Imus saw a women's basketball team, jumped to a conclusion and made a derogatory racist comment about them for a cheap laugh.

I believe his greatest sin was in not recognizing the individuality of the players. It really was at the crux of the problem. In their eloquent response to him, the women on the team said that what hurt them the most was that he judged them without knowing anything about who they were. "He doesn't even know us," they said. Team members and the coach spoke about their interests and dreams, their ambitions and goals, their sense of humor and virtues, giving us insights into their personalities. In so doing the women of the Rutgers' basketball team reminded us that every human being is unique, and that all of us are individuals created *b'tzelem elohim*, in the image of God.

So one of the first lessons we need to each be reminded of is to ask ourselves, what do we think when we see others? We must always look beyond stereotypes and search for and see the divine in every human being.

A beautiful midrash composed about 2,000 years ago asserts that coins are all made in the image of the emperor, just as human beings are made in the image of God. But the difference, the rabbis point out, is that whereas every coin is the same, God sees to it that every human being is unique.

The second issue is to note that Imus did apologize for what he had said. He ultimately met with the members of the basketball team, and offered them an apology, after having already publicly apologizing several times. While I do not doubt the sincerity of his remorse over having made the comment, especially now that he is out of a job, let us not forget that this is not the only apology he needs to be offering. A few months ago he made an obnoxious reference to Jews calling Jews “thieving Jews”. He then went on to say, “I apologize. I realize that’s redundant.”

How does one ever know if an apology is sincere?

A student in our religious school recently discussed with me whether or not he should accept the apology of another child who had been making fun of him, since it was not the first time this had occurred. Maimonides teaches us that *teshuva*, repentance, is true and meaningful when the person realizes and admits the error of his ways, asks for forgiveness, and then when presented with the same opportunity turns away and does not repeat his offensive act. In other words, it is not enough to apologize when caught in an embarrassing situation. True remorse can be gauged by the depth of sincerity and that can be determined when one turns away from their previous ways.

As we all know, Imus is not the only popular “shock jock” on the air. And many have appropriately raised the issue of the hypocrisy of Al Sharpton being some kind of paragon of virtue, as well as the language and images used in rap music today. Many of the words of contemporary rap music songs are as degrading of women and other blacks as Imus’ comments. The question of how we talk about each other is certainly an important conversation we need to have. Somehow young people are so obsessed with the importance of being cool, which is often defined by the level of being outrageous, that we forget that words can have a powerful impact on others.

Our Etz Hayim Bible commentary says, “Only twice in the Torah are we commanded not to eat pork, yet every Jew knows that it is forbidden. The Torah commands us many more times to refrain from gossip and hurtful speech...The Book of Leviticus is

concerned with our use of words (vows, false oaths, hurtful speech), teaching us to sanctify what goes forth from our mouths. In its exposition of the rules of kashrut, it teaches us to sanctify what goes into our mouths as well"... as what comes out of it.

When confronted with the death of his sons Nadav and Abihu in the parsaha, the torah says, "*vaydiom Aharon*, Aaron was silent." Philo, a philosopher from the first century claims that Aaron's silence spoke more clearly and powerfully than speech, or anything he could have said. He offered appropriate advice from the book of Proverbs, "The one who curbs the tongue shows sense." These words certainly resonate and have meaning in light of the Imus affair.

Let us learn from the words of torah as well as from what happened to someone who did not heed them. Hopefully we will not make the same mistakes. Let us appreciate the uniqueness of each person. We need to reflect upon the power of our words and the impact of what we say and how we speak about each other. For as we now all know, sometimes, what you say can hurt and do damage in more ways than one.

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