

Kol Nidrei 5779: ENGAGING THE FOOL Rabbi Suzanne Singer

Derek Black was referred to by his father as “the devil child” – and this was meant as a compliment! Derek’s father, Don Black, was the creator of Stormfront, the Internet’s first and largest white nationalist site. His mother, Chloe, had been married to David Duke, “one of the country’s most infamous racial zealots,” in the words of *The Washington Post*¹ which featured this story about Derek. David Duke was also Derek’s godfather. Derek was raised in the world of white nationalism and, at 19, he was already a prominent spokesman for the cause. He hosted his own radio show, launched a white nationalist website for children, and was considered one of the “leading light[s] of the movement.” Eight years later, Derek was trying to untangle himself from the movement. What happened to cause this turnaround?

After high school, Derek decided to study medieval history so he applied and was accepted to a liberal arts school with a strong program in that subject. The school also ranked as one of the “most pot-friendly, most gay friendly” in the state, according to Derek’s dad, Don. But Don was not worried: he was sure the school would be influenced by Derek, not the other way around.

At first, Derek refrained from discussing his views on campus. He hung out with students in his dorm, including a Peruvian immigrant and an Orthodox Jew. But, then he was outed by a fellow student who had been researching terrorist groups. A heated online discussion ensued. “How do we as a community respond?” read one post. Some of his friends emailed Derek that they felt betrayed. Others “flipped him off from a safe distance on campus.” Derek soon moved out of student housing.

¹ *The Washington Post*, “The White Flight of Derek Black,” Eli Saslow, October 15, 2016. All quotes about this story are from this source.

Then, according to the Post, one student wrote:
“Ostracizing Derek won’t accomplish anything.
We have a chance to be real activists and actually affect
one of the leaders of white supremacy in America...
Who’s clever enough to think of something we can do
to change this guy’s mind?”

So what do you think these students did? Before answering, I would like to explore the issue of extremism and intolerance this story raises. Derek’s story illustrates the difficulty we have today in talking to one another. We demonize the other side because we are so often at absolute opposite ends of the political spectrum. The Left is outraged over the administration’s policies, and the Right is outraged over the Left’s political correctness and naiveté. Finding a middle ground seems virtually impossible. We sometimes ask ourselves whether we should even engage the other side if we disagree so profoundly. So what is the appropriate way to respond? And what are the consequences of not engaging? Dr. Christine Hayes, with whom I studied in Jerusalem this summer, provided invaluable insights on this crucial matter. I would like to share some of them with you.

The book of Proverbs uses the word translated as “fool” to describe someone whose opinion we disdain or scoff at. This seems remarkably appropriate because, let’s be honest, when someone holds radically different beliefs from our own, we often think of them as ignorant and, yes, even stupid. Of course, since the book of Proverbs is a Jewish source, we get contradictory opinions about how to handle the fool. In one verse, it says: “Answer not a fool according to their folly, lest you also be like them,” and in the next verse it says: “Answer a fool according to their folly, lest they be wise in their own eyes.” In other words, refrain from engaging the fool if it means lowering yourself to their standards, but engage the fool so that they don’t think of themselves as being in the right. So which is it? And how do we determine in what circumstances one or the other approach applies?

The rabbis of the Talmud² suggest the following.

If it is a matter of Torah, in other words, something relating to Jewish law, then we must answer and correct the fool's faulty opinion.

But if it is an ordinary matter, something where a legal ruling is not at stake, then we don't bother, and this is illustrated by a strange story.

A man comes before Judah the Prince, the leader of the Jewish community, and says:

"Your wife is my wife, and your children are my children."

What he is saying is that Judah's wife committed adultery and that his children are illegitimate. So how does Rabbi Judah respond?

He offers: "Would you like to drink a cup of wine?"

The man drinks, bursts [and dies.]

Then another man comes to Rabbi Hiyya and says:

"Your mother is my wife and you are my son."

This is an even worse accusation meaning that Rabbi Hiyya himself is illegitimate. How do you think Rabbi Hiyya responds?

Rabbi Hiyya says: "Would you like to drink a cup of wine?"

He drinks, bursts [and dies.]

This story is certainly not meant as a literal example of how we should respond, or not, to a slanderous attack on our character or that of our family!

I think the rabbis are teaching us three lessons:

The first is that there are circumstances in which the better part of valor is not to engage verbally because, eventually, the truth will out. The second lesson is that legitimizing hateful speech is not worthy of us: that will only debase us.

The third lesson this story is teaching is that slandering others, circulating nasty rumors, can ultimately have dire consequences for the slanderer him or herself -- as can be seen by the slanderer's fate in the story.

But not engaging can have other kinds of very unfortunate consequences, as we learn from another story in the Talmud.³

Rabbi Joshua has a student named Jesus –

² BT Shabbat 30b

³ BT Sotah 47a

yes, the one and only Jesus. Jesus says something that offends Rabbi Joshua, so he bans Jesus from his presence. Jesus tries on many occasions to return to the rabbi's good graces, but the rabbi will have none of it. Finally, the rabbi decides he will take Jesus back the next time Jesus tries to make amends. Unfortunately, Jesus approaches him just as he is reciting the Shema. So the rabbi puts his hand up, indicating that he needs to finish the prayer before speaking with him. Unfortunately, Jesus thinks he is being rejected once again, so he abandons Judaism, despite Rabbi Joshua's subsequent efforts to get him to repent. Apparently, Rabbi Joshua had rebuffed Jesus one time too many. Perhaps the rabbis believe that Christianity might not have developed had Joshua been more forbearing earlier on!

This hard line – stubbornly refusing to engage with someone you think is a fool – is also evidenced by the famous Rabbi Shammai, the perpetual challenger and opponent of Rabbi Hillel.

In one of the most well-known stories, a non-Jew comes to Rabbi Shammai saying he wants to convert on the condition that the rabbi teach him the whole Torah standing on one foot⁴ – in other words, he is asking Shammai to give him the Cliff Notes on the Torah. Considering this a major insult, Shammai is furious so he pushes the potential convert away.

The same non-Jew comes to Rabbi Hillel with the same question. But Rabbi Hillel's response is quite different.

He says, "What is hateful to you, do not do to any person.

That is the whole Torah. All the rest is commentary. Now go and study."

Rabbi Hillel is willing to respond to the non-Jew on his own terms assuming that subsequently the non-Jew will take Judaism more seriously.

Indeed, Rabbi Hillel is known in the Talmud as an incredibly kind and patient man. In another incident,⁵ two men make a bet.

The one who can make Hillel angry will win a stash of money.

⁴ BT Shabbat 31a

⁵ BT Shabbat 30b-31a

So one of the men goes to Hillel's home on a Friday night, when the rabbi is bathing in preparation for Shabbat.

The man knocks on Hillel's door. Hillel has to put on his robe, descend the stairs, open the door, and ask the man what he needs.

"I have a question," says the man. Hillel responds:

"Go ahead and ask, my son." The man replies:

"Why are the heads of the Baylonians round?"

This is clearly a silly, nonsensical question.

And there is certainly no urgency for an answer on the eve of Shabbat.

And, by the way, Hillel is a Babylonian, so it is insulting to boot.

Hillel answers patiently nonetheless: "That is a great question, my son," he says. "It's because their midwives are not skillful." A few minutes later,

the man comes back and knocks on Hillel's door. Hillel must once again put on his robe, descend the stairs, open the door, and ask the man

what he needs. "I have a question," he says to the rabbi.

"Go ahead and ask, my son," Hillel again replies patiently.

"Why are the Palmyreans bleary-eyed," the man asks,

another silly question of no urgency. "You have asked a great question, my son," says Hillel. "It's because they live in sandy places."

A few minutes later, the man returns and, once again,

knocks on Hillel's door. Once more, Hillel must put on his robe, descend the stairs, open the door, and ask what the man needs.

"I have a question," the man says to the rabbi. "Go ahead and ask, my son," Hillel replies. Now keep in mind the context of the times

as you hear the next question. "Why do Africans have wide feet,"

the man asks. Another ridiculous question – and of course

a question no one would ask today. "You have asked a great question, my son," says Hillel. "It's because they live in watery marshes."

"I have many more questions to ask," says the man,

"but I am afraid you will get angry." "Ask all the questions you have to ask," replies Rabbi Hillel, as if he had all the time in the world.

And the man loses his bet.

Christine Hayes, the excellent professor I studied with this summer,

analyzes this story as follows: "Hillel does not allow foolishness to stop him. According to him, it is a virtue to engage with anyone.

He meets each fool precisely where he is. He validates each where he is, and establishes trust. Then he slowly leads him to realize his error

by providing conditions where the person can see for himself that his demands are foolish. The change comes from inside, not by rebuke. This is what it means to answer the fool according to his folly. You have to understand what a person will need. Not everyone can do this.”

Indeed, not everyone is patient like Hillel, nor is every interlocutor worthy of engagement, and every encounter need not necessarily be civil. Devontae Torriente was the first black president of the American University’s Student Union and is a human rights activist. In an article entitled “I Don’t Owe You My Tolerance: How ‘Civil Discourse’ Functions to Uphold Systems of Oppression,”⁶ he writes: “It’s time to do away with the idea that we must be respectful or courteous to be entitled to our rights. Politeness isn’t a requirement when we are confronting anyone who uses their political and social power to further disenfranchise us... in this fight for our humanity, we will not concede the raw power of our indignation...remember this: I don’t owe you my tolerance, especially not when my life is at stake.”

Sometimes fire needs to be met with fire. If someone is bent on causing danger through speech, we might need to take action rather than try to argue with them. There are also a number of circumstances when responding is pointless because the person is not in a position to hear us: maybe they are too angry or maybe they are really wicked. And maybe we make an exception about the need for civility in the case of those who are the victims of policies rather than bystanders.

So, what approach did the students take in the case of Derek Black, the white supremacist I spoke about at the beginning of this sermon? The students decided to try the Rabbi Hillel approach, one of inclusion rather than one of exclusion. The Orthodox Jew whom Derek had gotten to know, a student named Matthew Stevenson, had been hosting Friday night Shabbat dinners, though mostly for non-Jews as there were few Jews on campus. He decided to invite Derek.

⁶ *The Blackprint*, 6/17/17.

“Let’s try to treat him like anyone else,” Matthew suggested beforehand to his guests. At first, Derek mostly listened – to the Peruvian immigrant’s stories, to Matthew’s view on Israel. He was curious and smart. He found that he really liked Matthew. His Shabbat friends began sending him links to a number of articles and studies debunking theories of white racial superiority. Gradually, Derek’s mind was opened and he felt more and more disaffected from his supremacist past. He finally issued a statement disavowing his previous beliefs: “I can’t support a movement,” he wrote, “that tells me I can’t be a friend to whomever I wish or that other people’s races require me to think of them in a certain way or be suspicious at their advancements. The things I have said as well as my actions have been harmful to people of color, people of Jewish descent, activists striving for opportunity and fairness for all. I am sorry for the damage done.”

Perhaps we need to learn an important lesson about patience and compassion from Derek Black’s friends. Rather than shaming the opposition, we might try reaching out and listening to each other. We might learn and grow in surprising ways. After all, this is the season when we are asked to heed the Shofar’s call to wake up from our stubborn ways. As the song says, Let us not be afraid.

Song: Al Tirah