

**To Answer or Not?
Fools, Politics, & Moral Responsibility**

Kol Nidre Drash 5779
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Shir Tikvah Congregation
18 September 2018

Tonight I share a text that pierces the heart of our current political toxicity- and leaves me bereft of clarity. With deepest gratitude to the Hartman Institute where I'm a rabbinic fellow, and Dr. Christine Hayes who taught this text this summer, I'm going to do the most Jewish thing I can think of since we aren't eating for the next 25 hours and serve you a delicious platter of my theological angst.

You're welcome.

In the book of Proverbs, we read (26:4-5):
Al ta-an kasil k'ivalto, pen tishveh lo gam atah.

“Do not answer a fool according to their folly because you'll become like them.” Clear. Concise. Not terribly ambivalent.

And yet- in the VERY next verse- Proverbs contradicts itself.

Ana kasil k'ivalto, pen y'hiyeh chacham b'ainav

“Answer a fool because if you don't, they will consider themselves wise in their own eyes.”

So which is it? Don't answer fools? Or answer them? How can two verses of text so directly contradict each other? And who is defined a fool? Why?

The Talmudic rabbis were reluctant to engage in moral absolutism; they created what we might call situational ethics. Now- this is not the same as moral relativism, which claims there is no moral hierarchy or that everything is relative. The rabbis most definitively had moral hierarchies- but they understood that circumstances and context differed in a given moment, so they needed to have a strong moral code- with some generous elasticity. For example, the rabbis teach: *Al tadin et chavercha ad she-tagiya limkomo*– Do not judge your fellow until you stand in their place. [Pirkei Avot 2:4]. Good wisdom for Yom Kippur. The rabbis also teach, *Havey dan et kol ha'adam lechaf zechut* – Judge every person on the side of merit. [Pirkei Avot 1:6]. Give folks the benefit of the doubt.

Holding contradictory ideas is hard. Holding moral contradictions is especially difficult. In the Broadway musical *Wicked*, the Wizard of Oz sings:

“There Are Precious Few At Ease
With Moral Ambiguities,
So We Act As Though They Don't Exist.”

This contradictory advice- don't answer the fool and answer the fool- doesn't cancel each other out according to Dr. Hayes; rather, depending upon the situation, sometimes it is wise to ignore a fool and sometimes we must respond.

In the words of the 20th Century prophet Kenny Rogers,
 "You gotta know when to hold 'em,
 know when to fold 'em,
 know when to walk away,
 know when to run."

Different situations call for different responses. I love that our Jewish tradition doesn't pretend that humans are perfect and that it addresses the experience so many of us have at work, in the community, even in our families- that some people behave like fools.

Where I'm struggling is not if; its when: When is it morally advisable to ignore a fool? When are we obligated to engage them? And how will we know the difference?

How does Judaism understand "the fool"? The Bible, or at least Proverbs, doesn't settle on a single definition, but rather paints a composite picture of a fool. Mischief, evil, and chaos are sport for the fool, Proverbs [10:23] teaches. The fool does no good [Psalm 14:1], venerates ignorance, and they don't believe the existence of virtue- one could therefore presume that since they don't believe in virtue, they don't practice it either. Fools despise wisdom, discipline [Prov. 1:7], and knowledge [Prov. 1:22]; they are unwilling to be taught, to admit mistakes, to acknowledge they can cause harm, in large measure because they revel in a misguided notion of their own victimhood. Fools are incorrigible and loathe to accept advice because they believe in the rightness of their opinion, facts be damned [Prov. 19:29]. In case you suspect I've pulled this from the anonymous source at the New York Times, all of this was written around 700 BCE, 28 centuries ago.

Jewish tradition discerns between someone who is willfully ignorant and incorrigible from someone who is misinformed or simply wrong. Fools, according to Jewish text, aren't people who make mistakes because that's what we humans do in the course of being human; fools are people who revel in causing harm and chaos, who have no moral compass, who are indifferent to human suffering.

"Do not answer a fool- because you'll become like them."

This verse seems a lot like what Michelle Obama said two years ago, "When they go low, we go high." Don't engage with the insipid, the incorrigible, the vulgar. God forbid we could become like the fool. In other words, don't answer incivility with incivility. Be guided, in this instance, by the outcome. If it has no real chance to change the fool, just don't do it.

Earlier this month, the New Yorker Festival invited White Supremacist and former White House Senior Advisor Steve Bannon to be interviewed. But David Remnick, the New Yorker editor, wisely responded to public outcry and rescinded the invitation. He explained that Bannon's legacy is "*a tragedy for the American republic, a tragedy for the Constitution, and a triumph for the forces, at home and abroad, of nativism, authoritarianism, misogyny, and racism.*" [<https://www.thewrap.com/jim-carrey-judd-apatow-john-mulaney-ditch-new-yorker-festival-steve-bannon-booking-amateur-night-sonafabitch/>].

Nonetheless, while prominent in the book of Proverbs, our refusal to engage the fool must be exceedingly rare. Why? Because of four prominent ideas and values in Judaism. First, humility. We are called to be humble like Moshe- in fact, Proverbs [16:5] proclaims that haughty people are an "abomination before God." If we stop talking with people we disagree with politically or morally, we risk becoming isolated, engaging in sloppy moral thinking, and trapped in an echo chamber that simply confirms what we already believe, we could easily become a fool ourselves.

The second idea is offered by Hillel: "*Al tifrosh min hatzibur*- Do not cut yourself off from your community." Communities are made up of all kinds of people- those we admire and those who drive us bananas; those we adore and those who are difficult. We are not required to put ourselves in places that cause us harm; but being in community- in holy, beautiful, loving, messy, imperfect, possible community- means being in some discomfort a lot of the time.

The third Jewish commitment that demands we answer a fool is justice. Incurable fools must be confronted- lest anyone believe they are wise. Or right. Attorney General Jeff Sessions is an immoral white supremacist who traffics with the KKK, Department of Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen should be haunted by the catastrophic human suffering she's caused to immigrants and asylum seekers, and Presidential Advisor Stephen Miller should spend the rest of his life repenting and personally apologizing to the parents and children his policy tore apart- an absolute and utter *shande!* Fools such as these cannot be permitted to espouse their foolishness unchecked, lest they are given any credence or moral legitimacy.

Finally, it matters that Judaism believes that most people can change. *T'shuvah*- the entire project of these *Yamim Noraim*- is built upon a theological presumption that we are capable of changing for the better. It's an inherently optimistic idea. We Jews believe in the human power to change, to transform, to repent, to turn in our lives anew. Shouldn't we seek *t'shuvah* whenever and wherever possible? So to have this text from Proverbs that claims there are but a few people- but there are a few people- who in fact we do not believe are capable of repenting, is unsettling.

And yet, I believe this is why Jewish tradition is so brilliant... It is precisely because we do believe the overwhelming majority of us have the capacity to change that we can also recognize there are limits to our sunny theological optimism; there are a few people in the world who are so profoundly foolish, so wretched, that we cannot and we must not engage them.

Let's assume then, that in our personal and professional lives, in our public and political worlds, we encounter fools- people whom we believe are wrong, who state things are that are foolish and absurd, who deny facts, and who are incorrigible. What are the criteria we use to engage them?

The Talmudic rabbis offer a way to discern whether or not to engage the fool. For them, content is essential. Our sages distinguish between Torah matters and mundane matters [B.Talmud Shabbat 30b]. For Torah matters, we must answer them; for more mundane matters, the rabbis teach, let it go.

I imagine those Talmudic rabbis would have a lot to say about our world today. When this president attacks the free press, the first amendment, the freedom to assemble in peaceful protest, we have a moral obligation to rise up and answer him with fierce moral clarity! When the president puts babies in cages and calls Mexicans rapists and asylum seekers criminal (fact- it is not illegal to seek asylum; it is a human right), this assaults our core values as Jews and Americans. When this president and his administration trample our beautiful environment with a dangerous pipeline, when he denies the fact that 3,000 Puerto Ricans died in Hurricane Maria, when they bulldoze tribal treaties with our Native American sisters and brothers, and they enact policies to ban Muslims from our nation, we must answer them. These, we would say, are matters of the Torah of America- these repugnant policies assault our virtues, our core values, our patriotism, and our human dignity and we must answer them- and the fools who espouse them.

What about more mundane matters? What a politician puts on their bagel or whether or not they pumped their fist at a 9/11 Memorial service or even put their bare feet on a couch in the Oval Office are all examples of what the rabbis might call mundane. Cringe worthy? Absolutely. Double standard had the first African American president done them? Of course. Worth getting derailed or distracted from the moral atrocities this White House perpetrates daily? Never.

As we head into the next seven weeks of a vital, challenging, hopeful, morally defining campaign, we must be discerning about what foolishness we respond to and how we respond.

But this cannot only be about the moral geometry of our politics; it must be about how we live in the world and how we understand ourselves as moral actors in it.

To be in relationship, to be in community, to be engaged in the world today means we are confronted by fools. Judaism, ever wise, guides us to be engaged, to challenge and refute untruths; to call lies "lies"; to demand from our leaders and from each other a society that centers compassion and human dignity.

The rabbis teach us we can only do *t'shuvah* for ourselves; we can't force others to repent and change. We can only control our own actions. But if we are thoughtful about

with whom and when and how we engage, we might unexpectedly find partners in this holy activity.

Do you remember a 2016 story in the Washington Post from [October 15, 2016] by Eli Saslow titled, “The White Flight of Derek Black?” [Much of the material below is quoted from the article]. In case you don’t, Derek Black was a White Supremacist, Holocaust Denier, conspiracy theorist extraordinaire; he founded the Daily Stormer’s website for children, to teach them about the “ideal” race. Following President Obama’s election in 2008 (whom he called an “anti-White radical”), he spoke at a gathering of the world’s most prominent racists and was introduced as, “The leading light of our movement.” Derek Black wasn’t simply a racist; he was a prominent young leader of the white supremacist movement in America.

At 19, Derek enrolled in a liberal arts college in Florida- much to the chagrin of his white supremacist family. He wasn’t “out” at school. He didn’t disclose his beliefs, his history with Storm Front, his ideas. He attended classes, socialized with fellow students, played pool, did his homework- all the while continuing to call in each day to his white nationalist radio show.

Late one night in April of 2011, Derek was “outed” in an online campus forum. Many of his fellow college students felt betrayed; the conversation was intense; Derek was shunned- understandably so- and he moved off campus.

However, not every student believed this was the right way to handle the situation. They believed, in the words of Dr. Hayes, that “complete disengagement wouldn’t accomplish anything. They wondered how they could change his mind. Perhaps he wasn’t incorrigible.”

Matthew Stevenson- the only Orthodox Jew on campus- had been hosting weekly Shabbat dinners and invited an eclectic crew- mostly Christian, atheist, non-Jews of different races, ethnic, and religious backgrounds- to make Shabbes with him each week.

Matthew did his homework. He went back and read some of Derek’s posts from 2007 and 2008: “Jews are not white.” Jews worm their way into power over our society.” “They must go.”

Matthew was no fool. But nonetheless, he decided, “The best chance to affect Derek’s thinking was not to ignore him or confront him, but simply include him. “Maybe he’d never spent time with a Jewish person before,” Matthew remembered thinking.

So Matthew invited Derek to Shabbes dinner. Several “regulars” refused to attend. Do not answer a fool they argued. He’s incorrigible. Derek showed up with a bottle of wine. Nothing was said about his past. Derek returned to that Shabbes table, week after week, and the group grew back to its original size.

The motley crew of Persians and Peruvians and Latinos and one Orthodox Jew making Shabbes was having an impact. “Derek,” according to the Washington Post article, “was becoming more and more confused about what exactly he believed. Sometimes he looked through posts on Storm Front, hoping to reaffirm his ideology, but now the message threads about Obama’s birth certificate or DNA tests for citizenship just seemed bizarre and conspiratorial. He stopped posting on Storm Front. He began inventing excuses to get out of his radio show.”

The Shabbes table crew slowly began to engage him, respectfully, firmly, challenging his views, sending him studies and articles, talking with him, and- to their surprise and his- becoming his friend.

Finally, a few weeks after his graduation, Derek wrote the following statement:

“After a great deal of thought..., I have resolved that it is in the best interests of everyone involved to be honest about my slow but steady disaffiliation from white nationalism. I can’t support a movement 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.”

To one of his Shabbat table friends he would later remark about the rise of racism and anti-Semitism in America, “It’s scary to know that I helped spread this stuff, and now it’s out there.”

Is this enough to atone for all the harm Derek had done? No. Not even close. But isn’t this what we ultimately want?: People to change, to admit they were wrong, to be held accountable so they can atone- publicly in Derek’s case- for their wrong doing, to make restitution, and participate in society? Rabbi Lekach-Rosenberg spoke on Rosh HaShanah about a *t’shuvah* laboratory-messy, holy, painful, vital, human where we engage in the hard work of trying to repair what we’ve broken. Isn’t that at the heart of what we do as Jews?

I love this story about Matthew and Derek- because it is so human. We need these stories- however rare they may be- stories that invite us to rise above the narrowness of our imaginations and look beyond the horizon to what is possible; stories that challenge our belief that every fool is incorrigible.

We Jews don’t suffer fools, we stand up for what we believe, we raise up a Torah of compassion and justice, we challenge every racist, anti-Semitic, homophobic, Islamophobic, Xenophobic, misogynist fool on the planet.

And- AND- we believe in the promise of Yom Kippur. We believe we can change, that *t’shuvah* is not only possible- it is necessary for society to function.

We must have courageous moral leaders like Matthew who provide us hope and affirm our belief that people can repent, change, and grow. And we must have more Derek Blacks who admit when we're profoundly wrong, who take responsibility for the hurt we've caused, who seek to genuinely and humbly repair what we've broken.

I don't know that I could be as brave or as wise as Matthew Stevenson. I hope I could...

But I know- I know- we need more Matthew Stevensons in our world. And we need more Derek Blacks.

Tonight, perhaps they are sitting amongst us.

G'mar Chatimah Tovah.

This sermon is dedicated to Dr. Christine Hayes- much of this material she taught in her lecture on July 6, 2018- Rabbi Lisa Grushcow, my beloved chevruta, and my colleagues and teachers at the Shalom Hartman Institute; there is but one word in Torah for wise souls: chamamim. Thank you for sharing your wisdom with me.