

What Should We Do When We Encounter A Fool?

Rabbi Sarah Hronsky, Yom Kippur 5779

Look before you leap.

Or, He who hesitates is lost.

If at first you don't succeed, try, try again.

Or, Don't beat your head against a stone wall.

Many hands make light work.

Or, Too many cooks spoil the broth.<sup>1</sup>

Everyday proverbs that have been passed down across time, offering advice, incomplete contradiction to each other. How then can either be correct?

Other examples:

Absence makes the heart grow fonder.

Or is it, Out of sight, out of mind.

You're never too old to learn.

You can't teach an old dog new tricks.

So, which is true? "Is it that you are never too old to learn?" Or is it, "You can't teach an old dog new tricks?" What do you think? Is one right and the other wrong, or is it just situational?

The Book of Proverbs, also known as Mishlei, in our Hebrew Bible, offers some of its own proverbs-sage advice- so to speak. The sage advice comes in chapter 26; with verses 4 and 5. (SHOW SLIDE)

The question at hand: Should we speak to people we deem to be fools?

According to verse 4:

*Al ta-an k'seal k'ee-valto, pen tishveh lo gam atah.*

"Do not answer a fool—in accordance with his folly, else you will become like him."

Pretty clear statement! Don't engage, or else you will stoop to the fool's level, becoming just like him.

And yet—in the VERY next verse, Proverbs offers a contradiction.

*Anei k'seal k'ee-valto, pen y'hiyeh chacham b'ainav.*

"Answer a fool, in accord with his folly, because if you don't, she will consider herself wise in her own eyes."

Also clear and directive. You had **better** answer the fool, less they actually start believing the foolish statements they make. The right thing to do then **is** to engage, because we may be able to

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<sup>1</sup> <https://beebo.org/smackerels/contradictory-proverbs.html>

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make them aware, knowledgeable, and prevent the fool from getting to that place that they would actually believe the wrongful, hurtful, mischievous, foolish things that they are saying or doing.

So which is it, do we answer a fool or not? Do we engage with the other, enter into civil discourse, or do we refrain? Do we shun, or do we teach? Do we stoop to a level, or rise above?

Lately, my heart has been hurting. Actually, since the entire season leading up to the 2016 election, my heart has ached profoundly. Not just in the political realm, but in the incivility in the way we treat each other in our local communities, in our temples, in our work places, in the bubbles of our social media. Everyday there is so much said that I deem extremely foolish, perhaps even wicked. These utterances appear in our written media, in our 24 hour news coverage, around our holiday tables, in line at the grocery store, on social media platforms, in places of daily conversation and in significant arenas of government and politics. While this may not be new, it has reached a critical place: from fake news, to sweeping generalizations of an entire group of people, the rise of hate language, and the name calling of friends, politicians, and co-workers, it feels more out of hand, than ever. Foolish words, flying freely causing hurt.

What should we do, then, when we are in strong discord with another's voice on a topic? When we find them to be in direct contradiction to our personal moral values? When we are convinced they are the fool? The idea of engaging another whose voice is different than mine, whose truth is different in their hearts than mine, seems nearly impossible. Is it better then to throw up my hands and walk away, not engage, or worse yet to resort in the name calling, bullying, or trolling the other?

This past summer, I was privileged beyond belief to learn the wisdom behind this text in Proverbs from Dr. Christine Hayes, in my fellowship with the Shalom Hartman Institute. And Dr. Hayes brilliantly parsed this text among many; she quickly reminded us that while our tradition has moments of contradiction scattered throughout, to have these two statements literally side by side, verse 4 and verse 5, clearly indicates they stand in relationship, not cancelling each other out. Rather, each is good advice, **depending** on the situation.<sup>2</sup>

Ahhh, it's situational. I should answer the other who appears foolish in my eyes, depending on the situation. Sometimes it will be wise to answer, and other times best to keep quiet. Which is the best advice to follow and in what situation, this is now our challenge.

Our Talmudic rabbis' point out each of us is human, and each of us acts at times like a fool. The words out of our mouths, the actions of our hands, may be unwise. As human beings, we make errors. We hurt; we offend, resulting in different situations, requiring different approaches.

So, what other advice does our tradition hold? This concept of being a fool is something quite severe in our texts from Proverbs. In chapter ten (10:23) we learn "mischievous is a sport for the fool." The fool is someone who delights in wickedness. In chapter one, we learn, a fool despises wisdom,

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<sup>2</sup> Dr. Christine Hayes lecture on civility on July 6, 2018 provided all source material for this sermon. Her lecture, her Torah, was brilliant and inspiring. It is available through Shalom Hartman Institute in Israel.

hates discipline, is eager to scoff, and hates knowledge.<sup>3</sup> They are unwilling to be taught, unable to acknowledge they can cause harm, or that they could be wrong. Fools are incorrigible, and averse to accepting advice.

In Proverbs chapter 12 (verses 15 and 16) we read, “The way of a fool is right in his own eyes; but the wise man accepts advice. A fool’s vexation is known at once, but a clever person conceals his humiliation.” A fool, therefore, can’t take anyone’s advice; because he is convinced he or she is right. And they are quick to share their vexation. Hmmmmmm

A fool appears to be more than a person who simply makes an error out of ignorance: more of a willfulness to cause trouble, pain, and hurt. Talking to this kind of a person, would be useless. Talking to them offers too much civility, for which they are not deserving, and it may actually harm you. It’s the Michelle Obama approach, “When they go low, we go high.”<sup>4</sup> Don’t engage, don’t speak, don’t offer civility less you become like them.

However, Proverbs also states that we cannot allow the fool’s speech to go completely unanswered. While we may not be able to engage and educate them, we have to stop the evilness, the wickedness, even if through the enactment of punishment. So, do not ignore, but take action.

When may this be the right answer? As a people, we are committed to justice, to *tzedek*. In the words of Deuteronomy, *Tzedek tzedek tirdof* – justice justice shall we pursue<sup>5</sup>. Do not spare the rod, when injustice abounds, and this we should think of in relationship to hate speech, surely words of a fool.

Yes, we have a right for freedom of speech. But, when the victim of words reaps the punishment of a fool’s hateful speech, this is unjust and unacceptable. Hate speech is **designed** to attack, demean, and dehumanize a specific group of people based on identity such as religion, ethnicity, race, gender, or sexual orientation. The price paid for not rebuking is far too great.

The words of the fool, the wicked words, like referring to entire groups of people as animals, all African American fathers as worthless, or the hateful chants of “Communist Jews run city governments alongside of criminal Black men (and no the word used was not Black something for worse),<sup>6</sup> or what about categorizing all Mexican immigrants as rapists. These strong words have led to punishment of the victims, not the fools espousing them. From loss of jobs, children stripped from arms of loving parents and sent hundreds of miles away, true asylum seekers turned away being told that the room has no more capacity, mosques set on fire, and bombs planted like

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<sup>3</sup> Proverbs 1: 7,22

<sup>4</sup> First Lady Michelle Obama said this in her appeal to the Democrats on the opening night of their nominating convention in Philadelphia.

<sup>5</sup> Deuteronomy 16:20

<sup>6</sup> Words chanted at the white nationalist march in Charlottesville

the one just three days ago discovered at a Jewish cemetery in New Jersey during a designated community clean-up day<sup>7</sup>.

Devontae Torriente, an African American man who is the Student Body President at American University, eloquently expounded on the cost of protecting the freedom of speech especially around hate speech. He stated, "It's time for us 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 age of entitlement by those with problematic or seemingly unpopular views, remember this: **I don't owe you my tolerance** (repeat) especially when my life is at stake."<sup>8</sup> Essentially he is expressing, that people have been made uncomfortable for far too long, so that others can speak freely. Hateful speech affects the victim's mind and body. So, fools who speak as such don't deserve respect, courtesy, or civility. Rather they deserve Devontae's **and** our outrage. The fool, who spouts hate, should be the one to pay the price, not the victims.

So, we can hold our tongue, and not engage in dialogue with the fool, who we are most certain cannot learn, will not learn, and will not grow. But, we cannot refrain from taking an action to protect the other. To allow for false truths to become fact. To allow victims to pay the price. For this we are to take an opposing action, stand up for, and stand behind, the victim. Stand against the wickedness of the fool.

Now, then, why do we have **that** tricky additional verse 5 "Answer a fool, in accord with his folly, because if you don't, she will consider herself wise in her own eyes." You should answer them, make them aware, and prevent them from a worse fate of actually believing the foolish things they say.

Sigh, so now what. The rabbis compel us to answer as did Rabbi Ellie in her sermon on Rosh Hashanah. She cautioned us about staying in our echo chambers of rightness, about holding up only with others who look like us, think like us, live in our blue, red, **not** purple communities. If we don't talk to others who think differently, hold different political beliefs, which might even annoy us at times, we run the risk not just of isolating ourselves, but compromising our own moral progress and moral values.

Consider whom you deem to be a fool, and what you deem to be foolish, and go back to that situational difference that the rabbis call out. The rabbis also teach that we do engage the fool, but only in matters of Torah, not mundane things. For the rabbis, they probably meant literal words of Torah, the most important material to them. But for our purposes, we might think this means to engage in **IMPORTANT** matters: not things like what someone wore to an event or who they went with, but matters of significance and weight.

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<sup>7</sup> Newark, New Jersey September 16 at the Jewish Federation's clean-up day.

<sup>8</sup> Devontae Torriente, "I Don't Owe You My Tolerance: How 'Civil Discourse' Functions to Uphold Systems of Oppression," *The Blackprint*, 6/7/17

The landscape of incivility is extremely clear. Yet, there is still a place and a reason to engage on important matters. Dr. Hayes said it best, “Not everyone shares the same moral agenda and identity. Each community has its own. So we won’t always agree. Yet, the civil thing to do is to respect what is morally salient to the other. Moral progress is value on many fronts. Imagine what it would be like to cheer on what the other person finds morally salient. We are not always in a competition. Civil thing to do, would be to cheer them on and for them to cheer you on. In an age of multiple moral challenges, we need to optimize our multitasking. My moral fight does not negate or invalidate yours!”

Why else to engage? Perhaps out of a sense of duty, out of sense of obligation. For example, in a teacher student relationship, when one of my students made a horribly racist comment, I was obligated to engage him in dialogue over and over again until we could move forward with new understanding of foolish words hurting others. My obligation as his rabbi and therefore his teacher.

Or engage because it is a virtue. Think of our ancestor Hillel for whom countless times his patience is tried and tested. In fact, there is a story of two men who made a bet on who could make Hillel angry, turn him into the fool. The man takes the bet and heads to Hillel’s home just before Shabbat starts, and three times asks inane, non-Torah related questions. He doesn’t come once, he comes three times waiting in between each visit. Hillel doesn’t have to answer him, it isn’t about Torah. And yet each time, Hillel compliments his question- *sha’aleh tovah* – good question and proceeds to answer him. We are talking questions about why is a person’s head so round, feet so wide silliness like this. The key for Hillel was he felt it was virtuous to answer, simply the right thing to do. Each time he answered, and he never lost his patience. He outlasts what we might call a modern day troll, who was chasing him, nudging him, poking him and through patience the fool gets bored and departs. Not able to get Hillel fired up, to get him to sink to the level of becoming the fool, the fool’s behavior is stopped in its tracks.<sup>9</sup>

Or there is the story of Hillel and Shammai for whom potential converts knock on their door to ask to be converted each with their own particular difficult request. One asks to be converted with only Written Torah, no Oral Torah, another so that he can be named a High Priest, and another for whom he wanted to learn Torah, but speedily all on one foot. Shammai literally raises the rod and shews them away, for all of these demands were foolish and impossible. He doesn’t engage them to teach, or to learn with them, or to advance them.

But, Hillel **does** engage each person. Exactly where they are. He validates them and their demands; he builds some level of trust, and slowly guides them to accept the original request was truly in error. Through his grave patience, and thoughtful instruction, each convert comes to a new place from within themselves. Hillel manages to answer fully, not by debasing himself and coming into the folly, but rather met the “ignorant” fool in their place of folly, and then guides them to a place where they can recognize their wrong.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> BT Shabbat 30b-31a

<sup>10</sup> BT Shabbat 31a

This case is exceptional! Neither Hillel nor Shammai come at these potential converts with a sense of superiority. They don't belittle the fool for their silly requests. Neither rejects the converts with discourteous behavior, or coarse language which would only have caused a greater divide.

Now, let us think, how do **we** respond when someone utters something so foolish to us? Do we stand on airs and berate the other? Do we cause a further distancing by responding too quickly, too harshly? Do we hit send too fast on the email, post hasty words of descent on social media, or call the other a name? Or are we more like Shammai- dismissing without truly hurting or like Hillel – embracing and helping the fool to walk forward?

The other exceptionality in that story is that both Hillel and Shammai seem to know who they are as individuals. Hillel is incredibly patient, a teacher at ease with himself, and has the innate ability to meet a person exactly where they are in that moment. Shammai seems to be able to recognize that he was limited in this arena. Not able to take on the fool, knowing he would lose his patience and sink to the level of folly, he sends them away. It's hard to imagine the restraint it took to not returning a volley like this. But he did, staying quiet and simply pushing them away! Both great men in our tradition, understood their response to be both situational and dependent on knowing themselves as individuals. Do we know who we are? When we should engage, and when we should refrain?

(PAUSE) In this season of seeking *teshuvah*, of apologizing and not repeating past actions, we acknowledge that human beings have the capacity to change. There are some for whom change is possible. This means anyone, including ourselves, could be open to hearing something new, to a different viewpoint, and make a change. While we can only do *teshuvah* for ourselves, controlling our own actions; when we choose to engage another, in the right situation, at the right time, in our best way, we might unexpectedly find a partner in this holy work of *teshuvah*.

Do you remember the 2016 story about Derek Black printed in the Washington Post?<sup>11</sup> Derek Black was a White Supremacist, Holocaust denier, conspiracy theorist; 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."

After being homeschooled and surrounded only by white supremacists his entire life, Derek chose to attend a liberal arts college at the age of 19. When he started school he appeared to be like every other kid. He was anonymous; no one knew he was behind a white nationalist weekly radio broadcast, his building of the Storm Front website, nothing about his speaking engagement at rallies, nothing. He attended classes, somewhat socialized with fellow students, played pool, and hung out.

But, late one night in April Of 2011, Derek was "outed" in an online campus forum. Many of his fellow students, felt betrayed. As he walked around campus, ugly things were shouted at him. We

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<sup>11</sup> Eli Saslow, "The White Flight of Derek Black," *Washington Post*, October 15, 2016 Most of the story shared in this sermon is quoted from this important piece.

understand this reaction; they were demonstrating that hate speech and hate ideologies were unacceptable. Sadly, the hurled words belittled the fool, and debased the hurler. The result of this behavior was that Derek was shunned, and he moved off campus. Perhaps not a bad result, but not one that would change the fool's mindset.

One student, Matthew Stevenson, the only Orthodox Jew on campus, angry at first, bent his mindset and thought he would try. Maybe just maybe, Derek wasn't incorrigible. Maybe, non-engagement wasn't the answer.

Matthew decided to reach out to Derek and invite him to a Friday night dinner, you see he had been hosting weekly Shabbat dinners and invited an eclectic group—mostly Christians, atheists, non-Jews of different races, ethnicities, and religious backgrounds, Peruvians, Latinos, Persians, and of course the one Orthodox Jew.

Matthew had done his homework. He was no fool. He had read on Derek's social media network his comments such "Jews are not white." "Jews worm their way into power over our society." "Jews must go."

He decided, "The best chance to affect Derek's thinking was not to ignore him or confront him, but simply include him.

Matthew had warned his Shabbat regulars about the extended invite to Derek and about not confronting, just being with him. Thus, several of his regular attendees refused to attend Shabbat dinner. They didn't want to share space with him.

Derek, on the other hand, seeking some social outlet, did attend and light non-confrontational conversation was had with the few others who also came. Week after week, Derek returned and eventually so did all the regulars.

Making Shabbat with this eclectic group was having an impact on the white supremacist. In time, the comfort level increased. The trust was established, and more serious conversations came around the table. The Shabbat guests engaged Derek with respect, while simultaneously challenging his views. Throughout the weeks, some guests sent articles and studies to Derek to disprove his theories. Derek opened his mind, read them, and interacted.

Derek began to question his core beliefs. He was confused about all the ideas he continually shared on his radio show and on the website. The more deeply he thought about his foundational values, the more he found himself disenchanted.

Years of dialogue, new found friendships, with a variety of people of different viewpoints, led to the significant statement Derek made after his graduation: a statement that would alienate him from his family, from his godfather David Duke, from his entire previous life.

Derek wrote the following: "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

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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."

The story of Derek's journey, and Matthew initiating it, is not something of the Talmud, of Hillel and Shammai. It is real life, every day, human interaction. It demonstrates that anything is possible, especially when we choose to engage the fool.

As my *chavruta* – study partner, Rabbi Michael Latz so beautifully instructs, "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 *teshuvah* is not only possible—it is necessary for society to function."<sup>12</sup>

This year, may we have the wisdom to see, really see, the situation with the "fools" we come across. Are they truly wicked or just ignorant? Am I able to engage, without becoming like them? Am I Shammai or Hillel in this moment? Could I be like the heroic Matthew Stevenson taking a chance and reaching out? Could I be like him, with the patience to walk through the slow path of meeting the other, and emerging on the other side?

What will I do when another speaks words that appear foolish or wicked this year? Can I be a partner in bringing *teshuvah* and healing?

May we each be wise in 5779 the next time, and there will certainly be a next time, we encounter the fool.

*Cein Yehi Ratzon*

*These words of Torah are humbly offered in the name of Dr. Christine Hayes. Who delivered the most inspiring talk on civility especially in the strains of foolish talk and behavior. Her teaching literally is being offered in a much edited and much less eloquent form. In addition, a todah rabah, I extend gratitude to Rabbi Michael Latz for guiding me to accept that the sharing of these words are appropriate to give in my community on Yom Kippur. Without his nudge, I wouldn't be offering this teach at this holy day season.*

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<sup>12</sup> Kol Nidre Drash 5779: Rabbi Michael Adam Latz of Shir Tikvah Congregation, September 18, 2018