



Parshat Mattot Maasei
Let's Lyft the Conversation
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I had a disconcerting Lyft experience the other day. It started off very pleasantly. As I was buckling my seat belt, the driver said with a smile, “hi, how are you? you know, this is my first day driving pero I been thinking about it for a long time. Pero, how are you?” He is chatty and pleasant. He speaks with a thick Spanish accent and there are times when I have trouble understanding exactly what he’s saying. Finally, I switch into Spanish. When he stops teasing me about hiding my Spanish for the last five minutes, he asks a seemingly innocent question. “So what about you? What do you do for work?”

“I’m a rabbi,” I say. “It’s like being a priest, except I work with Jews instead of Catholics and I can get married.”

He starts to laugh. With a big smile he says, “You’re Jewish?! Man, you guys are the reason this country is so messed up. You own the government. You have all the money. Must be nice.” Then he starts to laugh.

I’m instantly feeling cold and uncomfortable. What do you say when someone is so nice and so anti-Semitic at the same time? Years of pastoral training cue a line of curious questions.

“What makes you say that?” I ask.

“I don’t know,” he says, “That’s just what my father told me. I don’t need any proof or anything because I know he’s right.”

After a pause, I say, “you know, it scares me to hear you say that. That’s what they said in Europe before they killed 6 million of my people. Jews are a tiny percentage of the population here. They don’t own the government. They don’t have all the money. And when you say things like that, it makes me feel scared.”

In the rearview mirror, I can see him watching the road. I can’t tell what his expression is. There’s quiet in the car for a beat. To break the silence, I ask, “what do you think about the latest crack down on immigration?”

Immediately he answers, “I think it’s the best thing that’s ever happened to this country. I mean, if these people come in, they’ll ruin everything. They’re against American values. They’re terrorists. Pretty soon, they’ll overrun the country. You’ll see, if you let them in, in 20 or 30 years, there won’t be any white people left. It’ll be only Hispanics. And I’m Hispanic!”

Just then, Google maps interrupts us. “In four hundred feet, you will reach your destination.” That was it. That was the Lyft ride. He pulls up to my garage and says with a big smile, “it has been really nice talking with you. Can I give you my number? I usually work construction, but I really enjoyed talking with you and so if you ever need a ride, I could leave work to drive you wherever you need to go. I would really like to talk with you more.” I thanked him and assured him that I have his number through the app. And then, I walked away.

But the conversation left me reeling.

On the one hand, there was the blatant anti-Semitism. The blatant, weirdly pleasant anti-Semitism. Here was a guy who genuinely wanted to engage. He was cheery and affirming. He would like to keep talking. And, by the way, Jews are the reason the world is in trouble.

Increasingly, it is this kind of insidious hatred which animates our world. It's not overly threatening, not based on experience, and ostensibly not fueling anyone to do anything. It's just conversation. Just there. Vogue. Like wearing clashing colors and calling it high fashion or using offensive words in a rap song and calling it art. Don't get upset about it, our culture tells us, this is hip. It's free speech, man. If I hate on someone else, that should tell you I'm cool. It's how we connect.

Today, we don't worry about white-robed mobs lynching people in the streets. Instead, we hear people making off-color jokes and laughing while they spout friendly anti-Semitism. Our children walk into their school bathrooms to see swastikas carved on the doors. Our young adults arrive at college to be berated by groups which say Jews are the oppressors. Just this week, I met with a young adult who told me proudly that when he interviewed for his current company, he could even share that he was Jewish and talk about Israel! That is in 2018. He said that he didn't even apply for another company because he knows they don't employ anyone with a connection to Israel.

This type of hatred is insidious. It masks itself as friendly but has dire potential consequences. When we take it seriously, as we should, we are told that we are overreacting. That we are over-sensitive. (By the way, when people call you over-sensitive, usually it's code for "you are feeling something I don't want to acknowledge.") That's where we're at. That's where our world is at.

But I wasn't just troubled about the anti-Semitism that popped up in my Lyft conversation. Here is this driver who is willing to throw shade on anyone. Your people, my people—the object of hatred doesn't really matter. He is a Hispanic immigrant, hating on

Hispanic immigrants. He told me his parents came to this country seeking asylum. He was born here by sheer luck. And yet, he thinks we should keep everyone like his parents out.

How can this man sit there and hate on his own people? I mean, I loathe the anti-Semitism, but in some ways it's easier to process than the seeming hatred he has for his own people.

And while it's tempting to say that this is just some crazy person driving Lyft, the truth is we too struggle with the pattern of unconsciously spewing hateful words, especially at ourselves. Recently, one of my students came in visibly upset. She told me that she was making fat jokes about herself in school. "I mean," she said, "it's ok when I do it because I'm talking about my body. I have a right to say whatever I want." But then, her friends started repeating what she was saying. That hurt. And then, worst of all, a guy in her class took a picture of her, superimposed the image of a whale, and then sent that image out via snapchat. Ouch!

We talked about how inappropriate it was for this student to take the picture of her and send this offensive message. We wrote a letter to her principal, to her guidance counselor, and to her teacher to get her the support and resolution she needed. And then I turned to her. "What these students did and said about you is not ok. And, you can't throw shade on yourself and expect other people to be nicer to you than you are. You have to treat yourself with at least as much kindness as you want others to treat you with."

How often do we disparage ourselves without even realizing it? With all the vile hate-filled speech that we hear on a regular basis, we've become inured to the destructive power of our words. We think that hate speech is going on out there, unrelated to us. We don't realize that

when we put ourselves down, we are participating in the very same pattern of hate which has caused harm throughout history.

Words have power. That's why freedom of speech matters. That's why Judaism teaches that God created the world through speech. God said "let there be light," "let there be animals." God did not just make the light and the animals and the plants. Just as God spoke the world into being, we have the power to shape the world around us through our words.

When I was living in Israel, I learned a profound bit of Torah from my teacher Rabbi Ruth Gan Kagan. She pointed out that since Hebrew is written without vowels, sometimes a word can be pronounced in multiple ways. For example, the book of Torah we finished today, written bet, mem, daled, bet, reish. Traditionally, bamidbar—in the wilderness. But, you could also pronounce it bam'daber. In speech.

Ok, that's very nice, you might be thinking, but who cares. "In speech" or "in the desert." That doesn't speak to me. Except that it does. You see, the distinction here is what you say and how you say it. When you speak in one way, we're all stranded in the desert. Not in Egypt, but not in Israel either. Stuck. But when you speak in a different way, in a more conscious way, then we get to engage in potentially transformative conversation with one another. Then we get to create another world together, just like God did when God spoke the world into being.

Ultimately, we can be down about hatred and anti-Semitism, or we can do our part to lift up the conversation by asking questions of genuine curiosity, speaking up, guarding our own speech, and speaking words of blessing. Whether we are stranded in the wilderness or engaged in transformative conversation is up to us. So here's my question for you today: what will you say?