

R H 2nd Day—You Don't Throw People Away

Rabbi Bill Berk

The two Torah portions for Rosh Hashanah tell stories that cut to the heart of personal, family life. They both involve a father who tries to get rid of his son. Abraham tries to kill Isaac and he throws Ishmael and his mother Hagar out into the desert with one meager skin of water. It turns out that much of the book of Genesis focuses on one recurring theme—people keep trying to throw people away. Isaac and Rebecca try to throw Esau away. Jacob's sons literally throw Joseph away. Over and over in the opening book of our Bible we have this surprising theme—people get thrown away. What's most surprising is that we are never quite sure what the Bible wants us to think about it. Is it a good thing or a bad thing? I mean Abraham is not only the father of our people but he is one of the biggest heroes of all time. What is he doing? What is he thinking? What is the Torah's message? Is the Torah trying to tell us something—does it want us to be disturbed by Abraham or proud of him? On the surface it's not clear. But if you dig deep enough into our tradition you find, I think, that the ambivalence we detect here is not sustained. Deep in the heart of the tradition there is a move against this all too pervasive behavior. Our tradition is crying out to us—you don't throw people away.

We find this move at the end of the book of Genesis. At the end of Genesis Joseph and Judah manage to save the family. No one is thrown away. That's the climax of Genesis. Joseph manages to convince the brothers that they all must get over it. The family is too important.

We find this move in the midrash. There's a debate in the Talmud about how we should handle the Torah's law about the mamzer, the bastard, that is born out of wedlock or as a result of an adulterous union. According to a strict reading of Biblical law the mamzer is to be totally rejected—no Jew can marry the mamzer. He faces a life of rejection and potential loneliness. He's not allowed into the community. Rabbi Judah and Rabbi Meir argue the issue in the Gemara. The ancient midrash, Leviticus Rabba, comes along and tells us the following:

There was a certain Daniel the tailor who commented on a verse from Ecclesiastes which reads—I returned and considered all the oppressions. Daniel the tailor interpreted the verse as applying to bastards. "And behold the tears of the oppressed"—if the parents of these bastards committed transgressions, what concern is it of these poor sufferers? So also if this man's father slept with a forbidden woman, what sin has he himself committed and what concern is it of his? And these bastards had no one to comfort them. And on the side of their oppressors there was power—this means on the side of Israel's Great Sanhedrin which comes to them with the power derived from the Torah and removes them from the community. "A bastard shall not enter the assembly of the Lord"—And they had no comforter! Amar hakadosh baruch hu, alai lenachman—says the Holy One blessed be He, "It shall be My task to comfort them."

Let me translate this midrash. The whole Jewish people are throwing away the children of adults who misbehaved. This throwing away is backed by the legal Torah authorities in the person of the Great Sanhedrin. The greatest of the rabbis are sealing the verdict and insisting that these people are to be thrown away. And God says—I will not throw them away.

We are living through an epidemic of people getting thrown away. During the Great Recession, 8 and a half million people were thrown away by their employers. When I was rabbi here at Temple Chai I saw over and over again fathers, mothers, grandparents, children, grandchildren, siblings, and friends thrown away by people with good manners and good education and righteous thoughts. A typical true story from my counseling here at Temple Chai—this story is current—there has been no change. A mom

was close to her son. A few years after his marriage tension grew in the relationship. A grandson was born. One day the son emails his mom and tells her that she won't be able to see her grandson anymore. And just like that a grandmother, a mom, a woman, a tzelem elohim is thrown away. I can name 3 other Temple Chai families where the exact same thing has happened. I can name 4 Temple Chai Dads who never got to see their kids again after a divorce. For most of us, fortunately, the stories are not so dramatic. But every one of us recognizes the dynamic—every one of us has been thrown away by somebody and every one of us has thrown someone away. In America today we have gotten better at recycling plastic than we are at recycling people—instead we just throw them away. We see the political rhetoric in our country grown more strident—people in congress used to be able to go out after a strong debate and have a drink and relax together and laugh and tell jokes and not let tough politics get in the way of relationships. My cousin Mark Ginsberg is one of the top officials in the U.S. Energy Department and he travels regularly to China and India and deals there with the top leadership on issues related to energy and the environment. He told me this past summer that the leaders of China and India look to the United States for leadership. They want America's leadership. And they are worried. They are worried because when they look at the political and social fabric of this country they see it fraying. Congress can't do anything. Everybody's so right they don't mind throwing away their opponents. They certainly don't have to deal with them.

As Jews we know a lot about what it feels like to be thrown away. We're the original disposable people. Got a problem with the economy? Throw the Jews away. Got a problem with social unity—throw the Jews away. We should know better than anybody that ultimately you don't solve any problem by throwing somebody away. What is at the heart of this issue? What's the root of it? I'm not sure. Insecurity? Deep fear of abandonment? Better I should get rid of him before he gets rid of me? Self-hate? Lack of inner peace? Simple hatred. Take your pick. One thing I do know is that Jewish culture doesn't like it. Ever since the Egyptians tried to throw our boy babies away we haven't been very partial to it. Its interesting in Israel, with a stronger sense of what I call michpachtiyut, you don't see as much of this as you do in America. When you do see it, chances are good somebody is trying hard to do something about it. This summer I stood in a demonstration along with 400,000 other Israelis to protest rising housing prices and the growing difficulties faced by Israel's young and poor. That's the equivalent of 26 million Americans coming out on one day to make their voices heard. In Israel right now there's a loud outcry saying—we don't want anybody thrown away.

A few of you have heard a story I told last year. I visited Yamin Orde Youth Village run by one of Israel's great heroes Chaim Perri. They have taken orphans in ever since the first wave of Holocaust orphans arrived in the early nineteen fifties. Today most of the 500 kids there are from Ethiopia and Russia. So there was this Russian Jewish kid whose Dad ran away to Israel and whose mom died when he was about 10 years old. The Russian authorities placed him in Yemin Orde Youth Village. Now Yemine Orde doesn't believe in throwing anybody away. So they took in this orphan and took good care of him till he was 18 years old. They not only fed him good food they fed him a past, they taught him where he came from, they taught him Jewish values and Jewish law and Jewish customs, holidays. He learned the history of the Jewish people. When he turned 18 he signed up for a prestigious elite fighting unit in the Israeli Army. In order to get in this unit you need the approval of your parents. The IDF found out that his Dad was still alive and living in Haifa. So a social worker from the youth village took this young man to meet his father and to get his father's signature on the army's permission slip. So they went to Haifa and rang the bell on the door of his father's apartment. The father opened the door and took one look at the boy and realized who he was and slammed the door closed. The social worker rang the bell again and the door opened and the social worker explained what they needed and the father slammed the door again. They returned empty handed to Yemin Orde. On the way the social

worker phoned Chaim Perri and told him what happened. Chaim rushed to be by the side of the young man when he arrived. Needless to say he was worried that the boy probably had his feelings shattered. The boy looked at Chaim Perri and said, “lo nora—its not a big deal—you see, he’s just a blip on the radar screen. I know where I come from. I come from Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and Sarah and Rebecca and Rachel and Leah. I come from Moses and Rabbi Akiva and the Rambam. I come from 4,000 years of people who tried to bring a little light into the world.” They managed to get the army’s approval to accept him and he serves today proudly in the IDF. His home is Yemine Orde and he knows that no one there will ever ever throw him away.

When I was a kid we had a relative that got on everybody’s nerves and who had been harsh with my parents. I remember asking my mom why we had to go visit this relative. My mom said, “We don’t throw people away.” For her it was like the 614th commandment. It was something to live by. In her memory and honor I want to suggest that we take this commandment seriously. Imagine families that find a way to stay together. Imagine divorced couples insisting that they find a way to speak civilly and compassionately to one another. Imagine friends who refuse to throw each other away. Imagine more tolerance and love in our lives. Imagine an enlightened form of capitalism where firing people is rare. Imagine a strong enough safety net so that if people do go down it won’t be so scary. Imagine a politics of respect where we don’t demonize our opponents. Sounds pretty messianic. Sounds like the time of redemption. How ridiculously impractical—and not only that— too expensive. Who wants to pay for a gentler capitalism?

I do. I live in a country where the norm is Yemin Orde Youth Village. I live in a Jewish country where no politician would dream of changing our medical system where everybody is taken care of. No one has to worry about having medical coverage. Our taxes may be high in Israel but nobody is thrown away.

Our tradition is unyielding on this point. The Talmud tells us the story of the most rejected of rabbis, Elisha ben Abulya. He was rejected because he rejected Judaism. The rejection was so complete that the rabbis gave him the nick name of “Acher,” which means, the Other. That’s in fact how they referred to him. He was the hated other. He was completely ostracized. One rabbi, the great Rabbi Meir, would go and learn with him. Acher had been his teacher in the past and Rabbi Meir continued to go to him. This enraged the other rabbis who confronted Rabbi Meir—How can you be with him? Don’t you realize he is an apostate? Don’t you realize he doesn’t believe in God or God’s justice? Don’t you realize he has dropped out of our people? How could you have anything to do with him? Rabbi Meir responded simply, “He’s my teacher. To me he is a pomegranate. I take the fruit and I don’t eat the peeling.”

To those we hate, to those who have disappointed us, to those who have betrayed us, to those who we just don’t like, to those we can no longer tolerate—may we find some way to take the fruit, to appreciate the fruit, and to put the peeling away. If we can’t do that, may we at least be able to pray for them—to ask God’s blessings for them—so that at least the Creator of the Universe will know that some one loves His children.