

Why do we Learn

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As I bent over to pick up my son's bowl for the 10th time, I sighed. "Micah," I wondered, "Why can't you just leave your bowl on the table? Why do you have to throw it on the ground?" As I think back to that stage of his life, I can't help but smile. In part because my exasperation led to nothing but a goofy toothless grin from Micah.

But also because it reminded me of how kids learn. Every child behaves like a little scientist: constantly running experiments to understand how the world works. Researchers believe that Micah threw that cup down 10 times to test: how gravity works, where the cup would land, and most importantly how many times I was going to bend down and pick it up!

When we're young, we have everything to learn, so much so that even watching a bowl fall to the ground can teach us something. It makes me wonder: What if we could forever look at the world as if it were a space that radically amazes and entices us? What if we

always had that same level of **unbridled curiosity**, that unyielding impulse to learn? What would it mean for us?

Pirkei Avot teaches: *Aizehu Chacham? Halomed m'kol Adam.*¹ Who is wise? The person who learns from everyone. I don't know about you, but there are times when this axiom, is incredibly hard to live by. What can we possibly learn from people we disagree with or don't share our worldview? Or who simply bore us to tears?

I don't know if you've heard of Derek Black. He has many infamous relatives: his father, Don Black, who started Stormfront, the first major white nationalist website and host of regular radio show, and his godfather, notorious former KKK Grand Wizard, David Duke.

But I want to tell you about Derek, a young man who was carefully groomed to become the next leader of the white nationalist movement.² Homeschooled, and indoctrinated in his family's white supremacist views, Derek was given every opportunity to become the leader they wanted. Until he went to a liberal arts college in Florida. When he first arrived, he figured the easiest way to be ostracised was to espouse white nationalist views, so for his first semester he kept it all to himself. Derek tried to be anonymous on campus while still calling in to his father's radio show.

¹ Pirkei Avot 4:1

²BLACK, R. DEREK. "Why I Left White Nationalism." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 26 Nov. 2016, www.nytimes.com/2016/11/26/opinion/sunday/why-i-left-white-nationalism.html.

As he was leaving for winter break, his secret came out: his face and his hateful ideology were plastered all over the college message board. An intense backlash followed with fellow students posting: “[Derek Black] chooses to be a racist public figure. We choose to call him a racist in public.” And, “I just want this guy to die a painful death along with his entire family. Is that too much to ask?”

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After that, Derek avoided public spaces, and people in general, until he got a text from a young Jewish student named Matthew Stevenson asking: “What are you doing Friday night?”⁴ Matthew had read all of Derek’s message boards that claimed: “Jews are NOT white.” “Jews worm their way into power over our society.” “They must go.”⁵

But Matthew wondered: what if we include Derek instead of revile him? What if we spoke honestly and earnestly instead of throwing stones? So Derek accepted the invitation and joined them for Shabbat dinner. And then another. Months went by where Shabbat after Shabbat, Derek had an opportunity to meet the people

³Saslow, Eli. “The White Flight of Derek Black.” *Washingtonpost.com*, The Washington Post, 15 Oct. 2015,

https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/the-white-flight-of-derek-black/2016/10/15/ed5f906a-8f3b-11e6-a6a3-d50061aa9fae_story.html?utm_term=.873de3e4c77f.

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ *ibid.*

he had publicly reviled. As he later said: “[T]he “...person-to-person interactions ...[that required]... a lot of honest listening on both sides [changed me]. For me, the conversations that led me to change my views started because I couldn’t understand why anyone would fear me. I thought I was only doing what was right and defending those I loved.”⁶

Derek’s definition of “what was right” changed irrevocably--not through violence, hate, or yelling, but because he was met with an outstretched hand and words of welcome from a young Jewish college student. His last public words before being disavowed by his father and family, were written to the Southern Poverty Law Center, where he said: “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.”⁷ All that came from his openness to learning from everyone.

Derek’s family--his godfather David Duke, and his father--continue to make morally repugnant choices every day. I believe that their words and actions are heinous. They stain our

⁶BLACK, R. DEREK. “Why I Left White Nationalism.” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 26 Nov. 2016, www.nytimes.com/2016/11/26/opinion/sunday/why-i-left-white-nationalism.html.

⁷ Saslow, Eli. “The White Flight of Derek Black.” *Washingtonpost.com*, The Washington Post, 15 Oct. 2015,

https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/the-white-flight-of-derek-black/2016/10/15/ed5f906a-8f3b-11e6-a6a3-d50061aa9fae_story.html?utm_term=.873de3e4c77f.

country. But the **moment** we say that we can learn nothing from our honest interactions with them, the **moment** we say such people are irredeemable and damned, in that **moment** we step away from our Jewish tradition. Our faith teaches that each of us, even those whose behavior is despicable, are made in the divine image. When we demonize the other, we fail to see the divine spark within them. We stop learning from them, and we close ourselves off to possible connections and opportunities for growth.

Never claim you have Absolute Truth. That's one of the most important and impactful things I learned from Rabbi Dr. Michael Chernick, my Talmud professor when I was in rabbinical school. Dr. Chernick believes that we humans are limited. We cannot know the Truth with a capital T because we can never really understand all the perspectives surrounding it. In every one of our sacred texts, (as Rabbi Blake taught us last night) we make sure to preserve minority opinions, because we know how important divergent voices are. Different ideas and different traditions exist side by side, all refracting a part of the truth, but never claiming an absolute understanding of it.

In that moment of learning, I was filled with excitement, a sense of exuberance in learning something new. All too often that

feeling is lost here in our building. How many of us have heard the kvetch: “Mom, don’t send me to Hebrew School, I hate it!” “Dad: why do I need to go!” As my mom Linda in the X row can attest, I know I said it **more** than once. My children, of course love coming here; Benji can’t wait for the first day in Sharing Shabbat next week! There is more than a little irony in the fact that I now run our Jewish education program: who would have thought this Hebrew school dropout would be running our program at WRT? Yet hindsight is 20/20: at the time, I was stuck, I didn’t understand why I was there. Why did I even need to learn?

23 years ago, Rabbi Jacobs stood here and said: “We are ending Religious School as we know it.”⁸ WRT entered the vanguard of Jewish education: we started Sharing Shabbat a program that has inspired congregations throughout the country. We continued to invest in our post-B’nei Mitzvah learning, and particularly our 10th grade Confirmation experience, which helps so many of our teens find their Jewish voices in a turbulent world. We have created countless moments for parents and families to be learners, and to challenge, as Rabbi Jacobs put it, the “dropoff culture” that assumes we will just fill our kids up with “Jewish gas,” which will fuel them for the rest of their lives.

⁸ Ending Religious School as we Know it, Rabbi Richard Jacobs, Westchester Reform Temple Rosh Hashanah 5753

Today, almost a quarter-century later, we continue that legacy of reimagining Religious School, as we launch the Jewish Learning Lab, a new name with a compelling new mission: to create an environment full of experimentation that kindles a lifelong engagement in Jewish learning, creating enduring and joyful Jewish memories, bringing Torah to life, and inspiring Jewish dreams. We are excited to take our first steps in this massive change this fall. I look forward to sharing our successes and changes in the months to come.

Remember the last time you learned something new? That rush of adrenaline, that "aha" moment? There is joy in learning when you're open to it and that wonderful feeling is crucial to why we learn. John Coleman of the Harvard Business Review puts it beautifully: "Our capacity for learning is a cornerstone of human flourishing and motivation...And even if ...[learning]... had no impact on health, prosperity, or social standing, it would be entirely worthwhile as an expression of what makes every person so special and unique."⁹

But learning does have an impact on our health: it actually helps us stay alive and blossom. The relatively new concept of **neuroplasticity**, demonstrates that our brain is constantly

⁹Coleman, John. "Lifelong Learning Is Good for Your Health, Your Wallet, and Your Social Life." *Harvard Business Review*, 17 May 2017, hbr.org/2017/02/lifelong-learning-is-good-for-your-health-your-wallet-and-your-social-life.

changing, and has the capacity to adapt far into adulthood, something our Jewish tradition has always known. Pirkei Avot describes our development past childhood:

At fifty, one is prepared to give wise counsel.

At sixty, one is given the deference of seniority.

At seventy, one is considered a sage.

Eighty is the age of heroic strength.¹⁰

None of this would be possible if we weren't emotionally invested in learning at each moment, willing to grow into the next stage. Dr. Lisa Feldman Barrett takes this a step further, and argues that learning is our fountain of youth. She has been studying "Superagers'...[**senior citizens**] whose memory and attention isn't merely above average for their age, but is actually on par with healthy, active 25-year-olds."¹¹ I often think about my grandmother Zelma, who swam every day until she was 92. She isn't afraid of her computer, uses email regularly and the internet as much as she can and always has a book in her hand. Throughout her life she taught English to people new to our country who in turn taught her some of their many languages. To top it all off, whenever she goes to the hospital she comes back smiling because everyone tells her how

¹⁰ Pirkei Avot 5:22

¹¹ Barrett, Lisa Feldman. "Opinion | How to Become a 'Superager'." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 31 Dec. 2016, www.nytimes.com/2016/12/31/opinion/sunday/how-to-become-a-superager.html?mcubz=0.

young she looks. All of this is in line with Dr. Barrett's research: we need to strengthen our minds throughout our lives.

Dr. Denise Park, a neuroscientist at the University of Texas recently studied 200 seniors to understand how different types of learning affected their overall mental health.

"Park's research...showed that not all activities are created equal. Only people who learned a new skill had significant gains...The greatest improvement was for the people who learned digital photography and Photoshop — perhaps, Park says, because it was the most difficult."¹²

When we stagnate, we decline. When we challenge ourselves, we grow. I think one of the keys to learning at any stage is be like Micah and throw the bowl -- to be a little bit silly, a little bit vulnerable, and to test the limits.

Of course learning is not always a bed of roses. Ecclesiastes teaches that: For as wisdom grows, vexation grows; To increase Learning is to increase heartache,¹³ because many times the more we learn, the more we realize how powerless we are in the face of life's challenges. Sometimes ignorance can be bliss.

¹²Silverman, Lauren. "Learning A New Skill Works Best To Keep Your Brain Sharp." *NPR*, NPR, 5 May 2014, www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2014/05/05/309006780/learning-a-new-skill-works-best-to-keep-our-brain-sharp.

¹³ Kohelet 1:18

The more I learn about climate science, the more I feel I may be dooming my children to a world in peril.

The more I learn what's happening in Washington, the more anxious I feel about what tomorrow will bring.

The more I learn about the fate we all share, our own mortality, the more I want to ensure that I'm never stagnant in this brief gift of life, and that I make every moment count.

The more I learn, the more I recognize that learning isn't easy. Then again, nothing worthwhile ever is. There are many stumbling blocks that stand between us and our learning, but our capacity to move past them is what makes it worth all the effort.

In other words, if we aren't learning and continuing to grow throughout our lives, we aren't truly living.¹⁴ The moment we say we have nothing left to learn is the moment we prepare for our lives to end. Yom Kippur presents that choice, between life and death. As we read this morning/will read tomorrow morning:

This day, I call heaven and earth to
witness regarding you: life and
death I have set before you, blessing

הַעֲדֹתַי בְּכֶם הַיּוֹם אֶת־הַשָּׁמַיִם
וְאֶת־הָאָרֶץ הַחַיִּים וְהַמּוֹת נָתַתִּי

¹⁴ This postulation is based on John Dewey's argument in *Education & Experience*, chapter 4; <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~hyper2/dewey/ch04.html>; where he suggests that Growth is the key purpose of education: and growth is intended to continue throughout our lives.

and curse. Choose life--so that you
and your children may live--¹⁵

לְפָנֶיךָ הַבְּרָכָה וְהַקְּלָלָה וּבַחֲרֹתַי
בְּחַיִּים לְמַעַן תִּחְיֶה אֶתְּהָ וְזָרְעֶךָ:

Every aspect of this day reminds us of our own mortality: the open ark, empty of Torah scrolls, shows us what our own coffin might look like. We avoid most of what sustains us: eating, drinking, loving, working, and cleaning ourselves. We wear white, reminiscent of the burial shroud. Yet throughout it all, there remain two small reminders of life: the air we breathe, and the chance to learn something new: both call us to choose life.

The word “Torah” means instruction or teaching. It has been venerated and celebrated by Jews for thousands of years. When we return the Torah to the ark, we proclaim: *Eits chayim hi lamachazikim ba, Vetomecheha me-ushar*: The Torah is a tree of life to those that hold fast to it, and to hold close to it, is to be happy.¹⁶ Has each of us found our way to life-giving learning? Have we challenged ourselves recently to learn something new? Wherever we are on that journey we, your clergy, are ready to be your partners: from our Adult Education offerings, to Torah study, to the Jewish Learning Lab, to sitting down and learning from each other.

¹⁵ Deuteronomy 30:19 translation: Mishkan HaNefesh

¹⁶ Proverbs, 3:18

Judaism is a living tradition. It lives within each of us, to be passed on to the next generation. The writers of Torah, the compilers of Talmud, the creators of Jewish legal codes, have all taken this ancient faith, learned from it, and made it their own, so that we might pass it on to our children.

Martin Buber articulated this beautifully: "... A generation can only receive the teachings in the sense that it renews them. We do not take unless we also give... what matters is that time and again an older generation, staking its entire existence on that act, comes to a younger with the desire to teach, waken and shape it; then the holy spark leaps across the gap."¹⁷

When Micah's bowl fell to the ground, and I picked it back up again, he learned more than the laws of physics. We both learned the wisdom of a fallen bowl. Inside that lesson Micah, was the implicit promise that I will always be there not just to help you pick up your bowl, but to help you through life.

Both of my sons, Benji and Micah are full of unspoken questions which are an invitation to a lifelong conversation. I hope they will discover that each moment, from the banal to the sublime, is a moment for learning, as long as we're all open to it.

¹⁷Buber, Martin. *Israel and the World; Essays in a Time of Crisis*. Schocken Books, 1963, p. 139.