



WHERE ALL PEOPLE CAN BE SAFE

I went to school in an ethnically diverse setting, in Independent School District 197 Dakota County, in Minnesota: there were both Swedes *and* Norwegians. Scandinavians being a generally enlightened people -- the bizarre anti-Semitism of their governments and press notwithstanding -- it may be surprising to know that there was some level of intolerance and bullying on the playground and in the schools where I grew up. Well, maybe there was a reason they had to leave Scandinavia.

One of the mean names kids called each other in grade school was “faggot.” Of course, none of us knew what it meant, until one student looked it up in the dictionary and reported that it means “a bundle of sticks.” That seemed a really stupid name to call someone and so it was dropped. For a short while it was fashionably cruel to call someone a woman – “You woman!” – but when a playmate named Wanda responded to such a taunt by saying incredulously and without a sense of having been wronged, “Yeah, well, I am a girl you know,” no one could quite figure out why that was supposed to be an insult and it quickly disappeared from the schoolyard lexicon.

Given my family name, I could pass as either a Swede or Norwegian (since the difference between “Tilson” and

“Tilsen” was inaudible), and so for that reason I was pretty rarely harassed or subject to bullying. Although I was probably one of the more involved and “public” Jews among my contemporaries, many of the other kids in school might not have even recognized my true minority status, although my dark coloring did make me stand out. I of course never engaged in the childhood cruelty of name calling, although I did some pretty mean things I now regret, but we won’t go into that. I prefer to remember myself as the Champion of the Oppressed and Defender of Decency.

Now things are different. When a sixth grader says to another, in the most off-handed fashion possible, “I’m going to blow your head off,” he or she is likely to be suspended or expelled, if not face criminal charges. Back in my day, one of my friends, when I annoyed her, used to threaten to rip out my gizzard, but seeing that I don’t to my knowledge have a gizzard, it’s hard to guess how the authorities would deal with such a case today. The rule, though, is to err on the side of caution – and err they do – and treat such statements as real threats.

It is even worse than that. The playground taunt or insult can be posted on YouTube or Facebook, an apt application of the expression “going viral” inasmuch as a virus is

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something generally considered harmful.

It turns out that there is a continuum of badness in insults and threats. Even threats that are not literal or “credible” are harmful. In recent years, insults, taunts, photo exposés and other cruelties that have been spread on the “social media” have led to suicides and other tragedies. Local and national media have reported on “suicide caused by Facebook taunts,” “Texas woman Twitters and Lands in Jail,” and the “Webcam suicide case” at Rutgers.

It is critical to our mission that BEKI be a place where all people can be safe from insults, threats, harassment and embarrassment. This can be a challenge when youth, who attend a variety of schools and camps, each with its own culture, come together on Shabbat and Festivals and in Youth Group (USY and Kadima) activities, without exception wonderful and decent children, each one above average. School can be rough for some kids and they deserve a place to be safe; and kids who come from safe and protected environments should not have to face verbal or emotional violence or bullying in the synagogue.

Nor should they have to see kids at BEKI who harass them elsewhere. Being victimized does not “prepare them for the real world”; it teaches them that other Jewish kids can be cruel, undermines their trust that the community can be safe and nurturing, and drives them away from Torah.

“I was only kidding” is not an acceptable excuse for taunts, teases, torments, ridicule, disrespect and bullying. “I didn’t mean it” doesn’t remove the damage. “He deserved

it” is not a justification. “I never thought that *this* would happen” – not knowing what “minor” teasing might lead to in the end – is not a defense. In some cases, the perpetrators live with a lifetime of guilt or a criminal record; and occasionally they get killed by their victims who react more strongly than anticipated to the insult or abuse. As one of

our sages said, “Whoever embarrasses another person is like one who sheds blood” (Talmud Baba Metsia 58b).

Halakha (Jewish law) specifically prohibits speech and action that can cause embarrassment, shame or fear in another person. A single joke, prank or slight may be a violation of one or more laws, such as the prohibition against tale-bearing and slander (*rekhilut* and *lashon ha-ra*), the rule against endangering one’s life (*hishamer*), the prohibition against oppressing others (*al tonu*), the rule against desecrating God’s name (*hillul ha-Shem*), and the requirement to love one’s neighbor (*ve-ahavta le-re’ekha*), among others. It makes a mockery of Torah and of Judaism.

As Jews, we are especially admonished to be sensitive to foreigners, for we were “foreigners in the land of Egypt”; and we are told to be consider-

ate of the needs and sentiments of those who are vulnerable or oppressed, the “orphan and widow.”

As Rabbi Elazar haModa’I said, “Whoever embarrasses another person, even if he is learned and accomplished, has no share in the coming world” (Avot 3:11). This is why our sages said, “It is better to throw yourself into a fiery furnace than to publicly embarrass another person” (Talmud Baba Metsia 58b).

