

Rosh Hashanah 5781
A Football Player's Wisdom for Racial Justice
Rabbi Alex Freedman

Shanah Tovah!

In this season of making confessions, I admit that I didn't expect to learn wisdom from a football player. Two months ago, I read a story about two football players which made me cringe, then cheer.

The month of July saw many rallies and protests in support of racial justice in the aftermath of the George Floyd murder. Against this backdrop, a Philadelphia Eagles player named DeSean Jackson posted some highly offensive anti-semitic remarks on Instagram. In response, a player for the New England Patriots posted a video of his own. Julian Edelman is a star wide receiver who is also proudly Jewish.

I'm going to share much of Edelman's message to Jackson because it contains wisdom for all of us:

“I have seen DeSean play in his career. I have nothing but respect for his game. I know he said some ugly things, but I do see an opportunity to have a conversation.

“I am proud of my Jewish heritage. For me, it is not just about religion. It is about community and culture as well. I am unusual because I didn't identify as Jewish until later in my life. It was only after I was part of this community that I learned how destructive hate is. Anti-Semitism is one of the oldest forms of hatred. It's rooted in ignorance and fear.

“There is no room for anti-Semitism in this world. Even though we're talking about anti-Semitism, I don't want to distract from how important the Black Lives Matter movement is and how we need to stay behind it. I think the Black and Jewish communities have a lot of similarities.

“One, an unfortunate similarity is that they are both attacked by the ignorant and the hateful. It's really hard to see the challenges a community can face when you're not a part of it. So what we

need to do is, we need to listen. We need to learn. And we need to act. We need to have these uncomfortable conversations if we're going to have real change.

“So to that end, DeSean, let's do a deal. How about we go to D.C. and I take you to the Holocaust Museum and then you take me to the Museum of African American History and Culture? Afterwards, we'll grab some burgers and we'll have those uncomfortable conversations.

“This world needs a little more love, compassion and empathy. Take care.”

I share this today because I think Edelman sets a positive model for us in the Jewish community too. All across this wonderful country, 2020 saw a renewed focus on racial justice. While there are no longer nightly protests in most places, the conversations about racial equality and progress continue. As they should. When we ask the natural question, “So where do we go from here?” Edelman provides us with a direction.

These words are his most impactful: “We need to listen. We need to learn. And we need to act. We need to have these uncomfortable conversations if we're going to have real change.” (End quote).

We need to *listen*: only by listening can we deeply understand.

We have to *learn*: there's so much we don't know about the experiences of Black Americans and others beyond our own community.

We need to *act*: this is how ideas become real.

And we must *have uncomfortable conversations*: this is how we grow. I think he means for us to ask honest questions that may make us vulnerable. We must open ourselves to being somewhat uncomfortable because we can then better understand others.

Additionally, conversations are the best way to share our own experiences as Jews and human beings. We're not to yell, not to rant, not to have a monologue. Instead, conversations allow us to

listen and respond, listen and respond. Our Jewish DNA tells us this is how the Talmud is organized. And our human DNA tells us this is how our best relationships deepen.

(As an aside, now to his credit - after making his offensive posts, Jackson himself apologized and is educating himself, to the satisfaction of his team's Jewish owner).

Julian Edelman provides a map for both individuals and communities to follow. I'm excited that at Beth El, we are committing ourselves to a similar theme, a series of conversations with and about others. The theme that will animate many of our programs in the year ahead will be "Love your neighbor as yourself. *V'Ahavta L'reacha Kamoha.*" As you know, these words come directly from the Torah. Over the course of different events, programs, and speakers, we will learn more about those living with us and alongside us. This includes a focus on the Black community and beyond. This will highlight racial justice but extend past that too. Our staff and lay leadership are enthusiastic about making this lasting commitment. Sometimes it's easy to drive around town looking straight ahead. But we cannot forget that when we do that, we pass by many others who live here too.

This brings me to make another confession: In this area of interacting with people of different races and ethnicities, I have limited opportunities. Living here in Highland Park and similarly in New Jersey, I interact almost exclusively with the Jewish community, which is almost entirely white. The people in this Jewish community are the faces I see each day, so I have to make more of an effort to reach out more to those outside this community. When I attended public high school, it was easy to do this because my school had plenty of racial and ethnic diversity. Beth El does not, which means that I have more work to do. After the holidays I plan to reach out to a Black pastor to have an open conversation about racial justice.

For me, racial justice is partly a top-down issue, where we should encourage our leaders to change certain laws in order to make things more fair and equitable for all people. Equally so, racial justice is a bottom-up issue, where the more interactions people have with those of other races, the tighter knit our society fabric becomes.

I really believe this is the Torah's desire. I wish to share an insight from Rabbi Jonathan Sacks and then expand it. Because before we can act, we should first understand.

We don't have to read very far in the Torah to see what G-d considers "good-*to*v." The word appears seven times in the opening chapter alone. Basically, after each day G-d evaluates the

day's act of creation and deems it to be good - "*Vayar Elokim Ki Tov.*" So that's a lot of goodness! There are only two times in the Torah that something is considered "not good - *Lo Tov.*" The first is taken from the creation story, where G-d sees Adam by himself. G-d says, "*Lo Tov Heyot Haadam Levado* - It is not good for man to be alone" (Gn. 2:18). To fill this social absence, G-d then creates Eve. Rabbi Sacks concludes, it's not good *to live alone.*

The second example comes from the Book of Exodus. After the Jews have left Egypt, Moses discovers that he spends all day listening to the people's questions and cases and solving their problems. Kind of like being a rabbi! (Just kidding). His father-in-law Yitro sees this and cautions against it. Yitro says to Moses, "*Lo Tov Hadavar Asher Atah Oseh* - The thing you are doing is not good" (Ex. 18:17). Instead, Moses should delegate in order to spare himself the burden of being the only decision-maker, and to spare the Jews the long waits in line. Rabbi Sacks concludes, it's not good *to lead alone.* Now let's put these two halves together: We should *not live alone,* and we should *not lead alone.*

I want to take another interpretive step. The context of the first example, about Adam and Eve, is that *individuals* need companionship in a life partner. But I think we can expand this to the realm of *communities.* No community should self-isolate and live alone. Communities enrich the world when they show the world what makes them unique. And communities strengthen themselves when they take in the best of what others have to offer. The Jewish community and the Black community each stand strong individually. But we are stronger when we interact with each other and learn from each other.

As for the second example, about Moses and Yitro, that context is about an *individual* leading the nation from the top. I want to expand this idea too to the level of *communities.* No community can most effectively lead alone. Every community is stronger when it finds common cause with and partners with other communities. The Jewish community and the Black community each stand strong by themselves. But we are stronger when we support each other and when we stand up to protect each other.

Let's return to Edelman's message: "We need to listen. We need to learn. And we need to act. We need to have these uncomfortable conversations if we're going to have real change. This world needs a little more love, compassion and empathy." Team up with Beth El's "Love Your Neighbor" campaign this year as we do the above together to improve different forms of justice in our society.

And here's how you as an individual can follow Edelman's lead:

Listen - Get to know people of different races and ethnicities in your workplace or neighborhood. Hear their perspectives.

Learn - Educate yourself about the realities of life for Black people. If you have Netflix or the like, watch movies and shows that highlight these experiences, like "When They See Us" or "13th."

Act - Expand opportunities for people of color in your company, school, or community. Barriers unfairly hold some people back, so speak up to give them a boost.

Finally, have uncomfortable conversations - Consider having a conversation with a Black person about things that are important but difficult to talk about. Or, just watch one. Former Chicago Bears player Sam Acho has a brother who also played pro football. Now Emmanuel Acho, who is Black, hosts a series of Youtube videos called "Uncomfortable Conversations With a Black Man" where he discusses these hard-to-talk-about topics with different white guests. I saw a ten-minute episode with special guest Matthew McConaughey and Acho, which was so terrific and insightful that I plan to watch more. Acho doesn't yell but instead simply talks - about his own experiences and what justice should look like.

Speaking of justice, the famous Torah verse reads "*Tzedek Tzedek Tirdof* - Justice, justice shall you pursue" (Dt. 16:20). But why does the Torah repeat the word "*Tzedek* - justice"? Surely we understand the point with just one mention. I believe the Torah's message is this: pursue justice in your own community, and with equal commitment pursue justice in the communities of others.

I close with the words of the late John Lewis, a towering figure of inspiration who died this year, and a man I was privileged to listen to at my JTS graduation: "Freedom is not a state; it is an act. It is not some enchanted garden perched high on a distant plateau where we can finally sit down and rest. Freedom is the continuous action we all must take, and each generation must do its part to create an even more fair, more just society."

May this year of 5781 be a year where we *all* advance the noble act of freedom, and the holy pursuit of Tzedek.

Shanah Tovah.