**The T’shuvah Extension**

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**Shabbat During Sukkot**

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Please rise for a minute. I want to open the ark. Okay, you can be seated now.

You’ll notice that we have two different colors of Torah covers. The large Torah has a green cover. That’s a Temple Etz Chaim special. It’s a cover just for *shalosh regalim,* the three Pilgrimage Festivals of Sukkot, Passover, and Shavuot. Before I got here, I’d never seen a special Festival Torah cover. I think it’s nice that we have something unusual like this.

But what I really want to talk about today is the smaller Torah. Its cover is white. White is the color associated with the High Holy Days, with Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. You might have noticed that Cantor Spenadel and I wore white robes. When rabbis wore robes to all services, we typically wore black ones throughout the year, and switched to white for the Days of Awe.

So, if white is the color for the High Holy Days, why do we still have a white cover on our Torah over a week after Yom Kippur? And why will it still be on our Torah on Sunday night, for Sh’mini Atzeret and Simchat Torah?

One of the central images of the High Holy Days is that of the book of judgment. The *unetaneh tokef,* a poem that is sung on both Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, brings the image to life. *B’rosh hashanah yikateivun, uv’yom tzom kippur yeichateimun:* On Rosh Hashanah it is written, and on the fast day of Yom Kippur it is sealed. We spend the time between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur searching our souls, and we go find the people we wronged and try to make it up to them. We engage in all this conduct as a way of trying to do *t’shuvah,* to make ourselves right with our fellow human beings and with God before the judgment is finally sealed. The N’ilah service at the end of Yom Kippur has special power, as it gives us the image of the gates of the heavenly court closing for the year.

But wait, everybody. I have the following message to deliver to you, one that I always love to hear: You get an extension! The rabbis concluded that the judgment was indeed sealed on Yom Kippur, but that it wasn’t finally delivered until Sh’mini Atzeret, this Sunday night.[[1]](#footnote-1) So, until then, we have a sort of High Holy Day continuation. We’ve got a little more time to make things right.

Here’s how I want to spend part of that time. I want to tell you a story of *t’shuvah.* As I look around at the way things are going in our country and our world, I think we can all use this one, my little extension of the High Holy Days.

Eli Saslow, a writer for the *Washington Post,* told this story earlier this week. It concerns a young man named Derek Black.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Derek was not an average young man. He was royalty of a sort: white nationalist royalty. His mother, Chloe, had been married to former Klan leader David Duke at one point; when Derek was born, Duke served as his godfather. Derek’s “father, Don, had created Stormfront, the Internet’s first and largest white nationalist site, with 300,000 users and counting.” Derek was homeschooled at in West Palm Beach, Florida, in the home his mother had grown up in. As the article notes, “[t]here were Guatemalan immigrants living down the block and Jewish retirees moving into a condo nearby. ‘Usurpers,’ Don sometimes called them, but Chloe didn’t want to move away from her aging mother in Florida.” Derek traveled with his father when Don “went to speak at white nationalist conferences in the Deep South.”

Don wanted his site to gain respectability. He took steps to rid it of the people he called “sociopaths” by banning “slurs, Nazi symbols and threats of violence.” Still, as the article put it, for Don, “[e]veryone was either ‘with us’ or ‘against us,’ ‘sympathetic’ or an ‘enemy,’ so Derek strengthened his relationship with his father by becoming his greatest ideological ally.”

Derek became “an emerging leader” of the movement. While still in high school, he launched a daily radio show.   
“On the air, Derek helped to popularize the idea of a white genocide, that whites were losing their culture and traditions to massive, nonwhite immigration.” But he was intellectually curious, and “sought out logic and science to confirm his worldview.” He enrolled in New College of Florida. It was “a top-ranked liberal arts school with a strong history program.” It was also regarded as a kind of Hampshire College of Florida, “one of the most liberal schools in the state.” Don wasn’t worried about Derek being converted away; if anything, he would convert the others.

Derek soon decided not to reveal the white nationalist side of himself. It would make his college experience too complicated. Also, he actually came to like the people he met. “He watched zombie movies with students from his dorm, a group that included a Peruvian immigrant and an Orthodox Jew.” Meanwhile, he continued to call in daily to his radio show, which he now did with his father.

The second semester of his freshman year, Derek left to study abroad in Germany, “because he wanted to learn the language.” That spring, a message was sent to all the students at New College. It outed Derek as a white supremacist.

By the time he returned for his sophomore year, this had become the biggest message thread in the history of the school. He kept on with his white nationalist activity, planning a conference with speeches to be given by his father, David Duke, and “other separatist icons.” At New College, he moved off campus. Some of his friends from the year before emailed to tell him that they felt betrayed. He tried to avoid public spaces, as most people stared and kept their distance.

One person, however, decided to try a different approach. His name is Matthew Stevenson, and he was the Orthodox Jew who had been in Derek’s dorm the year before. And now he invited him to Shabbat dinner. The school did not have much of a “Jewish infrastructure,” so Matthew had taken to hosting weekly Shabbat dinners at his campus apartment, where most of the attendees weren’t Jewish.

It wasn’t that Matthew didn’t know what he was getting into. He wore his kippah regularly. He had experienced anti-Semitism. And he read up on Stormfront and on David Duke’s assertion that Jews “must go.” But he also thought about Derek, “Maybe he never spent time with a Jewish person before.”

It was the first social invitation he had received since he came back to school. So he went. Some of the regulars stayed away. Matthew instructed those who came, “Let’s try to treat him like anyone else.” And that’s what they did. Nobody mentioned white supremacy. Derek kept coming, keeping his conversation to academic topics such as “the roots of Christianity in medieval times. He came across as smart and curious, and mostly he listened.” He and Matthew started talking about Israel and Palestine. Both were suspicious, but they found themselves liking each other, and they started playing pool together. Soon, Shabbat evening attendance was up to its previous levels.

His Shabbat friends started sharing their experiences, such as the Peruvian immigrant’s talking about his almost entirely Hispanic high school. They also began to challenge Derek to clarify or justify his opinions. He engaged in conversations and in email exchanges. And his views started to soften and become more confused. He was also taking courses, learning that the very idea of whiteness hadn’t always been around.

This rethinking culminated shortly after he graduated in 2013. He wrote an email to the Southern Poverty Law Center, an organization that monitors hate groups. His “father had considered [it] a prime adversary for 40 years.” And this is part of what he wrote: “After a great deal of thought ..., I have resolved that it is in the best interests of everyone involved to be honest about my slow but steady disaffiliation from white nationalism. I can’t support a movement that tells me I can’t be a friend to whomever I wish or that other people’s races require me to think of them in a certain way or be suspicious of their advancements. 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.”

Derek told the SPLC to publish his letter in full. It did. It drove a wedge between Derek and his family. But he has no interest in going back to the life that he led. He has chosen to rejoin mainstream America.

My story of Derek Black’s *t’shuvah* to his truest self comes later than Yom Kippur. Derek’s own turning came later than he would have liked. But both Derek and I got an extension. May all of us take advantage of the extra time we have to turn toward seeing each person as having been created *b’tselem elohim,* in the image of God.

*Kein y’hi ratzon,* be this God’s will.

1. Yosef Tavori, “Hoshanah Rabbah as a Day of Judgment,” http://www.biu.ac.il/JH/Parasha/eng/sukot/tab.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Eli Saslow, “The white flight of Derek Black,” *Washington Post,* Oct. 15, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/the-white-flight-of-derek-black/2016/10/15/ed5f906a-8f3b-11e6-a6a3-d50061aa9fae_story.html>. All quotations relating to Black’s story come from this article. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)