



SERMON BALAK:¹
WHAT IF BALAK HAD HAD TWITTER?

Student Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Friday 3 July 2020
Wimbledon Synagogue

- 1 Katie Hopkins has been banned from Twitter.² She is now no longer able to use Twitter's ubiquity to incite hatred against Muslims,³ black people,⁴ victims of transphobic violence⁵ and other regular targets. Her audience has been substantially reduced and the amount of upset she can cause – and vulnerable individuals she can render more vulnerable – has gone down drastically.
- 2 And just a few days later, the comedy writer Graham Linehan was also banned, for repeated attacks against and hateful conduct towards the transgender community.⁶
- 3 This does, of course, raise some issues around free speech. Is it right that Twitter, a private company, can have the power to ban people from what is one of the largest marketplaces of ideas in the history of humanity? Well... yes. It is right. Or at least, it's fine. Freedom of speech runs both ways: Katie Hopkins can say what she wants, but she can't compel anyone to host her. Twitter doesn't have to publish anything it doesn't choose to: if it was forced to publish against its will, that would be a free speech violation.
- 4 And in any event, it isn't as if Katie Hopkins and Graham Linehan have been silenced. They can still appear on television (if they can find a producer willing to feature them). They can still broadcast over the radio (if they can find a programme willing to invite them). They can still give speeches. They



can start their own websites. If it comes to it, they can drag crates to Speakers' Corner in Hyde Park and shout.

- 5 But it's still understandable that they're piqued to have lost their access to Twitter. It's free, easy and allows anyone to access an audience of tens of millions. Twitter, and the internet in general, are very powerful tools and it's entirely explicable why someone would want to use it.
- 6 In tomorrow's parashah, Balak, king of Moab, also sought to harness a powerful tool to help him spread hate speech. His powerful tool was called Balaam, and Balaam's powers as a sorcerer would unleash a severe curse against the Israelites.
- 7 However, just like Twitter, Balaam put his foot down and said, "No." He drew a line and refused to be used as a medium for baseless hatred.
- 8 There was a difference, though. Katie Hopkins wasn't silenced; as we've said, she could go to Speakers' Corner and shout. But Balak's plan really was spoilt, because he needed a sorcerer to enact his curse. It wasn't something he could do under his own steam. We can defend Twitter's ban on the basis that it didn't stifle anyone's freedom of speech, but Balaam's refusal really did end Balak's hopes of cursing the Israelites.
- 9 And yet we all realise that Balaam was absolutely in the right. Of course Balak shouldn't have been allowed to curse the Israelites. And why? Because a curse matters. It's a real thing – at least from the Torah's point of view. It would have had serious, real-world consequences, be they disease or famine or pestilence. It's a good thing that Balaam prevented the curse, because someone had to prevent it. Balak should not have had any opportunity whatsoever to unleash a curse, whether through Balaam, or through another freelance sorcerer, or on his own.



- 10 And yet is a biblical curse really all that different from modern hate speech? I think not. In a powerful judgment in a hate speech case in 2013, the Supreme Court of Canada said:⁷ “Comments that expose a target group to detestation tend to inspire enmity and extreme ill-will against them. They vilify them and render them lawless, dangerous, unworthy or unacceptable in the eyes of the audience. Hate speech seeks to delegitimise group members in the eyes of the majority, reducing their acceptance within society. When people are vilified as blameworthy or undeserving, it is easier to justify discriminatory treatment. A particularly insidious aspect of hate speech is that it acts to cut off any path of reply by the group under attack. It does this not only by attempting to marginalise the group so that their reply will be ignored: it also forces the group to argue for their basic humanity or social standing as a precondition to participating in the deliberative aspects of our democracy.”
- 11 Hate speech, including online hate speech, is the modern-day equivalent of Balak’s curse. It is not free from consequences. Sticks and stones hurt, but they aren’t thrown out of nowhere. It’s rabble-raising words that lead to sticks and stones.
- 12 The last we hear of the evil Balak is: בַּלַּק הֵלֵךְ לְדַרְכּוֹ.⁸ Balak went on his way. No violence. No retribution. No punishment. He was simply prevented from spreading the loathing in his heart, and, a foiled man, toddled off with his tail between his legs.
- 13 We can’t all be Balaam and we can’t all be Twitter. Most of us are in nowhere near a powerful enough position in society to take their momentous decisions. But we can do the same thing on a smaller scale:



simply putting our foot down and refusing to become a conduit for, or to tolerate in any way, shape or form, hate speech.

Check against delivery.

GKW 03.07.20

¹ Numbers 23:1-23

² Nicola Slawson and Jim Waterson. “Katie Hopkins permanently removed from Twitter”, *The Guardian* (19 June 2020): <<https://www.theguardian.com/media/2020/jun/19/katie-hopkins-permanently-removed-from-twitter>>

³ Lizzie Dearden. “Katie Hopkins gave speech attacking Muslims to far-right group days before leaving Mail Online ‘by mutual consent’”, *The Independent* (27 November 2017): <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/media/press/katie-hopkins-muslims-far-right-speech-mailonline-racism-islamophobia-david-horowitz-freedom-center-a8078356.html>>

⁴ Jacob Stolworthy. “Katie Hopkins accused of racism after Dear White People tweet”, *The Independent* (2 May 2017): <<https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/news/katie-hopkins-dear-white-people-netflix-series-black-lives-matter-racist-tweet-a7713646.html>>

⁵ Nick Duffy. “Katie Hopkins mocks Transgender Day of Remembrance for murder victims”, *Pink News* (20 November 2018): <<https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2018/11/20/katie-hopkins-transgender-day-of-remembrance/>>

⁶ Molly Blackall. “Twitter closes Graham Linehan account after trans comment”, *The Guardian* (27 June 2020): <<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2020/jun/27/twitter-closes-graham-linehan-account-after-trans-comment>>

⁷ *Saskatchewan Human Rights Commission v Whatcott* [2013] SCC 11, [2014] 1 LRC 1 at [41], [71] and [75].

⁸ Numbers 24:25