

Getting It Right, Doing It Right

Yom Kippur 5786

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Robert Powers thought that immigration was out of control. What did he do? He murdered eleven worshipers at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, injuring six others, because he believed “the great replacement theory,” which imagines American Jews to be masterminds of a conspiracy to replace America’s white Christian majority with people of color.

Luigi Mangione was furious at the health insurance industry. What did he do? He murdered Brian Thompson, the CEO of United Healthcare. *The New Republic* reported: “At the scene of the shooting, investigators found shell casings with the words ‘deny,’ ‘defend,’ and ‘depose’ on them—an apparent reference to “delay, deny, and defend,” a phrase describing tactics by health insurance companies to refuse coverage for their customers.”ⁱ

Tyler Robinson didn’t like what Charlie Kirk said. What did he do? He murdered him. Documents charging Robinson with the assassination record that, when his parents recognized him in photos of Kirk’s assassin, they “asked their son why he committed this crime, to which he said ‘there is too much evil and the guy [Charlie Kirk] spreads too much hate.’”ⁱⁱ

Reasonable people may believe that there are too many immigrants in this country. Most of us agree that health insurance companies work hard to deny healthcare to their customers, sometimes with disastrous and even deadly results. And Tyler Robinson was hardly the only American who disagreed with Charlie Kirk.

But here’s the thing: Neither Robert Powers, nor Luigi Mangione, nor Tyler Robinson achieved his goals. Mangione came closest, with a cult following sparking outrage at unethical health insurance practices. Still, the industry has not changed, and there is no indication that it will. Immigration is being strongly addressed now, but no rational person would credit the antisemitic Pittsburgh mass murderer for that. And Charlie Kirk’s movement is stronger than ever.

What do all three murderers have in common? They all had views shared by millions of Americans. Each of them sought to accomplish his objective through grotesque, immoral means. Each failed to reach his aim. The means employed were not only immoral; they were also ineffective. We are much more likely to achieve our goals if we seek to do so through righteous action. Righteous action is a worthy objective in its own right, too.

This summer, Rabbi Pamela Wax addressed “a jarring tension between two possible responses to a sense of injustice,” both found in one Torah portion, Pinchas. “On the one hand,” she writes, “the parshah takes its name from a man who is rewarded for his violence.” Pinchas “zealously murder[s] two presumed idolators without recourse to due process. In contrast, the [portion] also presents us with the model of diplomacy exemplified by the five daughters of Zelophehad.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Pinchas opposes intimate relations between Israelites and non-Israelites, a common biblical stance. How does he deal with that? Seeing an Israelite man consorting with a Midianite woman, he runs his spear through both, murdering them. Pinchas might have put the fear of God into people there and then, but he hardly put an end to Jews falling in love with people of other faiths or none. Moreover, in Rabbi Wax’s words, his action displays “knee-jerk reactivity, vengeance, and self-assured ‘rightness.’”^{iv}

Zelophehad’s daughters, on the other hand, “stayed curious rather than reactive.” Their father has died, and inheritance law of the day called for his property to go to his sons. Zelophehad, though, left five daughters but no sons. The daughters approach Moses because they believe that they should inherit their father’s property. Rabbi Wax emphasizes that they begin their protest with a question, asking whether justice is served by having their father’s property transferred to their uncles or male cousins.^v

Even if the daughters’ question is rhetorical, opening with a question is a technique that Rabbi Wax calls “a great tool to have in our back pockets when we are in relationship with those with whom we disagree.”^{vi} We often achieve more when we respond to what we perceive as injustice, wrongheadedness, even hate speech with a question, rather than an indignant declaration.

Rabbi Wax cites “the great social scientist Brené Brown[, who] said, ‘I’m here to get it right, not to be right.’ Getting it right is about the soul...It’s about integrity and *teshuvah*, returning again and again to our best and highest selves.”^{vii}

Zelophehad’s daughters prevail, and not only in their own time. We take women’s inheritance rights for granted. Rabbi Gunther Plaut called their story “a prime example of how a law that was devised for a specific occasion became the foundation for a statement of general law.”^{viii} The daughters—Mahlah, Noa, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah—not only get it right, but they also do it right, and they accomplish their goal.

Last month, we held a program here at Temple with Braver Angels of Arkansas. Our facilitators—one leaning left; the other, right—taught techniques for effective conversations among people who disagree. If we enter conversations with

the goal of changing people's minds, we are unlikely to succeed. By contrast, if our purpose is to understand another person's viewpoint better, we improve our chance of success—at understanding, that is, but not only that: If we enter the discussion with curiosity rather than certainty, we are more likely to preserve the relationship. Perhaps nobody's mind will be changed, but even if the goal is to convince the other person that they're wrong, that's not going to happen without understanding where they're coming from.

A few years ago, the person listening to Congregation Agudath Achim's voicemail heard an awful antisemitic threat. They had caller I.D., and the voice sounded like that of a preteen. The police identified the source of the call—and yes, the caller was a kid.

The synagogue could have pressed charges, and nobody should have faulted them if they had. Antisemitism poses mortal danger to Jewish safety, and all threats should be taken seriously. Still, Agudath Achim rabbinic and lay leadership agreed: Education was the better choice in this case. Yes, the kid was obligated to participate, and the congregation could and probably would have pressed charges had he refused.

One could say that the story doesn't have a happy ending. When Rabbi Michael Weisser and his wife made a decision like Agudath Achim's upon receiving hateful and much more dangerous messages from a correspondent who turned out to be a KKK Grand Wizard, the Grand Wizard, Larry Trapp, repented and ultimately converted to Judaism. That did not happen here. At a Yom HaShoah Holocaust remembrance gathering where Professor Dorian Stuber told the story, he could not be sure that the young man would now be a friend to the Jewish people. Still, he and others at Agudath Achim felt good about their approach, building understanding rather than giving the kid one more "reason" to hate Jews.

On this Yom Kippur, as we resolve to be our best selves in 5786, let us focus less on being right and more on pursuing our goals righteously. Let us move away from our certainty when we can, at least for long enough to understand those who disagree with us, at least for long enough to maintain and even strengthen relationships across lines of difference. Then, as we seek to increase justice in this world, we will do that sacred work with love. And with love, we may build justice.

Amen.

ⁱ Matt Ford, "Why Many Americans Are Celebrating the UnitedHealthcare CEO's Murder, *The New Republic*, December 6, 2024, <https://newrepublic.com/article/189121/unitedhealthcare-brian-thompson-shooting-social-media-reaction>.

ⁱⁱ Jon Haworth and Megan Forrester, “Tyler Robinson said he killed Charlie Kirk because he ‘spreads too much hate’: Officials,” *ABC News*, September 16, 2025, <https://abcnews.go.com/US/tyler-robinson-set-face-formal-charges-shooting-death/story?id=125614396>. The name of the victim appears in brackets in the original.

ⁱⁱⁱ Rabbi Pamela Wax, *Kein B’not Zelophehad: Diplomacy Vs. Vigilantism, D’var Torah for Pinchas, (M) Oral Torah from T’ruah*, July 16, 2025, https://truah.org/resources/pamela-wax-pinchas-moraltorah_2025_/.

^{iv} Wax.

^v Wax.

^{vi} Wax.

^{vii} Wax.

^{viii} W. Gunther Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, Revised Edition, New York: Union for Reform Judaism, 2005, p. 1073.