

Walking in Other People's Shoes
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Several months ago, I opened up my podcast app on my phone, and pressed play on a new



episode of Invisibilia. One of the things I love about the show is that they make a point of helping the audience empathize with people who have had very unusual experiences. In this particular show, they shared the story of a person who at one point joined an online hate group that targets women. They shared his personal story about how

he initially came to identify this group, and then how he came to change his behavior and attitude, and repudiate his former beliefs and actions. He tells in the story how he realized how wrong he had been, and how much happier he is now that he has renounced hatred. He ended up sounding like a sympathetic person – someone who was misguided, but ultimately came around to learn how wrong he was.

At this point in the story, however, something unusual happens. The host of the show, Hanna Rosin, explains that sometimes when their show is looking to hire a new producer, they might give them some audio, and ask them to put together a sample episode based on that audio.

They sent a prospective employee, Linna Misitzis, (Misseetzeez) audio of the interview with this man, and she created her own story. Her story used the same audio, and the same life story, but the impression that comes across was so different, that



it felt like it was about a different person. She described the same man, his affiliation with a misogynist hate group, his turnaround – but in this story, he came across very differently. Skeptical about his turn-around, Linna pointed out all of the ways that his account seems insincere. She drew our attention to patterns of behavior that he still evinces, suggesting that while he repudiates the hate group he had been a part of, his aggressive attitudes and behaviors remain. The story she created was so different from the one that the host of the show had created that they decided to air both stories, and then talk about them.

The conversation that the two radio producers had following the the two stories was not really about the man they were reporting about. Their conversation was about an approach to learning about other people’s lives. Hanna Rosin was a true believer in the value of putting yourself in other people’s shoes. In her stories, she hopes to help her audience see the world



from someone else’s perspective, to develop empathy for them, to build a connection, even if the person whose perspective they are taking on is someone whose actions or beliefs might make us uncomfortable.

Linna Mitzis, on the other hand, felt that Hanna’s approach can be dangerous. The man in the story, she felt, was a danger to the people around him. Trusting him and empathizing with him, might lead us to overlook abusive and manipulative behavior in others who act similarly. Entering into another’s point of view might, in certain circumstances, blind ourselves to the

harm they cause. While I tend to agree with her in this case that this person has not fully changed his hateful worldview, I actually tend to agree with Hanna. I believe that developing empathy for other people is a crucial part of building a just society, and I think that understanding how people come to act and behave the way they do is an essential part of being able to find a way to coexist with others with whom we disagree.

It's become popular, in some circles, to respond to people who hurt us or people we care about by shutting them out. We've seen efforts to prevent certain people from speaking publicly, and we've seen particular viewpoints shut out of rallies and organizational platforms. And most widespread, we've seen the creation of a world where the media that



people consume is carefully curated to agree with each of our particular world-views. I think there are very good reasons for each of these phenomena. If we take dangerous ideas and viewpoints lightly, or try so hard to understand them that we fail to recognize them as harmful, then we fail in protecting others or ourselves. On the other hand, if we close ourselves off to learning about others, who may actually be much more sympathetic than we realize – then we close off opportunities for both of us to engage with each other and learn from each other. It's always possible, even if it seems unlikely, that a more dramatic change could happen – maybe we would change our minds or they would change theirs – but we'll never know if we don't engage.

There's a Jewish teaching from the Talmud that reflects this tension, and comes down strongly on the side of listening to others. It is about the houses of Hillel and Shammai, two influential schools of thought to Rabbinic Judaism, who consistently disagree with each other about just about everything.

*R. Abba stated in the name of Samuel: For three years there was a dispute between Beth Shammai and Beth Hillel, the former asserting, 'The halachah is in agreement with our views' and the latter contending, 'The halachah is in agreement with our views'. Then a heavenly voice announced, **'[The utterances of] both are the words of the living God, but the law is in agreement with the rulings of Beth Hillel'**.*

Since, however, both are the words of the living God' what was it that entitled Beth Hillel to have the law fixed in agreement with their rulings?

The Talmud answers: *Because they were kindly and modest, they studied their own rulings and those of Beth Shammai, and were even so [humble] as to mention the actions of Beth Shammai before theirs...*

It's easy to understand why Beit Shammai might have been hesitant to share the opinions of their rivals. Maybe they feared that people would be confused, thinking that Beit Shammai thought that either opinion was acceptable. Maybe they were concerned that being exposed to the opinions of Beit Hillel would lead Beit Shammai followers to change their minds. And maybe

Beit Shammai simply didn't share the other opinion because they thought it was irrelevant. They had made their decision, time to move on.

But Beit Hillel decided to take a risk. They were willing to make it less clear who they thought was right, willing to risk people defecting to the other camp. And most of all, they decided that alternate opinions to theirs were NOT irrelevant. For them, engaging with Beit Shammai was an essential part of what Judaism is all about. We learn from elsewhere in the Talmud that the children of the two communities married each other, suggesting that when it came down to it, they were part of one community. Given that, Beit Hillel must have decided that, above all, listening to each other had to be an important part of how they interacted with their fellow neighbors.

Part of what I was so taken with about that Invisibilia story from before is that from listening to two versions of a story, I got two perspectives. I was able to see the world from the mind of a man whose attitudes towards women are, I believe, seriously misguided, and begin to understand the way he thinks – and at the same time, I wasn't taken in by him or by his supposed change.

Of course, in the case of Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai, the Talmud tells us that each were the “word of the living God.” They were each valid, inspired, opinions. But not everyone's opinions are in fact equally valid. People can be mistaken, and people can be cruel. Some people, for all sorts of reasons, may harbor hatred for others, which is something that should not be condoned. But that doesn't make the people who hold those views less than human. It is our task to walk that fine line – to listen, to have empathy, but never to surrender our discernment.



To empathize does not mean to buy into someone's story, but it can help us to be more caring people. I wish for all of us the courage to be like Beit Hillel, the courage to take other people seriously, to see the world from their perspective, and then to turn around and make our own decisions. When we enter another person's world, you never know what you may find.