

## EDITOR'S NOTE

# THE LOST CHILDHOOD OF DOEG

**T**he bright young people work hard all day and party hard at night. No small part of the fun involves those who are excluded from the parties and what is said about them, and the giddy enjoyment (*simha*) of the “ins” is much enhanced by the knowledge that those who are “out” know they are shunned and will soon enough hear rumors of the brilliance and cruelty of what is said about them behind their backs.

A voodoo effigy, representing a particularly despised individual, is produced. The host sticks pins in the doll and the shrieks of laughter of the bright people waft across the shimmering swimming pool around which they are partying so vigorously, exploding into the brightly lit evening, and eventually they will reach the oversized ears of the unhappy target. The delighted laughter of the bright people and the merriment at the torture of the voodoo doll are an aftertaste and a foretaste of the sometimes oblique and sometimes direct humiliation he must experience day after day in the presence of, at the hands of the hard-working bright people, who have the power to do this to him, and to the silent witness of neutral or sympathetic bystanders, whose silence only magnifies his helplessness.

Out of this loop, unable to say much even when called on because the information he needs to speak intelligently has passed him by, his voice is often reduced to an inaudible mumble; his only choice is a torturous self-effacement. Most of you will not be surprised to hear a description of the physical price: “his weight... was dropping off him because he wasn’t eating much; although he was ordering new suits, they were soon hanging loosely on his shoulders, his trousers... bagging around the shoes. It was registered in his face, which had become gaunt, haggard, so thin that the long lobes of his ears, the jut of his big nose, his heavy black eyebrows and the dark circles under his eyes—eyes sunk deep in his head now—were more prominent than ever, and the gauntness was accentuated by his expression, so gloomy, with the corners of his mouth pulled down and the jowls hanging down.” He spends a great deal of time hanging around in

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the proximity of those with power, in the hope that this will create the illusion that he is not invisible to them, and in the hope that the illusion can alter the reality for the better. Once, at a party to which he is invited, he attaches himself endlessly to the voodoo pin sticker, asking him again and again: “Why don’t you like me?”

Bullying has been in the news lately. So no doubt many of you want to know, “Where are their parents?” If you are skeptical about the ability or willingness of parents to straighten out their bright children who work hard all day, you ask “What about their teachers?” And if you despair of the educational system, ought not there be a law? But we are not slumming in the hallways of a dystopian suburban middle school. The bright young tormentors *are* the law: see the one sticking the pins in the doll—he’s Attorney General of the United States; his victim is the Vice President of the United States, whose campaigning put him in power, since otherwise his brother would probably not have been elected President.

It is not my purpose here to milk posthumous sympathy or pity for Lyndon Johnson. John Updike, the son of a high school teacher, once said that he could never hate LBJ the way the liberal intelligentsia did because Johnson reminded him of a substitute teacher stuck with a class of spoiled brats. I, too, admiring the outsized energy and ambition of his early presidential days and pondering the enormous benevolence of his program, have a soft spot for him, despite what I now know of the defects of the program and the vices of the man. By now we have learned, from the early volumes of Robert Caro’s massive *Years of Lyndon Johnson*, that his man could bully and humiliate with the best of them, a lot better than he could endure being on the receiving end. Read for yourself, if you have forgotten, or if you never studied them, the latest—*The Passage of Power*—which I have been quoting, where Caro, like a novelist, keeps recurring to these earlier scenes. The disliked college student who wormed his way into the administrative woodwork until his peers were forced to beg him for the jobs without which they could not stay in school; the Johnson who fawned and flattered the father figures whose help he needed on the way up, and who abused, ridiculed, and bullied those under his thumb; the Johnson who forced an aversive Robert Kennedy to shake his hand on numerous occasions when he could make him, was the last person with a right to whine or complain about bullying and humiliation.

Fifty years later, the hatred between Robert Kennedy and his brother’s successor, whose title he refused to acknowledge, and its consequences for the country and the world, grip the imagination and haunt the

average civil soul. At the very least, one must shake one's head and recall Plutarch's advice at the end of his "Precepts of Statecraft": "as a conflagration does not often begin in sacred or public places, but some lamp left neglected in a house or some burnt rubbish causes a great flame and works public destruction, so disorder in a State is not always kindled by contentions about public matters, but frequently differences arising from private affairs and offences pass thence into public life and throw the whole State into confusion."

## II

Over a century before Plutarch, Shema'aya, one of the leading rabbis of his generation, warned against becoming familiar to governmental powers (*ha-reshut*; *Avot* 1:10). Rambam comments on this phrase:

Being known to the regime in ancient times and being close to it made it hard to be safe from it in this world and destroys one's faith, as one cares for nothing, only for what brings him closer to them. You know about Doeg, even though the ruler whom he became close to was the one anointed by God and a prophet and was chosen by God.

Doeg is described as the "master of the shepherds of Saul." (I Sam. 21:8) It was he who reported to Saul David's friendly reception in Nob, the priestly city, when David, unknown to the priests, was fleeing Saul. Thus Doeg brings about and executes the massacre of the priests. He is one of the non-royals who are denied a share in the world to come, according to Mishna *Sanhedrin*. The rabbis expatiate on his enmity of David: it is Doeg who argues that David is ineligible to enter the congregation because of his descent from Ruth the Moabite.

It is common to pair Doeg with Ahitophel, another layman barred from the world to come who betrayed David. In the book of Samuel, Ahitophel is distinguished for his oracular wisdom. For reasons that are not made explicit in the Bible, Ahitophel joins the rebellion of Absalom against his father; when his strategic counsel is rejected, he hangs himself. It is possible that Ahitophel's animosity towards David has something to do with a family connection to Bathsheba, the woman whom David married after having taken advantage of her husband's absence on military duty and then bringing about his death. The Talmud also indicates that Ahitophel considered himself better suited to reign than David.

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The contrasts between Doeg and Ahitophel are as instructive as the similarities. Ahitophel is identified by his wisdom; Doeg by his link to Saul. To be sure, the rabbis make Doeg a scholar, who can cite chapter and verse for excluding David from the community. Yet we know very well that not all Torah scholars are the same: some are prominent for their erudition and penetration, some for other reasons. The rabbinic tradition ascribes reasonable motivations to Ahitophel's attack on David; no such attempt is made regarding Doeg.

David's own attitude towards the two, as interpreted by our rabbis and implicitly in the Biblical text, differs markedly. The superscription to Psalm 52 refers to Doeg's delation to Saul. Addressing his enemy directly, David alleges that he takes pride in evil deeds, and devises destruction with his razor-sharp tongue. God will likewise destroy Doeg. He then moves to the third person perspective of the righteous who will witness and fear and laugh at Doeg, saying "This is the man who did not put his trust in God but in his wealth." There is no indication in this chapter that David and Doeg ever enjoyed a personal relationship.

Psalm 55, according to the Midrash, is linked to Ahitophel. Where chapter 52 is addressed first to Doeg and David speaks to God only at the end, here the opening and most of the *mizmor* is a prayer to God. The speaker is alone and persecuted: "if only I had wings like a dove, I could fly away and be at rest." By the middle of the chapter it develops that his adversary is not an old personal enemy (v. 13). Turning to that person, he exclaims: "You were my peer, my guide, my familiar. We took sweet counsel together and walked in the house of God amid the throng." David feels betrayed by Ahitophel (if we follow the rabbis). He does not feel betrayed by Doeg, because he expected nothing of him. Upon learning of the massacre of the priests by Doeg, he acknowledges that when he saw Doeg he knew what he would do and thus must take responsibility for the outcome (I Samuel 22:38).

The rabbis explain why Ahitophel comes to despise David, but Doeg has no good reason to hate David. His behavior in Samuel can be explained as loyalty to Saul, both his initial report and killing the priests when Saul's other officials refuse his order. As noted, however, the Talmud regards Doeg as an inveterate opponent of David, as the one who sought to exclude him from the community because of his descent. But, unlike Ahitophel, Doeg is not really David's rival for preeminence. What made Doeg who he was?

Envy is one of the easiest vices to understand but one of the hardest to explain, precisely because there seems to be no benefit in it. Thus we often "explain" such a person by saying "that's just the way

he is.” Rambam’s comment on Doeg challenges that picture. If only Doeg had chosen a different path, if only he had kept his distance from the regime, his life would have been altogether different, for the better. As a child I thought of Doeg as the class tattletale, always happy to witness and communicate evidence of cheating to the authorities. Rambam made me ask about the lost childhood of Doeg that lay behind that original choice.

Rambam does not condemn becoming a politician, if that means working for the public good (*tsorkhei tsibbur*). The Mishna specifies “making oneself known to the authorities.” As Rambam interprets, this means cultivating their approval and patronage. Doeg attached himself to Saul and became dependent on his favor. Most likely, being chief shepherd made him prosperous, which would explain why Psalm 52 judges him a man overly reliant on his wealth and retrospectively posits that as the background to his verbal aggression. Hanging around power, hanging one’s welfare on the approval of the powerful, is what destroys faith in God and poisons human relations.

### III

Political life is often where the cult of power and its nasty dynamics play themselves out. Yet not all who choose to live that life are tarnished by the profession. Bullying, wanton cruelty, the cultivation and enjoyment of one’s colleagues’ suffering, are not at the center of Hubert Humphrey’s biography, though he was sometimes a victim. It is not the story of Harry Truman or Ronald Reagan or Henry Jackson, and the list can go on. Why the Kennedys and Lyndon Johnson practiced the art with such relentlessness and ruthlessness that they have become parables of hatred turned political is a large question for another time. For Johnson, perhaps, the roots lay in the sad story of a once respected father, whose diminished fortune made him an object of ridicule and contempt in society and a shame to his once adoring boy, who disavowed his poverty and determined to climb to the top. The Kennedy saga, too, is about a father, in this case a highly effective businessman who was an ethical monster and who stamped his brood with both his extraordinary ambition and his capacity to hate and to demean.

But let us descend from the American Olympus of Pennsylvania Avenue to our own fruited plain below. Educators and parents are preoccupied with the prevention and control of bullying. I’m sure we would all agree that the kind of behavior described at the beginning of

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our discussion should not be tolerated in our schools even if we are not sure how to stamp it out. Do we adopt the same standard for adults? Children learn from example; adolescents notice inconsistency. The effect of our sermons and penalties is diminished if grownups can get away with, and be admired for, the behavior we condemn in their sons and daughters.

Of course, you tell me, we are not always in a position to censure adults. They are harder to change. More importantly, we are often afraid of them. True enough. But then tell me: what about those we no longer have reason to fear, because we don't work for them or with them, because they are not our neighbors anymore, because they do not belong to us but to "the ages?" How do we teach and study and experience history, as decent people, as committed religious Jews?

The Kennedys and Lyndon Johnson are distinctive in the annals of American politics due to the intensity of their mutual hatred and the harm it caused. The early '60s, however, are even more distinctive for another reason. Whether the Kennedy administration, had the president not been murdered, would have compiled a great record of achievement we will never know. We do know the flavoring it conferred on our moral culture. We remember the crossroads of politics and culture that was known as "Camelot," an Eden that we, the intellectuals, the celebrities, the opinion-molders, and those whose opinion is molded, romanticize for its culture, for its brilliance, for its glory, above all for its style. What is it that we romanticize, and does it outweigh or is it even separate from its equally remarkable flavor of interpersonal ethics?

I have seen volumes of Robert Caro's Johnson biography in the libraries of yeshiva high schools. I do not know to what use, if any, they are put. Much has been said about the treatment of women by the Kennedy clan; there is little doubt where the Orthodox Jewish community stands on such matters, and I would not be surprised if educators have drawn admonitions about sexual behavior from their annals. I would like to think that our thinking about ethics outside the bedroom is likewise informed, and informed critically by that legacy. Why else should religious Jews read history or literature?

"It should not be forgot that once there was a spot for one bright shining moment that was known as Camelot." Once upon a time, stylish people considered the filthy habit of smoking cigarettes, when performed in the manner they found pleasing, a hallmark of sophistication. By the same token, it should not be forgot that the enchantment the

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shining ethos of Camelot has exerted over much of our culture ever since can be portrayed, from a decent and God-fearing vantage point, as something singularly unappetizing. Where Torah reigns, and the fate of Doeg is remembered, the pomp of power, the buzz of sophistication, the cool appeal of human indifference and cruelty, and the desperate yearning for the approval of those adept at them, cannot escape judgment. This should be part of what makes us who we are.

