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The Kashuv controversy: A cautionary tale

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The Kyle Kashuv story is an important cautionary tale and all of us, our children especially, must take note of it.

Kashuv, 18, is Jewish and the son of Uzi and Vered Adam-Kashuv, émigrés from Israel. He also is a survivor of the mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Fla., on Feb. 14, 2018, in which 17 people were killed and another 17 injured. Kashuv hid in a closet during the massacre. Yet two months after that shooting, he posted a video on Twitter showing him practicing shooting with an AR-15 rifle, the same type of weapon that killed some of his schoolmates. The posting was so upsetting to many of his schoolmates that Parkland police questioned him about his motives.

Kashuv became a politically conservative activist after the massacre. Unlike most of his fellow schoolmates, however, his activism was geared to staunchly opposing restrictive gun control legislation. In March 2018, he appeared on the CBS program Face the Nation. This past April, he was one of the speakers at the annual “leadership forum” hosted by the lobbying arm of the National Rifle Association.

In 2018, Kashuv lobbied Congress in favor of the STOP School Violence Act, which anti-gun activists describe as mere “window dressing” when it comes to stemming gun violence in schools. His efforts even brought him to the White House in March of that year, where he met with the First Lady, and even spent a brief time in the Oval Office. She tweeted afterward that his “message of unity is one we should all share.” Kashuv later became the high school outreach director for Turning Point USA, “a conservative group with ties to the Trump family,” according to the Washington Post. He recently resigned that position.

Kashuv described his political activities in his admission essay to Harvard College. In March, the picture he painted of himself in that essay, coupled with a grade point average of 5.4 and an overall score of 1550 on his SAT exams, won him acceptance to Harvard.

In a letter dated June 3, however, Harvard rescinded that acceptance—not because of Kashuv’s conservative activism, as some, including Kashuv at times, claim, but because of what he wrote two years earlier in a Google Docs study guide chat with other students. Among other comments he made then were “[expletive] the Jews” and “kill the “[expletive] Jews,” which is bizarre considering that he himself is Jewish and, as he says, his family lost relatives in the Holocaust. At one point in that chat, he used the “N” word 11 times in a row, then joked about how he was practicing his typing (“like im really good at typing,” he wrote, adding that “practice makes…perfect”). Kashuv also alluded to a violent computer shooting game, “Counter-Strike: Global Offensive,” and said he would “[expletive] make a CSGO map of [Marjory Stoneman] Douglas [High School] and practice.”

Kashuv reportedly used other racist slurs at other times, as well.

Harvard’s decision was prompted by protests from some of his former schoolmates after a video was posted online in May by one of them, Ariana Ali, which contained screenshots of the offensive Google Docs chat.

The issue, of course, is whether Harvard acted correctly in rescinding its acceptance of Kashuv. Jewish law has much to say on the matter. While Kashuv subsequently admitted writing the offensive material “two years ago,” he also insists that was then and this is now. “What I said two years ago isn’t indicative of who I am,” he told the New York Times.

He was thoughtless and immature then, he says, but has matured a lot since then.

In a letter to Harvard, Kashuv apologized “unequivocally” for his comments, adding that his “intent was never to hurt anyone.” In a follow-up letter, however, Harvard’s dean of admissions, William R. Fitzsimmons, said the decision to rescind stands.

Maimonides, the Rambam, sums up Jewish law on the subject in his volume on repentance (t’shuvah). He begins with this introductory comment: “A sinner should repent from his sin before God and confess. This [is a] mitzvah and [one of] the fundamental principles [of faith]….”

He elaborates on this in the next paragraph, Mishneh Torah, Repentance 1:1.

“If a person…repents, and returns from his sin, he must confess before God, blessed be, He as [Numbers 5:6-7, which we read two weeks ago on Shabbat] states: ‘When a man or woman commits any wrong toward a fellow man…, and that person realizes his guilt, he shall confess the wrong that he has done.’ This refers to a verbal confession. This confession is a positive command.”

While Rambam, however, says that it “is very praiseworthy for a person who repents to confess in public and to make his sins known to others,” he also adds this: “Anyone who, out of pride, conceals his sins and does not reveal them will not achieve complete repentance….” (See MT Repentance 2:5.)

Kashuv forcefully states his regret for the things he wrote when he was 16, and insists that he is “no longer the same person.” Rambam, in MT Repentance 7:8, says “it is an utter sin” to hold a repentant sinner’s misdeeds against him. This would suggest that he should be forgiven for what he did and Harvard should reconsider its decision. His confession, however, came only after his former schoolmate posted the video exposing those heinous remarks. It is fair to wonder, then, how sincere were his confession and his stated regrets. After all, he had two years to “repent,” but did so only when his “sin” became public. He did not “make his sins known to others,” as Rambam put it, but confessed only after others made his sins known.

One test of a repentant sinner’s sincerity is his demeanor, says Rambam. “The manner of a repented person is to be very humble and modest…,” he notes. (Rambam, ibid.)

An answer he gave to a Fox News interviewer, Ed Henry, seems, at least, to have lacked either trait. It also raises questions about his sincerity. “How do we know that?,” Henry asked, referring to Kashuv’s stated regrets. “You certainly sound heartfelt, but you want to get something—you want to get into Harvard or get into another school. And how do we know that you’re not just saying ‘Oh, I didn’t mean it?’”

Kashuv at first repeated that what he did was immature and unthinking. It was all part of a game he was playing to be more outrageous than the others involved in that chat. A few moments later, however, he said this: “Harvard was founded in 1636 by slave owners and has a long history of racism, sexism, and misogyny.” (He made similar comments in an interview with Time magazine, arguing that Harvard had a “checkered past.”)

Henry, during the televised interview, soon called him on that remark. “You’re mentioning that they had slave owners in the 1600s,” he said. “You using the N-word was…a little more recent. I go back to my first question: How do we know that you've really changed? What specifically…has changed in you the past two years where you would no longer write the N-word or say the N-word?”

“It’s because I matured tremendously…," Kashuv replied. " It’s the fact that I have condemned racism in every opportunity that I can in this public life that I didn’t really ask for."

It is proper to question Kashuv’s sincerity, but is it also proper to give him the benefit of the doubt? Rambam, it seems, adopts a wait-and-see attitude. “[Who has reached] complete t’shuvah?” he asks rhetorically in MT T’shuvah 2:1. “A person who confronts the same situation in which he sinned when he has the potential to commit [the sin again], and, nevertheless, abstains and does not commit it because of his t’shuvah alone and not because of fear or a lack of strength.”

Time will tell. For now, Harvard’s decision appears to be the correct one.

As for the cautionary tale, it is about consequences. It used to be said that one should not write down anything he or she does not want to later appear in a headline. That is exponentially true today. Parents need to tell Kashuv’s story to their children, and then they need to forcefully bring home the message that what one writes in a letter, an essay, or an e-mail, or posts on social media today, or what photographs are posted on the internet may come back to haunt him or her for ever more.

All of us need to tell ourselves that, as well. Electronic postings are permanent, and negative or questionable content will come back to haunt us, just as Kashuv’s objectionable chats and tweets will follow him for years to come.