

# What a Jewish Studies Scholar Learned from Westboro Baptist Church

Hillel Gray

The first time I sat down to interview four protesters from the Westboro Baptist Church, in the Emory University library, I worried: Would they scream and harangue me about the Jews killing Christ? Not at all. The Westboro Baptists were soft-spoken and friendly, though they teased me *as if* I were a nerdy academic.

Fair enough. I came across as academic and stiff. Back then, I avoided discussing my private life. My goal was to understand their lived experiences, such as how they treat each other, and to explore how they'd relate to me personally. The gist of my methodology was in place: to listen warmly and empathically, without ever condoning or criticizing their beliefs or tactics.

Others do not hesitate to criticize WBC. That morning, Atlanta police were out in force—not because of Westboro street preachers, who believe in (physically) nonviolent dissent, but to protect them from the animosity of counterdemonstrators.

How does Westboro draw such intense reactions? For their antigay epithets, and condemnation of Jews, Catholics, and others, they have been labeled a hate group by the Anti-Defamation League.<sup>i</sup> WBC does not see itself as hateful—they claim to convey God's hate of sinners and nonbelievers, justified as a duty to rebuke and exhort. From their perspective, they're administering a neighborly kind of tough love (cf. Leviticus 19:17–18).

Our pilot interview was arranged by Shirley Phelps-Roper, a daughter of Fred Phelps Sr., the controversial church's founding pastor. Shirley and I kept emailing back and forth, out of mutual curiosity.<sup>ii</sup>

During one rapid-fire exchange, my withholding of ethical judgment was tested. Surprised to discover my emails posted publicly on the church's blog, I

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asked if they would remove my name. In the ensuing days, Shirley accidentally forwarded to me an email from the church's internal debate over my request. It contained jarringly anti-Jewish vocabulary, drawn from the New Testament. With my feelings rising, I called a Jewish Studies colleague: she listened and helped me stay on track with my nonjudgmental methodology. I managed to respond in a measured way to Shirley, who apologized for forwarding that unsettling email.

We clicked well in person, too. I visited Topeka, where families of the tiny church live. After three days of interviews with churchgoers, I interviewed Shirley. She opened up about abuse allegations against her intimidating father, and about her having a child out of wedlock. She shared intimate secrets and teared up about the kindness she had received from her parents. I was touched. Without judging her anti-Judaism, anti-LGBT activities, I'd embarked on a close relationship with her.

Since 2017, small teams of undergraduates at Miami University have assisted my fieldwork with WBC. Thanks to their warmth and attentive curiosity to our research subjects, WBC families have introduced us to more of their teens and college-age children.

Students also drew my attention to hostility that I might have ignored. Notably, students pointed to my strained interactions with Steve Drain, a former academic who now handles WBC's public relations. During our last visit, August 2019, Steve had diplomatically pulled me aside about a troubling incident



*Courtesy of Westboro Baptist Church*

involving a student research assistant and advised me on how to resolve it. He also hosted us for dinner. Yet, at our last get-together, it was Steve who borrowed my kippah and ridiculed it. He puzzles me, and, if nothing else, challenges my capacity for empathic resonance and understanding.

Ironically, my identity as a Jewish Studies scholar and a Jew has eased my relations with Westboro Baptists. Tim Phelps, Shirley's brother, once unapologetically joked about being an "antisemite," which he deems an unfair label for the church's replacement theology. On the other hand, they believe 144,000 Jews will be saved in the end times.<sup>iii</sup> As they've grown to know me, some Westboro Baptists express the hope that I would be among them.

My relations with Westboro Baptists shifted in 2018, thanks to my parallel inquiry with an ultra-Orthodox Jewish group. As a scholar, I was eager to study a Jewish analogue to the WBC, the Neturei Karta of Monsey, New York.<sup>iv</sup> Like WBC, they await a miraculous intervention by God. Like WBC, they've been denounced by the ADL.

Even from our first interviews, in May 2018, I felt more relaxed and able to schmooze with Neturei Karta activists than I ever had with Westboro Baptists.<sup>v</sup> (In my qualitative methods course, a student is analyzing this differential.) So that August, I was determined to be less stiff in Topeka.

Not only did I loosen up, but serendipitously, as we wrapped up a ninety-minute interview, Tim Phelps challenged me to apply my expertise to "Jewish" eschatology. He even proposed that we coauthor a piece about Israel, Zionism, and the end times. In years past, I might have declined. But, after launching a relationship with Neturei Karta, wouldn't it be fitting for an article to place these oft-hated groups into conversation? Besides their zealous protests, both reject Zionism and await a divine intervention. The next day, Tim and I started collaborating on that piece.

A Jewish adult education class led to the latest phase of this research.<sup>vi</sup> Participants encouraged me to loosen up further. If a key goal is relationship building, I should mix one-way interviewing to allow the Neturei Karta or Westboro Baptists to listen to me. I experimented with this reversal in August 2019. I invited several Westboro Baptists to ask me whatever they wanted. Shirley asked, for instance, if I have children (which she suspected, having known me for a decade) and how they feel about my encounters with WBC.

Thanks to a critical-empathic, nonjudgmental approach, I've deepened my rapport with "the most hated family in America" at Westboro Baptist Church. What I've learned with WBC has prepared me for connecting with Neturei Karta. Both groups are gradually reciprocating, and building trust, as I explore the limits of conversations with those cast as an "Enemy" within my own circles.



*The author with Rabbi Yisroel Dovid Weiss of Neturei Karta, 2018.  
Courtesy of the author.*



*Margie Phelps of Westboro Baptist Church speaking with Miami University student researchers Alexa Lawhorn and Sofia Vlahakos, August 2018. Courtesy of the author.*



*Steve Drain, WBC Elder, in a picket on Palm Sunday, 2017.  
Courtesy of Westboro Baptist Church.*

My goal is not to change our research subjects, but to change us. It has been transformational, for me and for my student researchers, to listen in person to religious radicals. For example, after fieldwork with Westboro Baptists, one LGBT student was inspired (and better equipped) to go into social work. But nonjudgmental empathic listening is not everyone's cup of tea—and it's harder if one's identity is being denied or condemned by those interviewed for research purposes. We've also learned that such transformations do not require a trip to Topeka or Monsey. I've seen people shift to a more empathic perspective after watching just a few video clips of our research encounters. In a deeply partisan political climate, I know friends, relatives, and students who cannot stand each other's views or votes, not just intellectually but in their gut. Where hate may be percolating below the surface, I am learning to introduce WBC or Neturei Karta as a conversational gambit, as a nudge, to encourage us to listen to each other in a less divisive, more empathic manner.

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- i <https://www.adl.org/resources/profiles/westboro-baptist-church>.
  - ii Seeing my first name, Shirley asked whether Hillel is a boy's or girl's name. It struck me as funny, as WBC was protesting outside Hillels on college campuses around the country.
  - iii Revelation 7:3–8.
  - iv Neturei Karta is hated by many American Jews for favoring Palestinian over Jewish sovereignty and for cordial overtures to Hamas, Iran, and Louis Farrakhan.
  - v Granted, I can be more of a participant-observer with Neturei Karta, where I received an aliyah at their synagogue (with its placard declaring Zionists to be heretics), or, after reading Pirkei Avot, jumped on a trampoline with the rabbi and five of his sons.
  - vi At the National Havurah Committee Summer Institute, I taught: "We Need Something Different: Empathic Listening to the Most Hated Religious Groups in America."