

At a hi-tech platform, ancient wisdom still holds true



by Lev Tsitrin

Looking for motes in people's eye may have been lucrative for a "head of trust and safety at Twitter," but the good salary apparently came with its risks. That's one lesson I learned from a long, rambling, plaintive, and occasionally incoherent "[guest essay](#)" in the *New York Times* by one Yoel Roth, who for a long time held that position. Lording over small fry must have been both easy and fun; but when the mote was found in Mr. Trump's eye ("Following the violence of Jan. 6, I helped make the call to ban his account"), the going became tough. "Nothing prepared me for what would happen next ... Inundated with threats, and with no real options to push back or protect ourselves, my husband and I had to sell our home and move."

Please breath easy – Mr. Roth is safe and sound; he is still

well-connected, since the *New York Times* is happy to publish him, and he is by no means destitute, being now “a visiting scholar at the University of Pennsylvania and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.” I picked his story not for its graphic horror, but because of yet another lesson it teaches, it being a fascinating instance of the famous two-thousand-year-old parable that talks of motes and beams in people’s eyes.

For, upon closer inspection of Mr. Roth’s, some noticed rather large beams in them – in the form of “very disturbing views about minors and child porn” – beams which Mr. Roth hastened to reduce in his “guest essay” to mere motes, i.e., “carelessly tweeted jokes.” I guess it was hardly a joking matter when “at a congressional hearing focused on ... Twitter’s alleged censorship ... members of Congress held up oversize posters of [his] years-old tweets and asked [him] under oath whether [he] still held those opinions.”

Nor were Mr. Roth’s protestations disputing “claims that Silicon Valley platforms are biased against conservatives,” particularly persuasive after “The New York Post put several of [his] tweets making fun of Mr. Trump and other Republicans on its cover.” Yet again, Mr. Roth tried to shrink those beams – that put in grave doubt his impartiality – to motes, explaining that “I had posted them years earlier, when I was a student and had a tiny social media following of mostly my friends and family. Now, they were front-page news.” No wonder (to all but Mr. Roth, that is) that “Later that day, Mr. Trump tweeted that I was a ‘hater’”!

“Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother’s eye.” Though I am not among those who worships as God the person who said it, I will be the first to admit to his profound wisdom – which, it turns out, applies even to so exalted a person as the “head of trust and safety at Twitter” – someone who, given his apparently superior knowledge of

Truth, should be above all reproach, reigning over our opinions as some social media Pope.

So, given the fact that motes (and even beams!) can be found in the eye of so all-knowing a person as Mr. Roth, the question becomes, should social media be constantly purified of invective and lie by the “heads of trust and safety”? Or should it be sufficient that the users themselves dispute and debunk others’ positions they find untrue and repugnant (which is exactly what social media should be all about, after all) – even allowing the occasional use of abusive terms? (I noticed that, when I call a fellow-user a “moron,” the Twitter/X automatically asks for a confirmation of whether I indeed want to go ahead with the message. I click “yes” – and the matter is solved).

Self-regulation via users’ back-and-forth is, I think, the best way to do business on social media. “More speech” may indeed be the best solution for “bad speech.” So, I think that, despite Mr. Roth’s protestations, Twitter/X lost precisely nothing by firing him – and if he indeed brings value to the University of Pennsylvania and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, we all gain. Plus, he gave us yet another confirmation of the present-day validity of the ancient parable of a mote and a beam that, unbeknownst to Mr. Roth, is the main lesson of his “guest essay.”