



Yom Kippur 5768

Evil

Six years have passed since the airplanes slammed into the World Trade Center. On that day, President Bush declared: "Today our nation saw evil." The president said "We saw evil," not "we saw an evil act." President Bush used the word "evil" as a noun -- "We saw evil" -- as if evil exists as an entity with its own shape and texture and name. Some even claimed to see the face of evil -- the image of Satan -- in the smoke pouring from the towers.

This way of speaking of evil might make us uncomfortable. It's not a word we Jews tend to use in every day speech. But we do use the word on this holy day. As we read the Yom Kippur liturgy, we confront evil and we confess evil.

In Hebrew, the word is "*Ra*" -- spelled with the letters *resh* and *ayin*. On this day we confess the sin of yielding to our *yetzer hara*, our Evil Inclination; we confess the sin of *ritzat ragliyim l'hara* -- of running to do evil. And we confess the sin of *l'shon hara*, evil speech.

But what do we really mean when we talk about evil?

I learned my most important lesson about evil many years ago. My teacher was a gentle Scottish man named Mr. Campbell, a brave educator in my high school, a school with almost no Jews. Mr. Campbell devoted several weeks to the study of the Holocaust. He spared us no detail. We saw images of the crematoria pouring smoke into the sky. We saw stiffened corpses in crude wooden wagons, and bodies stacked like kindling, rows upon rows. We saw the frightened young boy with the thin legs as he walked from the Warsaw ghetto, hands raised in surrender.

Those images devastated me. In them, I saw evil. My friend and I would leave Mr. Campbell's class and sit in silence on the swings of a deserted playground. We couldn't bear to go on with our normal routines, to return to our mundane lessons of geometry and biology. We had seen evil, and now this evil darkened our world.

But we did find light in this darkness: the light of our own moral superiority. How could those Germans have let this happen? How could they not have smelled

the smoke rising from the crematorium at Dachau? How could the churchgoers in the town of Auschwitz been unaware of what was happening? How could the Poles not have seen the trains as they traveled through their towns, or heard the frightened cries of the people aboard? How could the citizens of Lublin not remarked on the absence of 40,000 Jews from a city of 100,000?

My friend and I held on to our moral superiority like a security blanket. We wrapped ourselves in it to keep the images of suffering from invading our dreams. We assured ourselves that we were better than those Germans who closed their eyes to the suffering and murder all around them. We were different from those Nazis who ensured that the murdering bureaucracy operated smoothly. We were not like those “good people” who somehow failed to see the slaughter of millions of Jews, gypsies, and homosexuals. We would never have allowed such evil to flourish!

Much of the world felt the same moral superiority in the years following the Holocaust. The Nazis – and those who capitulated to them – were considered to be inhuman – monsters – creatures qualitatively different from us.

Adolf Eichmann, a high ranking Nazi official who facilitated and managed the logistics of the mass deportation and murder of Jews during the Holocaust, protested this characterization during his trial in Jerusalem. Eichmann said: “I am not the monster that I am made out to be. I am the victim of an error of judgement....I am guilty of having been obedient, having subordinated myself to my official duties.”

My friend and I scoffed at Eichmann’s excuses.

One day, Mr. Campbell gave us our assignment that would conclude our study of the Holocaust. We were to engage in a reenactment of the trial of Hermann Göring, the commander of Germany’s air force. One student would take the role of the defendant; another student the prosecutor, still others would play the parts of eyewitnesses and judges. We would be responsible for conducting our own research about the defendant and the crimes of which he was accused. But the verdict rendered by the classroom judges would not be based on history. Instead, the judges would rule based on the strength of our arguments.

Mr. Campbell assigned to me the part of the attorney for the defense. At first I objected – how could I defend this Nazi? But Mr. Campbell insisted that I take the part he had assigned. I wanted to please him and I wanted an “A” in his class. That was my job, after all. I was supposed to be a good student, to do what Mr. Campbell asked of me. So I didn’t think about the images of the crematoria, of the corpses, or of the little boy walking out of the Warsaw ghetto. I thought only of winning the case.

I carefully constructed my defense of Hermann Göring. No one had ever witnessed Göring actually killing another human being. This became the centerpiece of my argument.

In real life, Göring had been found guilty by the judges at Nuremberg: Guilty of conspiracy to wage war, of crimes against peace, of war crimes, and crimes against humanity. The judges found no mitigating circumstances, and he was sentenced to death.

The judges in our classroom reenactment came to a different conclusion. They found Göring “not guilty.” As I heard their verdict I felt a momentary rush of joy at my victory. In the next moment, I realized with horror what I had done. My sense of moral superiority vanished. In that instant, I recognized that I had done something evil.

You see, I knew in my heart that Göring was guilty. Like Eichmann, he was an important cog in the Nazi killing machine. But I ignored that feeling; I ignored the images of suffering I had seen, and I got swept away in winning the argument. That was evil.

And I don't forgive myself because it was just an assignment, no harm done. In fact, harm could have been done. Some of my classmates might still believe, to this day, that Göring was in fact innocent. They might still believe that only the people doing the actual killing can be found guilty of genocide.

And even more important: if I had been able so easily to quell my conscience in a classroom exercise, with nothing but a good grade at stake, how could I say that I would have done the right thing during the Holocaust? On the day of that classroom verdict, I felt, with startling clarity, that I could have easily been among those who ignored the cries of the suffering, and who pretended not to smell the smoke of the crematoria. This is how evil lives.

On that day in the classroom, I learned something about myself that is consistent with what Judaism teaches about human nature: that evil is not something separate and apart from us. It is part of our very nature.

Our earliest rabbis taught that each of us is created with a *yetzer hara*, an evil inclination. We have an impulse to hate and destroy, to pursue our own gain with reckless greed, to remain indifferent to the suffering of others, to follow orders even when we know we should not. This is a part of who we are.

We cannot truly learn the lessons of the Day of Atonement without recognizing the *yetzer hara* within us. Otherwise, our confessions of our own evil are just words, weightless and fleeting. And so our life will continue on an unaltered course. And our world will continue on an unaltered course. And we will see no end to the heartache, the bloodshed, the suffering. Eventually the hope that our

children and grandchildren will inherit a better world will sputter and die, extinguished by our despair.

But this is not who we are. We are here in the synagogue today because we cling to hope – the hope that we can change. We are here today because we believe that one day, our world will be redeemed, and that we are the ones who will make this world what it should be. This hope is at the core of our religious faith; it is the hope that has sustained our people throughout our painful history.

We have this hope because we are creatures who also possess a *yetzer hatov*, an impulse for good. We have an impulse to love and create, to give selflessly of ourselves, to relieve suffering, to disobey immoral orders, to turn our enemies into our friends. This goodness is also a part of us, embedded into the core of our nature.

And this is the part that we want to awaken and nourish on this holy day. Our fasting, our prayers, our confessions, our coming together during these hours are all acts intended to rouse the best part of our nature. That's why we are here. We are here because we have faith in the power of our goodness and in our ability to change.

On this holy day, may we cling ever strongly to that faith in the power of our goodness. In this faith lie our strength and our hope.

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