

“The Danger when the Enemy and Evil become One”

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There is a quip from the great Lev Tolstoy that I often return to in moments when I find myself baffled by the seemingly incomprehensible ways of the world. Tolstoy said, “Everyone wants to change the world, and no one wants to change themselves.” It’s a nice reminder in times like ours that are overwrought with a combination of political turmoil and self-help obsession. One could rightfully ask, “Isn’t our culture overly concerned with the self, isn’t the very notion of the ‘self’ a product of modernity as philosopher Charles Taylor argued in his book *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity?*” We may be concerned with ourselves, how to look better, how to feel better, how to cope better, but that is different than actually changing the self. And changing the self into what, exactly?

The question of what it is to be human is not a modern question: it is a question that has occupied thinkers from many societies throughout history. So how do we, as Jews on RH, negotiate the two foci, what it is to be a Jew, and what it is to be human? One might think they are the same, and yet, perhaps ironically in our times, I am not quite sure. Toggling between these two questions has occupied much of my time in this tumultuous year.

I begin with two personal anecdotes. First, a few weeks ago I spoke at a conference sponsored by *Jewish Currents*, a progressive Jewish magazine that has taken what some deem an anti-Zionist or at best non-Zionist position on the present war. The topic of the panel was “Judaism after Zionism.” We were asked to speak about the rise of non and anti-Zionism among a younger generation of American Jews in response to the devastation in Gaza as a response to the massacre on October 7th. But I decided to begin with a preamble that I have wanted to say publicly for some time. Speaking to a packed audience of over 300 people, mostly Jewish, and very much on the Left I made the case that the choice to not categorically condemn the massacre on October 7th was a significant mistake that we need on the Left to do teshuva during this month of Elul. That while I agree with anti-coloniality, that the occupation is immoral and illegal, and that the war in Gaza is horrific and inexcusable, I cannot stand in solidarity against this war with people who think the killing of 1,200 people, mostly civilians, on October 7th was a legitimate

exercise of resistance. I urged those listening to explore their conscience even while recognizing that October 7th didn't fall from the sky but had a context, and that as hegemon and occupiers, we Jews were complicit in that context. I receive some tepid applause.

My colleague, a well-regarded scholar in an Ivy League university, an Israeli of Algerian descent, responded to me by saying she could not unequivocally condemn October 7th, arguing that it was a form of resistance against a brutal occupation, and that even given the deaths of innocent civilians, such resistance was both inevitable and, while lamentable, does not merit unequivocal condemnation. She received somewhat more robust applause.

As this encounter unfolded it gave me pause, not so much on the argument about condemnation, or even my colleague's views. What really hit me was what I determined (correctly or not I do not know) a kind of lack of empathy, can I even say humanity, in the response to her comments. Mind you, the audience was mostly Jews, maybe even some who you know. My point is not to enter into the detailed nature of the claims made, but in the way these claims are discussed and the reactions they evoke.

The second example occurred a few weeks ago after the military operation whereby Israel was able to blow up pagers and walkie-talkies in Lebanon, killing close to 100 people and wounding thousands, many of whom lost limbs, eyes, organs, and suffered serious facial disfiguration. I do not want to comment on the merit or legitimacy of such an operation as I am not equipped to do so. I am more interested in examining the Jewish reaction I witnessed. In the days that followed, social media was aplomb with jokes, memes, sarcastic comments, and celebratory humor (much of it racist in my view) about the deaths and maiming of people in Lebanon. When I pushed back on some of the more egregious comments, I was skewered and accused of "taking things too seriously," of "being overly judgmental," or, in a sense, being a "buzz kill," and claims that my view ran counter to scriptural verses that allow for the celebration of the deaths of the wicked. There are, of course, numerous verses in Psalms that suggest, "the destruction of the wicked is joyous" and also a verse from Proverbs (17:24) that we should not "take joy in the destruction of our enemies." So, which is it? I will return to that below.

For now, what struck me was similar to what I felt at the panel I spoke about above, albeit in the inverse. I am not a pacifist. I understand, even as I lament, war, and I understand that we Jews, like every other people on earth and throughout history, have enemies, and there are times when

we have to defend ourselves against them. That is quite different from celebrating their death, or joking about bodies lying in a pool of blood, of children who are now blind, or woman who will now spend the rest of their lives in a wheel chair because they happened to go shopping in the shuk when the pagers blew up.

One of the early self-descriptions in Israel was that the IDF was an army that embodied the notion of “*yorim u bohim*.” That is, we shoot to defend ourselves, but as we shoot, we cry that we have to shoot to defend ourselves. Now it seems, in Gaza and in Lebanon it has become “*yorim u zahakim*” “we shoot and then we laugh,” we make jokes as we kill, we feel justified to kill, and yet, when we are killed, we feel unjustifiably victimized. Yes, I know, I am exaggerating, but as the scholar of religion, Jonathan Z Smith once said, sometimes, “disciplined exaggeration [can be] in the service of knowledge.”

In any event, I stand before you this Rosh Ha-Shana, approaching the anniversary of the atrocities of October 7th, on the verge of the one year anniversary of the beginning destruction of the final destruction of Gaza, I think of those who applaud when someone says mass murder of Israelis is legitimate resistance, and when Jews laugh at the death and maiming of those who are our enemies and those who are not, and I ask myself, “What kind of people are we becoming?” Where is our humanity? Where is the tradition that implores us to be a “nation of priests and a holy nation,” to be an exemplary people who carry a tradition that views everyone as created “in the image of God.”

In the 19th century some Jews had this idea that the only way to solve the “Jewish Question” that is, how can Jews become fully a part of the modern world, is through nationalism. That we could create a nation-state that would combine the humanistic tradition born from centuries of exile that we carry within a political structure of sovereignty. It was a powerful idea, novel, and by 1933 it became a necessity. And it happened. We lost six million innocent souls but we created what we thought would solve our problem to become “like all the nations.” This is what the Israelites asked Moshe in the desert when they asked him for a king. This is what the Jews asked Samuel when they asked him for a king. This is what Zionists said when they asked “how can we never again go like sheep to the slaughter?” We will be different, we opined, while also being the same. That was the wager. That was *our* wager. I don’t think we adequately weighed that decision mostly because we never had the time to do so. History intervened and we were thrust

forward into the darkness only to emerge in a new world, wounded, traumatized, but resolute that we do have a future. And our future lies in sovereignty.

The Swiss historian of the Renaissance Jakob Burckhardt once said, “power is evil.” Martin Buber tweaked him to say, “power is evil only when it is power over others.” But I think both are right. It is not that those who wield power over others are evil by definition, but power is a force too strong to enable those with power over others to avoid power’s abuse. And part of that is not the only the physicality of power but also the psychological mechanisms that justifies it. In a way, that is even more dangerous because it disables self-criticism. And what pray tell, is Rosh Ha-Shana if not a mechanism of self-criticism. Here evil is not that we want to do bad things. It is that we think everything we do is justifiable. Sometimes evil is dressed in the justifying cloak of the good. It is the erasure of the accusation of evil, which only perpetuates, evil.

In the early 20th century at the onset of psychoanalysis the phenomenon of hypnosis became a very common trope among European thinkers. I want to mention two instances where hypnosis plays a role among Jewish thinkers of that period, the Zionist Aaron David Gordon and the ultra-Orthodox pacifist Aaron Shmuel Tamares. I evoke these two because I think “hypnosis” may be an operative way to get at where we are today as Jews.

Gordon arrives in Ottoman Palestine from Russia in 1904 at the beginning of what is known as the Second Aliyah. Many of the Jews who arrived at that time were secular Marxists. For them, Zionism was a revolutionary movement that they thought would solve the Jewish Question by working the land and becoming a part of the international workers revolution embodied a bit later in Trotsky’s 1938 Fourth International.

A socialist by nature, Gordon was very critical of Jewish Marxists mostly because he believed they were “hypnotized” by Marxist ideology that saw the human dilemma totally in material terms. In an essay from 1921 called “The Clarification of our Idea from its Roots” Gordon argued that the Marxist idea that individuals would attain their full potential by subsuming themselves in the collective, was mistaken. Gordon was critical of their materialist view of human development and argued that Zionism was valuable, even essential to Jewish flourishing, because it offered an alternative to what he called diasporic parasitism and enabled the reconstruction of the Jewish self through labor on the land. The collective was, for Gordon, the occasion and not goal of Zionism, which was a path toward the reconstitution of Jewish selfhood

and connection to the cosmic source of nature. Gordon was equally critical of capitalism for reasons having to do with its focus on individualistic materialism.

Around the same time, in the early 1920s, both responding to the devastation of World War I an ultra-Orthodox rabbi in a small town in Belarus penned a book called *Knesset Yisrael un Milkhamot Ha-Goyim* where, among many other things, he claimed the Jews have been “hypnotized” by nationalism and are in danger of succumbing to the hazards of such a concept that had just destroyed Europe. Like others in his time, Aaron Shmuel Tamares recognized the deep problems in nationalism as a collective identity and tried to veer Jews away from becoming “like all the nations.” The use of collective hypnosis was an interesting diagnosis to what appeared to be an unimaginable turn of events in communal life. How could Jews, as Jews, be Marxists Gordon opined, and how could Jews, as Jews, after seeing the destruction of World War I, become nationalists?

For those of you who have even been hypnotized, I have, it is a truly macabre experience. One remains fully conscious, fully aware of the environment around you, you hear people talking, laughing at you as you do stupid things you are asked to do, and yet you do them anyway. It’s as if you abandon your agency to the will of someone else without any real understanding as to why. You become convinced of something that is not processed through your own faculties of reason.

It is interesting that Gordon and Tamares chose the term “hypnosis” to describe the Jews of their time. The error of Marxism for Gordon was that it ignored the very thing Zionism could achieve, the very thing that would revive the Jewish spirit, the very act of aware of the nature of the Jewish soul and its potential, not to live as an isolated people but to fully participate in humanity. And for Tamares, nationalism seemed like a viable alternative that seemed to enable Jews to become part of the world, as Jews, but ignored that the necessity of violence, for what kind of state is not violent. This was part of the price of nationalism. After centuries of exclusion the Jews wanted to be part of the world, and in doing so, Tamares argued, they were willing to abandon their very reason for being, to carry the message and ethics of Torah as a gift to humanity to counter the nationalism that had destroyed Europe. The goal of the Jew was not to become “like the other nations,” but participate in the world by offering an alternative to

nationalism. But alas, the storm of history came too quickly, and with such vehemence, that such warnings were swept away.

Why focus on hypnosis today? Firstly, Rosh ha-Shana is a time to become awake. What else does the shofar do except wake us up from the slumber of the year, from the routines, from the justifications, from the ways we unconsciously abandon agency by being inundated with information, data, the manipulative strains of advertising, and others telling us what to do, what to believe, what to wear, how to think about ourselves, our lives, our futures. The shofar is like the snap of the finger of the hypnotist, bringing us back to ourselves, as it were, from someplace else we call “the world.” But that is not so easy in part because we become convinced by the hypnotists snap that their reality, not our conscience, is true, or justified. In that state of hypnosis, certainly today, we are not only losing ourselves, we are losing our humanity. I think to some degree (and I am sure some will disagree) we have become hypnotized by this inchoate and overdetermined phrase “total victory.” As historians of war and conflict will tell you, rarely does this kind of conflict yield total victory. In our time we can see it in Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen, and Sudan. “Total victory” is in my view the hypnotic mantra that enables death and destruction to continue unabated and, more troublingly, justified.

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I want to return now to a distinction I raised earlier, between an enemy and evil. All groups have enemies. And of course, there is evil in the world. But the identification of the enemy with evil is more complicated. In an essay on Kierkegaard, “The Question of the Single One,” Martin Buber wrote, “Man is not radically this or that. Man is not good, man is not evil; he is, in a pre-eminent sense, good and evil together.” (“The Question of the Single One,” 1965, 77, 78). This is not to say that at times we as humans do, or think, evil things. But that is different than attributing “evil” to any one group. In the Torah, the only group that is “evil” is Amalek, and they should be eradicated. Only then does the Torah mandate genocide. But the rabbis determined we no longer can identify Amalek, and thus genocidal eradication of evil is essentially erased. Thus almost all enemies, even those who clearly act in an evil manner are not, by definition, evil. If they were, genocide would be warranted, as it was with Amalek in the Torah. But this is a hard sell. We often equate the enemy and evil in ways that justify how we react to them. And this gets us into trouble, not only with tradition, but with our humanity.

The Psalmist tells us we can celebrate the destruction of evil but Proverbs warns us not to take joy in the eradication of an enemy. But what is the difference? Are all enemies evil? If so, then we are all evil in the sense that everyone is an enemy of someone. And our enemies consider us, evil. But there is a difference. Enemies, like disputants, have reasons why they hate others, even if we agree with those reasons (Nazism may be the exception here in that their so-called reasons were fabrications for the purposes of destruction). The reason may not justify hateful actions, heinous actions, and the actions may be evil, but the opposition, even hatred, that propelled these actions, isn't. It is all too convenient to fuse an enemy with evil, many peoples do it, in part because it justifies any actions taken against them, it makes every conflict into a zero-sum game. Again, the Torah relegates evil to only one people: Amalek. But by erasing Amalek as a category in real time don't the sages essentially drive a wedge between enemy and evil? For example, we can negotiate and make peace with our enemies but there is no negotiation with evil.

We can feel good and even celebrate the destruction of the enemy because we deem them evil. This, I submit, is our hypnotic state, we have been lured into believing in the equivalence of two related but different phenomena. We may have to fight the enemy, and even at times kill them to protect ourselves, but Proverbs tells us, "Do not take joy in the destruction of the enemy." Evil is different because evil is not only our enemy, evil is the enemy of the world we want to inhabit. To destroy evil is to enable us to inhabit a world without it. Thus, the Psalmist says, "in the destruction of evil take joy."

The shofar can be that instrument that enables us to distinguish between evil and the enemy. It can wake us up from the hypnosis we all experience as we process all the information we absorb from all directions. But this is not easy, because others are deeply invested in that hypnotic state for mostly self-serving reasons. If we justify our existence through hypnosis, we engage in self-deception. The hypnotic state is not real, And it cannot last. And it does not produce "the good."

I conclude this section with a passage from Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five* that sadly resonates today: "I have told my sons that they are not under any circumstances to take part in massacres, and that the news of massacres of enemies is not to fill them with satisfaction or glee. I have also told them not to work for companies which make massacre machinery, and to express contempt for people who need machinery like that."

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And here I return to my two examples above. Believing that mass murder is somehow justified as an act of legitimate resistance and thinking dead bodies in pools of blood, children blinded and women maimed, somehow merits a clever joke and funny meme is acting in a hypnotic state. The only justification is that the victims (Israelis or Hezbollah) are evil, and the author of Proverbs says, “in the destruction of evil take joy.” If you question that, you are either too sensitive, or *you* are the enemy. “How dare you chastise me for taking joy in the destruction of evil? Its in the Torah!”. But what if they are just the enemy, even if they have no right to commit mass murder as an expression of that hate? Snap goes the finger of the hypnotist. False distinction, fake news, no proof.

Here is where war not only destroys bodies, it kills souls, not the souls of the victims but the souls of the perpetrators. All murder is, in some way, suicide. And I stand before you this RH and say with both anguish and pain; we are destroying our souls by justifying fusing the enemy with evil. It enables us to become a people who can laugh at those we kill, make fun of death, dance on the rubble of bombed out buildings where dead bodies lie that have not yet been identified. We abandon our humanity by mistaking the enemy for evil, not evil actions, those certainly took place, but evil incarnate such that eradication is not only justified, by obligatory.

I am not a military expert. I can't truly assess if what we are doing is necessary. If it meets any objectives. But I am a rabbi, and if clergy have any role in this unfolding disaster, and I'm not sure we do, national disaster, human disaster, it is to assess the toll it is taking on the souls of our people. And I stand before you and say, “it is taking a very deep and dangerous toll.” Are sacrificing our humanity to defend the policies of a nation-state that may make us more, and not less vulnerable? Are becoming “like all the nations,” but in the wrong way. I ask these as questions worth considering not necessarily proclamations I am defending.

All of us are reading the same liturgy these two days, we are affirming a creator, master of all creatures, we are asking for forgiveness. But for what, exactly? What have we done wrong? Gossip? Lying? Overeating? But where have we erred *as a people* when we justify everything we are doing as “necessary” or “legitimate”? When *they* are always at fault, whoever *they* are.

Tolstoy said we want to change the world but not ourselves. And Aaron David Gordon, who read Tolstoy closely intervened and argued that we, the Jews, can't change ourselves unless we *are* ourselves. So how do we become ourselves? Gordon thought he knew. I can't say I know for

sure. But perhaps it begins with taking the shofar as a wake-up call seriously. Perhaps stepping out of the hypnotic state of excuses and justification. Or some false sense of invincibility. Perhaps by recognizing that some enemies have a right to be enemies. That not all enemies are evil. That death is final and, even if we must sometimes become killers, we should recognize that taking a life is no occasion for humor or grotesque celebration. I wish we could become a people who “shoots and cries.” I don’t know if we ever were, but if we choose to have a state, that is the true aspiration. But that is not who we are now. This is not who we have become. Its not even clear to me this is who we want to be anymore.

So, who are we? It seems to me today we have become survivalists, even unwittingly. And survivalists only care about one thing at the expense of everything else. But in some way, perhaps, survivalists are those who have already abandoned Torah, because survivalism tacitly rejects the covenant where God tells the Jews, promises the Jews, I will make sure you are not erased. In parshat Ki Tavo we read a few weeks ago, we read, “And God affirmed this day that you are, as promised, God’s treasured people who shall observe all the commandments, and God will set you, in fame and renown, high above all the nations...and that you shall be a holy people to your God.” (Deut 27:18, 19).

God states that he may punish us for transgression, but God will make sure we survive, because we carry something to the world. The notion of *segulah* (treasure) in ‘*am segulah* is not a reference to a people, but to a people who carry the Torah itself. Survivalists, in some way, consciously or not, have already rejected that, so maybe they are right. If you reject what God put you in this world to do, then you better be a survivalist, because you have forfeited any divine protection you once had. I can understand that in some way this is part of the collective trauma of the Shoah. But regardless it is worth pointing out and thinking through the consequences of such a choice.

So, I suggest something else. Let’s reject survivalism, not in a fatalistic way, but in a holy way. Let’s find a place in ourselves that recognizes that we have a role to play in this world and part of that is not becoming the worst iteration of ourselves, which is often the consequence of war. In some way, becoming our worst selves is quite easy; mix fear and trauma with power, deny wrongdoing and adopt exceptionalism, take everything the prophets said and invert it. It’s a witches brew, and perhaps it will work. Perhaps we will survive. But we will no longer be

interesting people, we will no longer be a holy people, we will become the problem that we were put into this world to correct. To simply be “like all the nations.” Listen to the shofar, it is trying to tell you something. It may be the last station before the banality of normalcy consumes us.