



Sermon Spark - In the Presence of Evil
Parashat Lekh L'kha (5784 / 2023)
By Rabbi Amy Levin

"Harry felt rooted to the spot. He couldn't move a muscle. Petrified he watched as Quirrell reached up and began to unwrap his turban. What was going on? The turban fell away.... Where there should have been a back to Quirrell's head, there was a face, the most terrible face Harry had ever seen. It was chalk white with glaring eyes and slits for nostrils, like a snake.

"See what I have become?" the face said. "Mere shadow and vapor ... I have form only when I can share another's body ... but there have always been those willing to let me into their hearts and minds."

The ghastly speaker is Lord Voldemort, the embodiment of evil in the popular Harry Potter series. What rings true for us as in this passage is that the way evil is woven into Harry Potter's world is the way we witness evil in the real world.

The nature of evil is on our minds this Shabbat. We cannot avoid the word "evil", as we see videos and hear reports of the acts committed on the Israeli side of the Gaza border. These acts challenge our sense of well-being, our ability to trust other human beings. We've long let go of the child's fairy tale God sitting on a throne of cloud and punishing evildoers with a well-aimed bolt of lightning.

Grandfathers, grandmothers, mothers, fathers, sons, and daughters, granddaughters and grandsons. Fiancées, newlyweds, children and babies. Every precious human murdered or maimed was a person who had made plans for the rest of the day, the rest of the week, the rest of their lives. Just like the plans we make.

It is all the more incomprehensible that the terrorists who swarmed through Israel's border area near Gaza invoked "Allah" as they committed one barbaric act after another.

This Shabbat of Lekh L'kha, we read of God's directive to Avram to take himself and his family to the land God will show him ... and there Avram will be renamed "Avraham" the father of many nations ... and as the history of human faith has unfolded, we have found ourselves, along with our Christian and Muslim "cousins"... all the progeny of Avraham.

And we know that our God, whether invoked as Elohim or Allah, does not condone evil.

As far as those who have sold their souls to evil are concerned, the identities of their hundreds of victims as individuals are irrelevant. Their location and their innocence are what qualify them as victims. This randomness is one of the things that makes evil so insidious. .

If you review the history of the regimes that have engaged in the random murder of innocent people in the name of righting the wrongs done to their own people, you will see that those same regimes did precious little to actually help their victimized populations. Hitler, Stalin,



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Sada'am Hussein, Arafat, Osama Bin Laden, Bashar Assad: None of these men cared for the health, safety or well-being of the people in whose name they destroyed. People who perpetrate these acts are not freedom fighters. There is no elevating scenario which justifies their actions. The point of the destruction is destruction. The point of the evil is to show that evil has power.

Incomprehensibly, evil seems to be an integral part of creation. An integral part of the creature "Adam" created by God. There has been no moment of human history in which the choice to do evil was not available to us. Why did God establish such a flawed being as the culmination of the act of creation?

I commend to you the rabbis of the Talmud as superb psychologists: these scholars, active in establishing post -Temple Judaism almost 2000 years ago described two urges, two polarized forces comprising the human spirit: *Yetzer ha-tov*, the urge attracted to good and *yetzer ha-ra*, the urge attracted to evil, the two inextricably bound up in each human spirit. The two eternally at odds in each human spirit.

God did create beings with but one of these urges . . . The angels have just yetzer ha-tov, the impulse to do God's will, to obey, to accept passively.. These are the creatures who surround God's celestial throne eternally chanting "kadosh, kadosh, kadosh....". Worthy creatures but, apparently, God craved praise from beings who would have to choose to praise God instead of being hard-wired to praise God.

People whose actions we consider evil...Hitler and Bin Laden and Assad...choose to give up the struggle, choose to give themselves over to the yetzer ha-ra . . . "there have always been those willing to let me into their hearts and minds . . ."

It is clear to which *yetzer* the Hamas terrorists succumbed..

So, it seems, we must resign ourselves to the presence of evil in the world. Indeed, the best case scenario seems to be that humans universally commit ourselves to limiting the scope of evil in the world. But we would see that best case scenario only if every human being, at any given moment, consistently negotiated a balance between the yetzer ha-tov and the yetzer ha-ra and opted for the creative tension of balance instead of living under the sway of one (passivity, subservience) or the other (greed, unharnessed cruelty).

Faith, crucial as it is, is not enough to stave off despair. We also need action.

"Evil," Heschel wrote, "is not only a threat, it is also a challenge. Neither the recognition of the peril, nor faith in the redemptive power of God is sufficient to solve the tragic predicament of the world. We cannot stem the tide of evil by taking refuge in synagogues, by fervently imploring the restrained omnipotence of God.



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The Midrash teaches us that it is our actions that will defeat evil. Said Israel before The Holy One, "Sovereign of the Universe, you know the strength of the Evil Inclination which is very hard, it's very strong." Said the Holy One to them, "stone it, attack it somewhat in this world and I will remove it from you in the time to come."

As Heschel surmises: "At the end of days, evil will be conquered by The One; in historic times, evils must be conquered one by one."

None of us, individually, has the capacity to address, or even comprehend, massive, primordial evil. But each of us does have the potential to know the difference between good and evil in ourselves and in others and to attack evil "somewhat" when we encounter it.

A second Jewish response to evil is Tikkun Olam, the repair of the world. We can address senseless hatred, the denial of the soul in other humans. We can address ignorance and poverty as individuals and as a community. We can commit our best selves and our best energies to repairing that which is broken in the human soul and in human society.

We are outraged when unbridled evil, cruelty, merciless destruction is committed in the name of the God we ostensibly share with Muslim and Christian people of faith. We know ... as do true adherents of Islam and Christianity ... that the name of God, the name Allah, has been shamelessly taken in vain.

Those Hamas militants were brainwashed, even drugged, to commit the unspeakable acts that began on October 7th. They themselves have been sacrificed by leaders who do not in the least care for their well-being or the well-being of the civilian residents of Gaza.

No matter where we are in the world, we are coming together this Shabbat to hold each other and support each other as we take in the cruelty of Hamas. We in Israel pray that you will be with us, in your prayers, in your neshamot, with your intellect and your integrity, as we house and feed and hold close the broken families of the south, as our IDF forces prepare to eliminate Hamas from our border. As we protect our families and our friends.

May Adonai bless God's people with peace. May Adonai grant strength to God's people

ה' עוז לעמו יתן ... ה' יברך את עמו בשלום