

Naming Evil Yom Kippur 2017-5778

When I was a student at Hebrew Union College, I had a professor who once said to us that all rabbis have only one, or two, or, at the most, three sermons that they just keep giving over and over again, but in different forms. I have been a rabbi for 37 years, and I have delivered sermons for 40 years, if you count my student pulpits. And I am probably as guilty of that analysis as any other rabbi. If you have been paying attention, you probably have already figured that out. I can look back over these 40 years and recognize some consistent themes, motifs, and messages. The danger is, when you do that, you sometimes discover that you were wrong.

Over the years I have taught that life is complicated. It is full of nuance and ambiguity. Life is lived in the in-betweens, the liminal spaces of doorways that force us to accept a world of balance, not black and white, but gray. I always argued against absolutism and certitude.

But as I read from Deuteronomy this morning, from Nitzavim, it is clear that the Torah makes no such subtle distinction. The Torah says there is good and evil, life and death. Choose life. Choose the good. Reject evil. Choose!

Perhaps it has taken me too long to acknowledge that there really is evil. I began to change my outlook after 9/11. I realize that there were some who were offended by what I said that year. I placed all the blame on the terrorists. Some did not hear me acknowledge the role that colonialism, imperialism, American capitalism and the export and imposition of western bias played in creating the world view of the terrorists, but my message then was, evil was evil. But overall, I remained committed to the idea that we must live with ambiguity.

Like many of you this week, I have been riveted to the PBS series by Ken Burns: Vietnam. I think my questioning of the absolutes of good and evil can be traced to my own personal experiences of that time period. The other night, the Vietnam series focused on the year 1968. I remember it well. I graduated high school on June 6, 1968, the morning Robert F. Kennedy was assassinated. I turned 18 at the end of that summer. My birthday dinner that night ended in a major family battle in reaction to my announcement that I had no intention of being drafted for the war in Vietnam. My father was not known as a man who was "slow to anger." I lived out the "generation gap" during those subsequent years.

We were young people battling parents who had experienced World War II with the clarity of knowing it was a fight between good and evil. It was a war of the Allies versus the Axis powers. Our fathers came home from the Great War, and they knew they had beaten back evil. But in the 1960's, the lines were not so clear. We were confronted with a far more ambiguous war. It was difficult to know who, if anyone, was all good or all

bad. As the Burns documentary teaches, good, smart, well-intentioned people made horrific mistakes and lied to us. Robert McNamara, Dean Rusk, Lyndon Johnson, and Hubert Humphrey waged a war that nearly tore America apart.

Vietnam demonstrated to many of us that life had become complicated and that good and evil were not so easily categorized. Many of us even began to question the accepted shibboleths of the previous generation. In hindsight, even World War II was not so black and white. FDR had kept the doors closed to Jewish refugees. Japanese American citizens on the west coast were interned in concentration camps. There was the bombing of Dresden and the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. We questioned the heroes we were raised to venerate.

That sense of doubt and ambiguity helped shape me and form my world view of the grays and nuances. But perhaps I have grown a bit and matured. Sometimes the choices are clear. There was no equivalency then. Franklin Roosevelt was flawed, but Hitler was evil. They were not even in the same universe. Yes, Japanese Americans were unjustly interned in concentration camps, but they were not systematically murdered on an industrial scale. The Nazis were demonic. Hitler and the Nazis were unique. Anytime someone is cavalierly compared to Hitler, it diminishes the evil that was embodied in that man. There are no comparisons, and there are no equivalencies.

So now let me turn to Charlottesville. This was a truly shocking event in American history. We had a visceral reaction to a torch-lit parade, an organized phalanx of marchers in formation, united in their chants: “Jews will not replace us!” “Blood and Soil!” This took place on a Friday night in front of a Reform Synagogue meeting in Shabbat worship. It happened in America? Our America?

Charlottesville shocked America, and it especially shocked American Jews. Last week Reverend VanSlyke talked about our trip to Israel/Palestine as part of the Interfaith Partners for Peace initiative. As she said, rabbis and Protestant ministers spent ten days together travelling, studying, and exploring the many issues in that part of the world. But, for me, one of the more unusual aspects of the trip was the presence of a significant number of African American Protestant clergy. In all honesty, most of my interfaith work on the North Shore has been largely with white colleagues. When you travel with a group for ten days you become rather close, and you can speak honestly with each other.

One afternoon we were studying together at the Hartman Institute, when an African American minister turned to some of us rabbis and asked: “When did Jews become white?” That might seem a surprising question, but the answer was not always so clear. Today American Jews typically live lives of privilege and social and economic security. There might be instances of minor social anti-Semitism, but there is no institutional anti-Semitism, even at the highest levels of our society, not in commerce, or the universities, or our legal system. When Joe Lieberman was the vice presidential nominee in 2000, his religious background was not an issue at all. There are three Jewish Justices on the Supreme Court. There were no anti-Semitic attacks after the 2008 economic crisis. But have we been complacent or blind? Has it all been wishful thinking?

Perhaps Charlottesville was the moment when—at least for some Jews—we no longer felt quite so “White.”

Charlottesville exposed a frightening, ugly underbelly of anti-Semitism and racism still alive in America. We watched the marches and riots, the violence and death caused by the KKK, the Nazis, and white supremacists. I know there are those who would balance left wing violent anarchists against white nationalists and Nazis, but there is absolutely no equivalence there either. The AntiFa group may resort to violence and mayhem. They are provocateurs and anarchists. They need to be placed outside acceptable left wing action, just as the Weather Underground was in the 1970's. But their goal is not to deny other Americans their basic rights. The KKK, Nazis, White Supremacists have a clear agenda: to attack African Americans, Muslims, Jews, immigrants, and the LGBTQ members of our family.

Evil is Evil. Nazis, Klansmen, white nationalists, white supremacists are in a category unto themselves. They are not just about violence and intimidation. Their message is one of bigotry, hatred, racism, anti-Semitism, homophobia, misogyny, and xenophobia. They seek to deny others basic human rights and equality. The white nationalists are seeking to create an exclusively white Christian America, not a Catholic or main stream Protestant America, but theirs is a perverse racist notion of Christianity, completely contrary to the true teachings of Christianity.

The call for condemnation is non-partisan. Democrats, Republicans, Independents, Libertarians have all voiced their outrage. But not everyone has made those clear distinctions. Those who would hesitate to call evil, evil, help perpetrate, enable, and legitimize those forces and attitudes antithetical to American values.

“Fine people” do not march along side torch-bearing KKK members, for as soon as they join into that mob, they too are white supremacists, Nazis and Klansmen. Nazis and Klansmen are evil. Make your choice. There are no excuses. Evil must be named and called out. Choose your sides. Know what is evil. Expose it. Condemn it.

Our Torah begins in Eden. Adam and Eve are shown the Tree of Knowing, knowing good and bad. The human charge is to distinguish between the two. And the Torah nears its conclusion with today's Torah portion, Nitzavim, from Deuteronomy. Moses teaches: I place before you good and evil, life and death. Make your choice. Choose good. Choose life.

Perhaps I have learned something since 1968. Maybe I have matured a bit. A few years back I visited Normandy. Standing at Omaha Beach reminded me that life is not always all gray and ambiguous. Sometimes there is no nuance. If you haven't been to Omaha Beach, perhaps you have seen “Saving Private Ryan” or “Band of Brothers.” I know that some of you here today have even been on the Honor Flights to the World War II Memorial in Washington.

My trip to Normandy was extraordinarily powerful. It reminded me that perhaps my father was right. There is good and evil. I stood on Omaha Beach and picked up some stones, pebbles, and put a few in my pocket. (Hold up stones.) This afternoon, prior to the Yizkor service, I will place one of these stones on my father's yahrzeit plaque, for he served as a medic on Omaha Beach. He and his band of brothers defeated evil over seventy years ago. They could never have imagined Nazis marching in the streets of an American city. Even more, it would have been inconceivable that their evil would not have been condemned from the highest office in our nation.

That "Greatest Generation" defeated the forces of evil. Let us not permit this present generation to doubt, excuse, or deny through false equivalencies the reality of hatred, bigotry, racism, and anti-Semitism. We must name it, condemn it, and defeat it! We must choose! Choose life, justice, equality, human rights, and dignity. As we are taught: "It is your life and the length of your days. Then you shall endure in the land which the Eternal One has promised to you."

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