

On Contemplating Good and Evil

Rabbi Josh Burrows

Shana tova.

My name is Rabbi Josh Burrows – you know me better as your Cantor Gabi’s husband – and Before I begin my sermon today, I greet you with a word of thanks:

It’s been slightly over a year since my wife, daughter and I joined the Temple Sinai community. This synagogue has become a place for my wife to sing with you and pray with you, to serve happily as your cantor; a place for my daughter to learn and grow, make friends, and take important formative steps toward the woman Gabi and I pray every day she will become. I have such a profound respect for the history of rabbis who have stood here, and for your incredible rabbis who lead you today. And I am deeply honored to share this bima with them, with my wife, and this sanctuary with you. Very quickly Temple Sinai has become home for us. And I will be forever thankful to you all for that... (pause)

We contemplate good and evil...

Earlier in our service we read from our prayer books the following text, “This Rosh Hashanah, each of us enters this sanctuary with a different need. Some hearts are full of gratitude and joy: They are overflowing with the happiness of love and the joy of life ... Some hearts ache with sorrow: Disappointments weigh heavily upon them, and they have tasted despair ... Some hearts are embittered: They have sought answers in vain; have had their ideals mocked and betrayed: life has lost its meaning and value ... May we in our common need gain strength from one another: sharing our joys, lightening each other’s burdens, and praying for the welfare of our community.”

The words are genius and deeply comforting. They remind us that, though each of us come here today with different needs, we are ultimately here for the same purpose. For today we contemplate good and evil – we contemplate the good things that have happened to us, and the evil, difficult things that have happened to us. We contemplate the changes in our lives over the past year. We contemplate the changes in our world over the past year. We count our losses. We count our blessings. We take note of the good, we take note of the bad, and we hope and pray for good.

For today, we spend our time contemplating good and evil...

This year, sadly, we've seen our share of evil. We consider, for example, the life of James von Brunn:

Born sometime in 1920 in Missouri – the state of my own birth – there isn't much known about James von Brunn's childhood. What is known about this dark, secretive man, is that he attended the Washington University in St. Louis, eventually became an officer in the United States Navy, and even commanded a small PT boat and crew during World War II.

We know that after the war von Brunn worked as a copywriter in New York City, but did not settle in New York. In fact, he lived a journeyman's life, bouncing from Idaho to New Hampshire, Florida to California, Maryland and back again. He worked as a real estate broker, is a skilled artist, was married twice, and fathered two children.

Maybe you've run into James von Brunn. Maybe you rubbed shoulders with him on the eastern shores of Maryland, where he last resided. Maybe you've come across one of his oil paintings advertised on the internet and considered purchasing his work. If you met him, you might have thought him a cantankerous old man, but you probably would not have given him a second thought.

Then, this past June 10th, the 88-year-old James von Brunn entered the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC with a shotgun and forever associated his name with white supremacy and anti-Semitism. With hatred and violence. With murder and bloodshed. A fringe but highly respected member of the white supremacist movement, von Brunn spent a lifetime slandering Jews and everyone of non-Caucasian decent. Claiming he wanted to "go out with his boots on", von Brunn shot and killed a security guard in hopes that he would die as well – as he imagined, in a blaze of glory. This wasn't the first time he committed a hate crime that landed him in prison, but it is his last. Wounded and captured just within the doors of the Holocaust museum, von Brunn is currently being held without bail and will likely spend the rest of his life in prison.

James von Brunn can't hurt us today. But there are many more like him – men and women who, for a variety of reasons, have embraced an understanding of the world that demonizes innocent people.

As we sit here today, contemplating good and evil – contemplating the good and evil in our world, in our selves, it's hard not to be incredibly frightened by von Brunn's story. Why does such hatred exist? How can we come to understand the existence of such evil? Perplexed, having searched our hearts and souls, having searched the volumes of philosophical treatises that have tried and failed to answer these questions, where can we turn?

Admittedly our Judaism, like many religions, is incredibly complicated and difficult to understand. You've heard it said that for every three Jews there are four opinions. There's a reason for this. After all, we've created a religion that allows for a surprising amount of personalization – a surprising amount of individual theology. Ask any faithful Christian what they believe about the afterlife, and they'll tell you exactly what they've been taught. Ask a Jew? "Well there's one theory that states this, and another theory that states that," we hem and haw. "I don't know, what do you think?" a rabbi might answer.

Yet, despite the theological flexibility inherent in our Judaism, the ethical standards placed upon our shoulders are clear and demanding. We find these standards in our biblical text, in our prayers, in our teachings, and in our cultural experience. As we contemplate the good and evil in our lives and world, these traditions offered by Judaism not only help us understand what's good about good and evil about evil, but through the study of these traditions we come to a deeper understanding of what it means to choose good and live to the fullest of our potential.

The Shema, for example, the watchword of our faith, praises the purity and importance of Oneness – the Oneness of God, the Oneness of all existence. This thought is not to be taken lightly. The idea that all humanity is, as we might say, 'in this together' is central to what we are meant to believe and practice as Jews. When we say that God's Oneness is everywhere, we mean that God is in me, in you, in this room, this podium, and yes, even in evil men such as James von Brunn. Everywhere. And we also mean that our perceived separations are just that – merely perceived.

While the likes of von Brunn would have everyone believe that we Jews are evil and want nothing more than complete world domination, in truth, our religion demands of us so much more: for despite our history of being persecuted and oppressed time and time again, we are commanded to help those who are in need – regardless of their religious or cultural heritage, regardless of the color of their skin; indeed, regardless of how they feel about us.

James von Brunn and his cohorts do nothing but emphasize the separations between people. Our tradition commands that we bring people together – that we are commanded to bring about the Oneness that is our ultimate potential. Is there any greater mission? Any grander mountain to climb?

Contemplating good and evil...

Take, for example, the Exodus narrative – the story of our experience with and eventual escape from slavery in Egypt. Though the story of our people begins with Abraham, it's important to note that in truth we became a nation in Egypt. After all, we entered Egypt a small extended family of less than one hundred. We left with hundreds of thousands. That we became a people during, despite, and maybe even because of our experience with slavery is one of the most important wisdoms we offer. It's precisely because we were slaves that we are commanded to help the downtrodden, lift up the fallen.

The ethic here is the same as what you might find in a schoolyard. We've all been picked on by bullies, beat up and beat down. Do those experiences give us the right to become bullies our selves? Just the opposite, Judaism teaches. Our experiences yesterday with pain and suffering, persecution and oppression, are supposed to teach us to help those who suffer today.

We think of Elie Wiesel who, despite his own suffering and loss at the hands of the Nazis, has dedicated his life to righting wrongs; bringing kindness, love, and understanding between peoples; and ending hatred wherever it exists.

Surely we would've understood if Elie Wiesel didn't choose to live his life in this manner. Trauma, after all, can follow us the rest of our lives. Trauma can make a person incomplete. Yet, unlike the James von Brunns of the world, Elie Wiesel stared through the prism of pain and chose to see the oneness of all humanity. In doing so Elie Wiesel made his life whole, gave his life meaning, and has brought so much goodness to our world.

Contemplating good and evil...

The book of Deuteronomy tells us an important story. Picture the scene: the Israelites were standing at the borders of the Promised Land, staring in at two mountains – Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal. God commands the Israelites to pronounce blessing at Mount Gerizim and curse at Mount Ebal. The symbolism here is wonderful. Good and evil, blessing and curse lay before us like mountains to climb. Then, later in Deuteronomy,

God's says to us, "I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life and ... you will live."

That our bible refers to both blessings and curses as mountains to be climbed is indeed fantastic imagery. That we have a choice between the two is even better. Elie Wiesel suffered great trauma in his life, and therefore vowed to always fight against those who would choose to curse the world with evil.

Yet, as we contemplate good and evil this year we cannot help but consider, with shame and anger, the life of Bernie Madoff who, unlike Elie Wiesel, did not experience pain and suffering directly. Instead, he was given every opportunity, every chance to make his life what he wanted it to be. Bernie Madoff got to go to college, join a fraternity, start his own business. Born with mountains of goodness within his reach, he instead chose to cheat, lie to, and steal from charitable organizations, many of his friends, people who trusted him – perhaps even some who pray here today.

James von Brunn isn't Jewish, isn't a minority – his hatred is for those different from him. Bernie Madoff preyed on his own people, his own family.

Sometimes contemplating good and evil is a sad, sad thing...

But finally, we consider the creation narrative – the very first two chapters of the book of Genesis, the Torah portion we traditionally read today. Rabbis have often wondered why the bible begins with the creation story. After all, the story of the Jewish people doesn't begin until Abraham – and even then, Abraham is the father of many peoples – not just ours'. Ancient and modern rabbis have taught that Genesis reminds all people that we come from the same place – that no one is greater than another.

But maybe there's something theological here as well – something that points to the nature of our potential. It's important to note that the first thing God does in our bible is create. And it's *how* God creates that fascinates us. As we have read today, "God said let there be light, and there was." God speaks, and things come into existence. It's not just that God's purpose is to create. It's almost as if God's very being is creation. And if our claim is that we are created in God's image, then maybe, just maybe, we increase our Godliness by creating – creating connections between people, creating opportunities for growth, opportunities for love. We increase the good in God when we are good to other people, good to our environment, good to ourselves, and yes, at times, even good to our enemies.

I think of my friend Dani, who I met and befriended while living in Israel on kibbutz the year after I graduated college. A young immigrant to Israel, Dani was born in Latvia and raised in West Berlin. After graduating High School, at the age of 19, he made Aliyah, spent a year learning Hebrew and acclimating himself to Israeli culture, and then joined the army. Eventually Dani became an officer in the paratroopers, manning and commanding a checkpoint on the outskirts of Nablus.

Checkpoints have always been matters of controversy – not just for media and political pundits, but for the very soldiers who man them and the very people, Palestinian and Israeli, who must pass through them. At the time Israeli soldiers used to share the checkpoints with Palestinian soldiers – the Palestinians guarding the Palestinian side, the Israelis guarding the Israeli side – a twenty-foot swath of no-man’s-land between.

One winter night, in the cold January desert, Dani took time to notice that his Palestinian counterparts did not make a fire to sit around – something they usually did to stay warm. They had run out of wood and could not leave their post. Thus, while the Israeli soldiers could sit and stay warm in a small heated structure, their Palestinian counterparts were freezing the night away.

Not allowed to take them into the structure, not allowed to leave their own post to collect firewood, Dani did all he could do: He and a few of his soldiers grabbed some blankets and hot tea and brought it to the Palestinian soldiers sitting across the way.

Now, you must understand, these checkpoints really should have been called flashpoints. Only a week earlier an altercation at a nearby checkpoint led to soldiers on both sides yelling at each other and even raising their guns – though no shot was fired in that instance. But that cold night, in that moment of shared experience, that moment of humanity, Dani and his troops were the finest examples of what the High Holidays call us to do, of who Judaism calls us to be.

So moved by their gesture, Dani’s counterpart – the Palestinian commanding officer – held up a finger to Dani as if to say, “Wait here a minute.” Charging off into the darkness, he returned a moment later with a bunch of ripe bananas. Two soldiers, decades of war – yet at that moment, peace.

Dani, like Elie Wiesel, understood something very important. He understood that we can make ourselves the best that we can be by choosing good, by going out of our way to bring warmth, comfort, and compassion to others.

Thus the voice of our tradition calls out to us, reminding us that contemplating good and evil can be a joyous thing – especially when we consider the gift that is life and all we can do with it.

May we all, on this High Holiday season, like Elie Weisel and my friend Dani, commit ourselves to the never ending pursuit of godliness – to an all out effort to be only creative and not destructive. James von Brunn lived his life working to tear people apart. Bernie Madoff lived his life working to tear people down. By the tools of destruction they made themselves evil, made themselves un-godly, un-holy, made themselves curses. May this not be our choice.

May we all, instead, find the strength, courage, and wisdom to lift ourselves up to be the best that we can be – our best selves. In doing so we can bring ourselves, and the world, that much closer to the mountain of goodness we seek.

Kein Y'hi Ratzon. May this be God's will. Shavuah tov. Shanah tova.