Wickedness is a Strange Malady: Thoughts for Parashat Vayera

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Vayera

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The Torah describes the wickedness of Sodom as being pervasive enough to be punished by God's destruction of the city. There were not even ten righteous people in the entire city. When the men of Sodom surrounded Lot's home with the intention of doing harm to Lot's guests, the Torah informs us that the wicked group included "both young and old, all the people from every quarter" (Bereishith 19:4).

Is it really possible for an entire city to be so steeped in evil? How can we imagine a town so corrupt that not even ten good people lived there?

If we peruse human history, we find instances of entire societies becoming mired in corruption, violence and wickedness of every kind. The names of Stalin, Hitler and Pol Pot come to mind when we ponder the fate of humanity during the past century. These tyrants were able to mobilize their forces to destroy millions of innocent people. Their henchmen followed their orders blindly, even when those orders entailed the most shameful and immoral cruelties.

But tyrants and their henchmen succeeded in terrorizing their societies because many citizens were too afraid to rise in resistance. The "silent majority"—although composed of people who were not innately evil—went along with the evil by looking the other way.

Tyrants utilize brute force. But they also utilize psychological warfare and intimidation. They vilify anyone who stands up against them. Those who resist the tyranny are branded as traitors or trouble makers. The tyrants, whose goal is to control the people into total submission, accuse opponents of attempting to control society. The tyrants, whose goal is to maintain total power for themselves,

vilify opponents as being power-hungry.

And the masses stay quiet. And those vilified by the tyrants become frightened into silence.

Although there no doubt were good and brave people who found ways of resisting the evil dictators, they were so few that it may have appeared from a distance that “both young and old, all the people from every quarter” were accomplices.

In Ibsen’s powerful drama, Enemy of the People, Dr. Stockmann found that the water sustaining the local health spas was contaminated. His scientific tests proved beyond a doubt that the water would be dangerous to people who would bathe in it. Instead of being thanked for saving the lives of potential patrons of these spas, he was vilified by the leaders and the masses of the town.

His findings would ruin the town’s business. He was branded as an eccentric trouble maker who exaggerated the problem for his own glory. At a town meeting, Dr. Stockmann was declared an enemy of the people. He was fired from his position. His children had to leave school. The windows of his home were shattered. His patients were told to find another doctor. He was ordered to write a public repudiation of his scientific findings, which he would not do.

Were all the people of Dr. Stockmann’s town evil? No, they were not. But they were less concerned with truth and health than they were with their pocket books. If word got out that the spas were unhealthful, then the town—and its people—would lose the income brought in by tourists. If the town leaders agreed to have the water supply improved as per Dr. Stockmann’s suggestions, it would cost a lot of money and would take several years to accomplish. The people did not want to pay for the repairs and did not want to lose two years of business. They were not concerned about the endangerment of the lives of tourists; they were not concerned that if patrons of the spas got sick, people would finally realize that Dr. Stockmann’s reports were correct.

Wickedness is a strange malady. It doesn’t only come from wicked people. It also comes from weak people, frightened people, people more concerned with their own immediate gains than with the long-term needs of society. Wickedness is not the monopoly of vicious tyrants and dictators; it is shared by lower level manipulators and demagogues who seek to control and intimidate. It is shared by those who tolerate wickedness and who succumb to the lies and propaganda of the wicked leaders.

The Torah’s account of the wickedness of Sodom stands as an eternal warning about what can happen to a society if evil is allowed to persist, if good people are intimidated into passivity and silence.

The story about Sodom is not only about Sodom.

Angel for Shabbat