Learning Where the Evil Lies

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The High Holiday season—in the midst of which I am writing these words—calls on Jews to examine ourselves, to reflect on our moral and ethical shortcomings, and to seek ways of mending these faults so as to turn, or *re*turn, to the right path. Moreover, our tradition makes clear that we are to subject ourselves to this self-examination not just as individuals but collectively. The confessional sections of our liturgy are replete with verbs in the first-person plural. *We*, like our ancestors who came before us, have sinned. *We* have turned from God's goodly laws and commandments. *We* have sinned against God, willingly and unwillingly. Not to mention entire *piyyutim* (liturgical poems) of more specific, concrete offenses to which we confess, knowing that we individually have not committed these acts but accepting collective moral responsibility for the possibility that someone in our community has.

To be sure, Jews are not alone in being called to this effort of self-examination. The Puritans who founded my university and nurtured it in its early years likewise felt the obligation to probe their innermost consciousness, and not just once per year. Calvin wrote, "Let us … unremittingly examining our faults [and] call ourselves back to humility. Thus, nothing will remain in us to puff us up; but there will be much occasion to be cast down." And in the same vein, "the more severe we are toward ourselves, and the more sharply we examine our own sins, the more we ought to hope that God is favorable and merciful toward us." For Calvin, of course, and among the Puritans more generally, the emphasis on atonement and redemption that we find in our tradition is largely missing.

Reflecting on one's faults had religious value—"it could not happen otherwise than that the soul itself, stricken by dread of divine judgment, should act the part of an avenger in carrying out its own punishment," and "those who are really religious experience what sort of punishments are shame, confusion, groaning, displeasure with self, and other emotions that arise out of a lively recognition of sin"—but when it came to possibilities for redemption, the non-elect were the non-elect, and that was that. By contrast, for Jews a large part of the motivation for self-examination is the desire to return: at the individual level to improve one's personal behavior, and at the community level to repair the world in which it is our lot to live.

This collective sense of moral responsibility for our world feels especially acute in the wake of the events of the past twelve months. Most obviously, for those living in Israel and in surrounding areas the past year has brought unspeakable atrocities, violence on a horrifying scale, and widespread death. But for us as Jews living in the United States, and especially in the privileged setting of a university like mine, the past year has also brought experiences no one wishes to relive, including repeated and sustained outbursts of raw bigotry of a kind rarely seen in our normally more elevated community. It is hardly surprising that this experience has brought forth a profusion of efforts to understand what has happened, and to search out the flaws in our community's institutional make-up, and especially that of our universities, that have fostered these failings. More in keeping with the Jewish tradition than Calvinist thought, much of this effort is now devoted to considering changes for which the need is plainly urgent.

The twentieth-century theologian Langdon Gilkey observed that "what we believe is largely determined by where the evil seems to lie." Over the past year we, meaning Jews but also the American polity more generally, have gained a new understanding of where the evil lies that has so devastatingly infected our lives. Although I hesitate to place too positive a gloss on this new understanding—to repeat, it has emerged as a consequence of events no one would choose to relive—there is moral value in seeking to make our world better, and to the extent that knowledge of our collective and institutional shortcomings is a necessary precursor to undertaking that improvement then it too has value. Gilkey was a theologian and I am not, and so I may well be using the word "believe" in a different sense than what he had in mind. But I am comfortable nonetheless with the notion that what we have learned has shaped our understanding in ways that signal what is to be done.

I think we can apply this new understanding in two distinct areas. One concerns us directly as Jews. The other concerns our universities, but it turns out

that we as Jews have something specific and important to bring to that effort as well.

To begin with the Jewish world, following the events of the past year we now have a different sense of where the salient threat lies—not the armed threat to Israel, but the threat to the wellbeing and security of our own community here. Groups of fellow-citizens whom Jews have overwhelmingly supported in the past, and with whose fundamental goals we still feel resonance, have actively and aggressively arrayed themselves against Jewish interests and derisively dismissed Jewish concerns. Nor were these reactions a response to the violence of Israel's response to the October 7 terrorist attack. Numerous groups were willing to proclaim their total lack of sympathy for the victims on the day the attack occurred, before Israel had launched any response whatever.

What kind of values, we are entitled to ask, do these groups hold? And given whatever values they do hold, are we really obligated to support these groups? Simply seeking to promote one's own interest, or one's own group's interest, is hardly a valid moral principle. That requires some broader, more universalistic basis. For all the reasons that our tradition so eloquently teaches, we sympathize and seek to ally ourselves with people who meet persecution, or discrimination, or other forms of unfair treatment. "You shall have one manner of law as well for the stranger as for one of your own country" is a valid moral principle and we are right to adhere to it, whoever is the "stranger" in question. But institutionalized groups who insist on this principle for themselves while denying it for others are not, in fact, principled. They forfeit their claim to our support on moral grounds.

In a similar vein, we have learned that familiar principles of civic engagement, most obviously free speech, are likewise subject not only to abuse (Jews have known this for centuries) but to misappropriation for self-serving purposes. As we look back on the past year, it is breathtaking how rapidly many in our universities have pivoted from full-throated advocacy of trigger warnings and safety zones to the notion that any verbal or written statements, even the vilest calumnies deliberately designed to provoke, humiliate and offend, are sacrosanct. Moreover, many of our students, and their supporters, now exhibit an understanding of free speech to mean not only that they are entitled to say whatever they want, about anything or anyone they choose, but, further, that there should never be any consequences to them for the content of that speech: freedom of speech somehow has come to encompass freedom from criticism for whatever one has said. Members of the Jewish community cannot help but notice that this stunning pivot from over-protection to anything-goes took place only

once the identity of the people who might benefit from the protection against unlimited free speech, including hate speech, shifted from the traditionally shielded groups to Israelis, Zionists, and Jews.

Yet more troubling at a practical level, and especially visible at our universities, is today's invocation of the principle of free speech to defend acts that would plainly be prohibited if they were to be committed in a different context. Is someone impeding your ability to walk from one building to another? In the eyes of many of my faculty colleagues at Harvard, he's merely exercising his right to free speech. Is someone blocking students from entering their classroom? Again, merely exercising free speech. Is someone shouting into a bullhorn so that our students can't hear either the instructor or one another? Here too, all merely free speech. Roughly a half-century ago, as a then-young member of the Harvard faculty, I served on a committee that considered, among other questions, whether the university should have a separate disciplinary code for political offenses—in effect, analogous to the long-ago practice in Tsarist Russia. Suppose, for example, some student threw a brick and smashed a shop window on the street: should there be one penalty if he was simply drunk, and a different penalty if he meant the act as a political statement? Our committee voted not to have separate disciplinary systems; a violation was a violation, regardless of what inspired it. I thought that decision was right then, and I think it's right now. Preventing other people from going about their everyday activities is not merely exercising free speech, no matter what the person doing the obstructing is saying.

In this context too, we as Jews do well to take notice of the different principles that many, again especially at our universities, seek to apply depending on the content of the speech. I am confident that most faculty members at most universities would sharply condemn disruptive actions by students and others calling to end affirmative action admissions while concealing their identity by placing over their heads white pillowcases marked with gold crosses. Today all too many of them, I fear, would view differently the identical disruptive acts committed by people calling for an end to the admission of students from Israel, while concealing their identity with white-and-black checkered dishtowels.

Most urgent, I believe, is the need to prevent our public spaces, in the universities and elsewhere, from becoming areas where Jews do not feel comfortable going. In the 1930s, in Germany, Austria, Poland, and other European countries, everyone understood that urban public spaces were places where Jews were not welcome and should not go. We must not allow the public spaces of our American cities to become Jew-free zones. Here too, Gilkey was a theologian and I

am not, and so all this may not constitute “evil” in the sense that he had in mind. But it constitutes an existential threat to our community, and for our purposes learning what that threat is and where it lies rightly shapes what we believe.

The second area in which what we have learned over the past year has changed our beliefs concerns our universities more specifically. At Harvard, I am glad to say, our leadership has at least voiced an intent to set the university on a path to useful reform. There is now widespread acknowledgement, as reflected in the recent report of the university’s working group on “open inquiry and constructive dialogue,” that in fact too much of our inquiry is not open and too much of our dialogue is not constructive. Many ideas that are widely held among the American population are, for practical purposes, impossible to express on our campus. The result is to circumscribe not only everyday conversation but the content of both teaching and research.

There is also now recognition that we too often fail to expose our students to ideas and even facts that challenge or extend the preconceptions with which they arrive here. In an earlier era, it was widely accepted that part of the purpose of a university education was precisely to lead students to question their pre-college perceptions. Max Weber wrote that “the primary task of a useful teacher is to teach his students to recognize ‘inconvenient’ truths.” In more recent times such notions have faded from view. In his address to our entering class at this year’s fall convocation, Harvard President Alan Garber recommended that each student make it a point to take at least one course that would likely make him or her feel uncomfortable. He likewise recommended that students deliberately place themselves in settings, either in the classroom or elsewhere, where they would encounter views with which they disagree. The contrast to the recent commitment to trigger warnings and safety zones is self-evident.

Part of the underlying problem, I believe, is the atomization of our society that our universities simply mirror. We attach enormous value to the diversity of the student body, at least in some dimensions, so much so that at my university we engage in hugely expensive and time-consuming litigation to preserve it. But once students are here, there is little effort to prevent their separating themselves into highly homogeneous enclaves. Our universities are, in microcosm, an example what my Harvard colleague Michael Sandel calls the “sky-boxification” of America—except that in this case it is not merely the wealthy and privileged who seek to separate themselves. None of this is new, and it is probably less true today than it was in the past. But it remains true nonetheless, and we now have a deeper understanding of the harm it does. Specifically, it shields our students from awareness of ideas and concerns from

outside their narrow circles. It thereby blunts our efforts to educate them to become effective citizens of the republic.

Further, to the extent that views held in one circle may have as much claim to validity as those in another, this segmentation thwarts yet another aim of the education we seek to impart, namely the difficult and sometimes uncomfortable ability to cope with conflicting ideas. Scott Fitzgerald famously wrote that “the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function.” Over the past year we have seen the harm done by the lack of that ability. A building in Gaza is a Hamas arsenal? No, it’s a hospital. Jews have a right to self-determination in their own independent country? But Palestinians have a right to self-determination in *their* independent country. If two ideas are in tension, at most one can be right. The examples are endless.

The solution to this intellectual limitation surely does not rest on perfunctory training sessions administered to students by a constitutionally unsympathetic DEI bureaucracy. What is required is a more serious form of engagement, in which students and others do not simply hear about the value of considering competing world views but actively participate in doing so, both in the classroom and in other settings. One of the most rewarding pedagogical experiences I’ve had in my more than 50 years of university teaching was a course that for many years I co-taught with a close friend in the English Department. The object of the course was to explore how people from different intellectual disciplines view topics of common interest; I represented the social sciences, my colleague the humanities, and we had numerous guest speakers from the natural sciences. Our aim was not to cover over differences in viewpoint but instead to highlight them and explore them. Some of our disagreements were sharp. I recall, for example, that my English professor friend was (as he remains) a committed devotee of Henry David Thoreau. I find much of Thoreau not just wrong but wrong-headed. We sometimes had that debate in class, and it was a vigorous one. For the students who watched it, realizing that the two of us were, and remained, close friends was probably more educational than whatever either of us actually said.

And here I think we as Jews have a particular contribution to make to this effort. Jewish learning has always, and perhaps uniquely, emphasized the value of debate and disagreement. The Talmud tells us that for three years the house of Shammai and the house of Hillel disagreed: these said the halakha is in accordance with our opinion, and those said the halakha is in accordance with our opinion. Ultimately, a divine voice emerged and proclaimed “both these and

those are the words of the living God" (*Eruvin* 13b). The fact that the voice went on to say that halakha is in accordance with the opinion of the house of Hillel is almost beside the point. The Tosefta instructs us to "make for yourself a heart of many rooms, and enter into it the words of the house of Shammai and the house of Hillel."

The value Jewish learning places on disagreement also emphasizes the interpersonal aspect of the learning process. The education our universities provide should not be parallel play in a sandbox. We need to encourage our students to regard one another as partners in learning. The value Jewish tradition places on debate and disagreement as essential to the learning process appears perhaps most dramatically in the poignant and ultimately tragic story told of Rabbi Yohanan, one of the leading amoraim of the second generation, and his friend and study partner (as well as his brother-in-law) Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish—commonly called Reish Lakish—whom Rabbi Yohanan raised up from an unsavory background to become also one of the leading Torah scholars of the time. According to the Talmud (*Bava Metzia* 84a), one day, during the course of arguing a point of *halakha*, Rabbi Yohanan said something that offended Reish Lakish. The two men quarreled, which so affected Reish Lakish that he died. Rabbi Yohanan's colleagues, recognizing the void left in his life, chose Rabbi Elazar ben Pedat as his new study partner. The story continues,

> Rabbi Elazar ben Pedat went and sat before Rabbi Yohanan. With regard to every matter that Rabbi Yohanan would say, Rabbi Elazar ben Pedat would say to him, there is a ruling taught in a Baraita that supports your opinion. Rabbi Yohanan said to him, in my discussions with the son of Lakish, when I would state a matter he would raise twenty-four difficulties against me in an attempt to disprove my claim, and I would answer him with twenty-four answers, and the halakha would become broadened and clarified. And yet you say to me, there is a ruling taught in a Baraita that supports my opinion. Being rebutted by Reish Lakish served a purpose. Your bringing me proof to my statements does not.

Soon thereafter, Rabbi Yohanan went insane and then died.

The value of entertaining conflicting opinions, and of engaging in debate, reflects a further core principle that also belongs at the center of the education we seek to provide: The uncertainty that results from our innate human limitations. This principle, too, is essential to Jewish learning. Even for those who

take the written Scriptures to be the sure words of the divine, the interpretation of these words is necessarily a human endeavor, and therefore subject to uncertainty and error. Learning about one's own ignorance is also an important part of a university education. In Jewish learning, it is that essential human ignorance, and the inescapable uncertainty to which it gives rise, that renders disagreement and debate worthwhile. This does not mean, of course, that any claim, no matter how absurd or offensive, must be entertained. A community is entitled to rule some ideas out of bounds, and the community that gave us the Talmud did so. But disagreement and debate are key to how we learn, and not just when we are students in the narrow sense. They are also part of how we humans make intellectual progress.

The past year has been a difficult one for all of us, and unbearable for many. It has taught us some things we would prefer not to have known. But we have lived through this experience, and we have learned from it. We now know that we can no longer count on what we thought we could count on. It is now our obligation to act accordingly.

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