I have a confession to make. I love watching police/FBI shows… all that stuff about the good people running after the bad people and bringing them to justice, that’s what I do in my *spare* time.

This past year, I especially enjoyed a show called “Criminal Minds”. For those of you who haven’t seen it, let me tell you just a little bit about it: The show always starts with a horrible crime, the worst of humanity. This FBI unit called BAU (Behavioral Analysis Unit), responsible for catching the bad guys, uses all kinds of behavioral theories to uncover the story of the criminal. The show focuses on the criminal, and through exploring the details of the criminal’s experience, they are able to catch him or her. They make sure to say that the story of this person is not an excuse for their horrendous acts but rather can help us understand them.

Another confession. Often I have found myself crying when learning the story of the perpetrator, feeling empathy for the bad guy and then feeling discomfort as I realized that. How can I feel such empathy for a serial killer, a child abuser or a rapist?

Of course, the real question is not about the empathy that a talented screenwriter can make me feel for an imaginary figure. Rather, my emotional openness to the figures on this program has pushed me to think more deeply about the way I, and all of us, confront real evil in our lives.

From the beginning of creation, we encounter the idea that human beings are capable of wrongdoing. Even God struggles as to how to respond to evil. In the book of Genesis, just after the flood, God has a new understanding of humanity that God didn't have before. The text reads:

ויאמר יוהו אל־לוב לא־אסף לחקל עוז אטר־האדמה בעבור האדום כי יזר ולב האדוםloquent

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God said to Godself: Never again will I doom the earth because of (hu)man, since the devising of (hu)man’s mind are evil from his youth.\footnote{Genesis 8:21}

This might seem contradictory: if humans are evil, why continue giving them a chance? Earlier, just before God decided to destroy the world, the Torah has a more all-inclusive statement, saying that all is evil. All the time. But in this instance, the language is not a judgement but perhaps an observation that a proclivity for evil is woven into the fabric of human nature. The key phrase is “from his youth”, not from birth or conception -- this implies that the tendency to evil may be curbed and redirected\footnote{JPS commentary to Genesis 8:21} and that there is a potential for goodness that co-exists with the evil inclination.

Is there such a thing as pure evil? Are there such people who are what we call הרע - evil people? How far can one go attempting to explain acts of evil? Can we ever explain and understand true evil? Can human behavior ever be understood as black and white, good and bad when we are each products of our experiences and settings? What happens when we realize that the enemy, the bad, the one against us, has a story, a real one, a story worth hearing? I know this can be a complicated question to ask -- it can seem like justification or rationalization. We live in time with so much violence and so much suffering perpetrated by fellow humans on other humans, and rather than exploring why this is, we instead seem to fall back on an oversimplified polarization of good and evil, as if these were clear black-and-white categories.

I remember the moment where I realized how blessed I was to have the support and the means not to make a mistake that I could regret for the rest of my life.

One night, when my older daughter was a baby and I was alone at home, she didn’t stop crying for hours. Clearly she was in pain, but I had no clue of what to do,
I was a new mom, exhausted, in an eternal lack of sleep with a non stop crying baby. I was going crazy. I saw in that moment of impatience, anger, fear and tiredness how I could just easily lose it, doing the worst a person could do to her child- but I didn’t. Instead, I put her in her crib, which I knew was a safe place, and went to a different room, I took a few breaths and called my friend who helped me see what could be wrong, probably an ear infection. I could do this easily, because even though I was tired, I was well-fed, and I was on paid maternity leave, which meant that my tiredness wasn’t the tiredness of a new mom who is also going to work all day. I had the support of friends and loved ones, who were accessible and had the time and ability to be there for me. I was not isolated, I knew I could count on my community. The circumstances of my very privileged life had brought me to know how to discern and make decisions in the best way possible even when in the midst of a difficult moment.

But then I realized I could feel empathy and understanding for the mom who did lose it, because she had not one but three kids screaming, because it wasn't just one night alone at home, but she was a single parent, and she didn't have food on her table and she needed to go to her night shift to work.

Empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of another person. But empathy, without leading to a sense of greater responsibility towards your fellow human, is just a nice feeling.

In the book of Deuteronomy we find an intriguing story. The Torah presents the scenario of a person found murdered in the fields when it is not known who killed him. The elders of the nearest town are required to participate in a ritual of purification, during which they proclaim, using a heifer with a broken neck - “our hands have not shed this blood”. A Baraita in the Talmud (Sotah 46b) understands this verse to imply that the elders are saying: ”We did not observe him and dismiss him without food and escort”. The Talmud points out that obviously the elders are not the prime suspects in this murder. Rather, the elders’ proclamation is a statement

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4 Wikipedia definition
5 Deuteronomy 21: 1-9

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of their responsibility for all who pass through their town. It is impossible, the elders say, that any person passing through our town would not have been hosted, fed, and accompanied on his or her way. We have not created a society that would allow such murders to happen. This person did not pass through our town, our people would have not allowed this to happen. As a society, the elders imply, we take care of all those who pass through, of every individual.

Our Torah, specifically the book of Deuteronomy, is filled with laws and directions of how to build our society, creating systems of fairness, systems that can hold the complexities of life. Systems that make sure that we are responsible for each other’s well being. That is what being part of a society means.

There is a story in the Tractate of Brachot in the Talmud which I have shared several times about Beruriah the wife of Rabbi Meir.

There were thugs in the neighborhood of Rabbi Meir who caused him a great deal of trouble. Rabbi Meir accordingly prayed that they should die. His wife Beruriah said to him: How do you make out [that such a prayer should be permitted]? She quoted a verse from Psalms (104:35), which says: itam mut batta’im min haaretz – Let batta’im (sins) cease from earth. And she asked - Is it written bot’im (sinners)? And she responded no- It is written batta’im (sins)! Let sins cease from earth.

(Let me clarify that the words bata’im (sins) and bot’im (sinners) are written in the same way in Hebrew).

Beruriah continued and said, look at the end of the verse:

Let batta’im (sins) cease from earth and let the wicked be no more.

"יתמו חטאים מן הארץ ורשעים עוד Ainu"

Since the sins will cease, there will be no more wicked men!

Rather pray for them that they should repent, said Beruriah, and there will be no more wicked.

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He did pray for them, and they repented\textsuperscript{6}.

What does Beruriah mean when she says, we need sins to cease so there won’t be more evil people? How do you make sins cease without targeting the person who has committed the sin? How is it different to target the sin rather than the sinner? In which way we can read this in today’s reality of the polarization of good and evil?

Rabbi Jane Kanarek in an article in Lillith on Political Imperatives writes: “Beruriah’s story encourages us to speak out about systemic injustice as well as act with compassion. It would have been easy for Beruriah to agree with her husband, to imagine Meir’s suffering ending through the bandit’s deaths. Yet, she does not comfort her husband by sympathising over his misfortune and agreeing these bandits deserve to die. Instead (...) she envisions a world where these bandits have become good. She speaks sharply and unhesitatingly, teaching her husband how to act in a different voice, a voice that Rabbi Meir is unable to see without her instruction. Pray, she tells him for a different kind of world. Have compassion for those who act wrongly. As the story teaches, his prayer is effective and the bandits change their ways”\textsuperscript{7}.

But prayer alone is not enough. We know that.

Rabbi Marshall T. Meyer, the teacher of my teachers, writes: “One of the firm beliefs of Judaism is that man cannot remain human without prayer, that is to say without belief in the God of Creation. Faith demands action and prayer is the spontaneous response of the believer. How can one have faith? By opening our most intimate being to the marvels and beauties that surround us and also by raising arms against the evils that threaten our society. Prayer is in fact, the activity that enables man, to fight for a better society and not to succumb to the status quo.”\textsuperscript{8}

\textsuperscript{6} Babylonian Talmud, Tractate of Brachot 10a
\textsuperscript{7} Lilith Magazine, Summer 2008. Rescue vs Repairing the World, Rabbi Jane Kanarek.
\textsuperscript{8} Rabbi Marshall T. Meyer, You are My Witness. The Courage to Pray.

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The well known quote of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, resonates at this time. Quoting: “...morally speaking, there is no limit to the concern one must feel for the suffering of human beings, that indifference to evil is worse than evil itself, that in a free society, some are guilty, but all are responsible”\(^9\).

The evils of our time are our own responsibility.

In a time when the lives lost to gun violence, continues to rise, when racial bias and racial injustice is a source of violent action and killings. In a time when fear for those who are different from us brings hatred to the surface of human relationship and prevents us from opening our gates to those in need. In a time of so much pain and brokenness we ought to ask in which ways are we responsible, and what actions that responsibility demands.

As Rabbi Kanarek writes, regarding Beruriah’s story: “While our prayers alone will not change the world, Beruriah tells us that in order to re-calibrate the world we will need to learn to imagine our society’s possibility anew. We will need to raise our voices, sharply and strongly, in order to advocate for these visions. What can our world be? What systematic injustices do we need to correct and how? How do we need to learn to treat others with compassion as we try to change our society?”\(^10\)

Last night. Just before we recited the Kol Nidre, we recited the following affirmation:

בישיבה של מעלה, ובישיבה של מעשה
על דעת המוקוּם ועל דעת הקהל, אנו מתירים להบำלא עם העבריים

By the authority of the court on high and by the authority on this court below, with Divine consent and with the consent of this congregation, we grant permission, to pray with those who have transgressed.

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As we said this, we recognized that amidst our community, amid this crowd, there are those who transgressed. But as the traditional text reads literally, we say that others are the transgressors—we grant permission to pray with those who have transgressed.

I have heard of a practice\textsuperscript{11} that removes just one word, saying:

לאחרפליים

to pray as transgressors.

Asking for permission to pray as transgressors, wrongdoers, as sinners.

Recognizing that we are all responsible for the bad that is in this world. How do we begin taking responsibility, and how do we manage the overwhelming sense that there is so much need for change, for systemic change on a big scale. We take care of individuals and try to live compassionate lives, as I spoke about on Rosh Hashanah, but we also know that there are large systems that need to be changed, and we know that it can be nearly impossible as an individual to do so.

But perhaps these big changes can be set into motion by living with empathy, by taking responsibility, by educating our communities, our children, by understanding that we don’t stand just for ourselves, by showing compassion, by advocating for what we believe is right. By not separating ourselves from society, by being actively involved in the fabric of society.

The ritual that we read about in the Torah reading of Yom Kippur and that we will enact later during our musaf service, the Avodah service, vividly describes the sacrificial ritual in the Temple on the Day of Atonement. The Kohen Gadol and this ritual offer the possibility of a new start. We are all transgressors at this point, we are all responsible, but there is here, now and today, a possibility to move

\textsuperscript{11} From Ebn Leader
forward, to start clean and anew. To leave behind the sin, so that we are no longer sinners.

Yom Kippur is about this dual recognition: we are all sinners, and we are all capable of good. God loves us and is ready for us to start anew. We have to own our responsibility, to feel its weight without letting it weigh us down, and then to move forward into action.

May this be a year, that as individuals and as a society we can transform our empathy into responsibility, and understand more deeply than ever that we have the capacity to change -- to change ourselves and to change the larger structures of society in which we live. It will never be as simple and satisfying as a good police drama, in which the story unfolds and justice is served within one hour. No, it’s a lifelong process, which we will begin and begin again every year. But with each spark of empathy and act of responsibility, we move closer to the vision that Beruriah upholds of a world in which sin ceases from the earth and wickedness is no more. May we listen to the Beruriah among us and hold each other accountable to the possibility that her words represent.