

Back in 1990, American attorney and author Mike Godwin postulated that the longer an online conversation or topic continues, the more likely that someone will compare someone or something to Hitler and his deeds. This is known as Godwin's Law. In 2012 it earned an entry in Oxford's dictionary. Why is it that the Holocaust has captured such a place in our civil discourse? What is the evil we speak of, and how do we appropriately engage with it?

The problem of evil is a regular topic in our community. The logical problem is constructed this way; If God is all powerful, all knowing, and all good, then how can there be evil in the world? I remember discussing this problem when I was studying at an Orthodox Yeshiva in Jerusalem. The Rabbi teaching posited that there was no evil in the world, that everything was given to us from God for our good. I challenged him, "Even the Holocaust?" He didn't hesitate, "Absolutely, the Holocaust was caused by God, there is no evil in the world."

The Orthodox rabbi's answer to me was rooted in the tradition and is a valid response. However, this answer isn't satisfying to me, and I suspect that it's not satisfying for most of you too I think because so many of us disagree with this theology, many American synagogues have become places where God-talk has largely been absent for at least a generation. We are uncomfortable with any conversation about God because the sheer magnitude of evil that the Holocaust represents. We struggle to find faith in the face of a God who could have stopped the Holocaust, but didn't.

The most often used justification of God, in the face of evil is called, "The free-will defense." God is absolved of responsibility for evil in the world because the only limitation on God's power is the choices that we make. We have the capability to choose evil, and we often do. This entire season revolves around the idea that we've made wrong choices and we have the power to repent, forgive and be forgiven. But evil? I certainly wouldn't attribute that word to anyone here. I absolutely wouldn't think of myself as "evil."

Evil always belongs to the "other." If the question were not the worst evil you could imagine, but evil in the world today, you might say ISIS, or North Korea, or the political party or particular politician you disagree with. Evil never belongs with us.

The dictionary defines evil as "profoundly immoral or malevolent" This definition is helpful in raising anger within us and the will to oppose it, but it's not helpful in explaining why evil exists in the other or how we best conquer it. As much as we accuse the other of immorality and malevolence, we also stand 2accused by the same other. I can't imagine that our claims of evil in the other resonate any more than their claims of evil resonate in us. The inability to properly identify and understand evil, which is the most common translation of the Hebrew word *ra*, will lead us to inevitable conflict and destruction.

If we want to understand nature, we look toward the beginnings, toward evolution. When God created the Earth, after each day He looked and said “Ki Tov - It’s good.” When God created human beings he looked at all creation and said, “V’Hinei Tov Me’od” Bresishit Rabbah - a collection of Midrashim - fan fiction of the Bible, associates this phrase with the “Yetzer Hara - evil inclination.” It’s a wondrous statement, how could the Yetzer Hara be associated with good?

We know that the human project didn’t quite go the way God intended in the Garden of Eden. The first humans ate from עץ הדעת טוב ורע “The Tree of knowledge of Good and Evil” and this infusion of morality into their consciousness expels them from the Garden. But still, you would think that we humans would be more good than evil. We certainly aren’t out to be profoundly immoral or malevolent right? We’re not evil, even if we have an evil inclination, we’ll choose good - right?

Well, we know what happens next in the story human nature. Generations come and generations go, and human beings corrupt the Earth. Our God, perfect in every way, comes to regret His own creation somehow. By the time we get to the story of Noah and the flood, instead of seeing good, God sees **“how great was man’s wickedness on earth, and how every plan devised by his mind was nothing but evil all the time.”**

God chooses Noah, the absolute best person on earth, the one who is simple, pure, blameless and righteous in his generation and asks Noah to take the seeds of creation in all the animals of Earth and start over after the flood wipes out creation for a do-over.

When the ark comes to rest on dry land, what is the very first thing that Noah does with these precious few animals that are left on Earth? The moment he gets off the ark he takes one of every pure animal, kills it and sacrifices it to God on an altar. After God goes through all that trouble to have Noah save those animals, he kills a bunch of them and makes a big barbecue for God’s enjoyment. I’m not making this up, it’s really there.

The LORD smelled the pleasing odor, and the LORD said to Himself: “Never again will I doom the earth because of man, since the devisings of man’s mind are evil from his youth; ***Ki Yetzer Lev Adam Ra M’inurav - evil from his youth.***

It may be a pleasing odor, but the reason that God decides never to destroy the earth again is not out of gratitude for that delicious bbq smell, it’s because even after God’s attempt to root out “ra” from the earth, he is unable--even the most righteous of men, Noah has that Yetzer HaRa. We all have it. Noah is not acting out of malevolence or immorality. So if the yetzer hara is not necessarily immoral, or malevolent, then what is it?

In the Talmud a story is related: The ancient Sages decided that they were going to capture and imprison the Yetzer HaRa. So they ordered a complete fast of three day....whereupon he [the Yetzer HaRa] was surrendered to them. He came forth from the

Holy of Holies like a fiery lion.... He [the Yetzer HaRa] said to them, "Realize that if you kill me, the world is finished." They held him for three days, then they looked in the whole land of Israel and not an egg could be found. So they asked, "What shall we do now?"...So they put out his eyes and let him go;

This story is comes as a way to show us that the Yetzer HaRa is an essential part of our creative power. Without the force of the Yetzer HaRa in the world, we don't desire to eat, we don't create anything new, we don't fulfill ourselves. I think that "evil inclination" is not a helpful or useful translation of Yetzer Hara. Evil is always something external that we're fighting. Rabbi Elliot Dorff translates the yetzer-hara not as evil inclination, but as a bad or self-serving inclination, the opposite of this would be the yetzer ha-tov, the altruistic inclination. He teaches in the name of the tradition, that we are born with both, but only the yetzer ha-ra is developed at the beginning of life. Come to my house with four young children to see regular examples of this. The altruistic inclination, the *yetzer hatov* does not develop until we are thirteen, hence Bar Mitzvah.

To fight the Yetzer Hara in the world, the first step is to identify it within *ourselves* and within others as the drive for self-fulfillment. When my self-interest gets in the way of your self-interest, we find ourselves in conflict. If we are able to see beyond ourselves and our own self-interests, I think we're going to be a lot closer to understanding one another.

The next step in fighting the Yetzer Hara in the world is accepting it and then transforming it within ourselves. We are tempted every day to make poor choices based out of our own self-fulfillment. I think we fail to adequately accept and thus channel evil within ourselves because we either ignore or reject it. If a person pursues money solely for self-fulfillment, their soul is corrupted. If a politician pursues power solely for self-interest our civil society is corrupted. If our nation pursues growth with no regard for the collective needs of the world, the earth will become corrupted. We accept that we all desire money, and that individual money can be channeled for the collective good. We accept that politicians desire power, and demand that their power can be channeled for the collective good. We accept that nation-states seek their own growth, but recognize that we all impact one another on this one fragile planet, and we mitigate our desire for growth with a long term vision that includes the dangers of climate change.

On this holiday of Yom Kippur we look squarely at the Yetzer HaRa within every one of ourselves and we pray to channel it for the sake of good. The Kol Nidre Prayer begins with the Hazzan asking permission to pray amidst sinners. Rebbe Nachman of Breslov asked the question, what is the role of the Shaliach Tzibbur - the prayer leader of communities. He said, that the prayer leader's role is to seek the good that exists within every person amidst all the evil and gather it together to send to God. So too for all of us on this holiday, we are to seek the good within us and use it to transform the evil. He associated the verse from psalms *Azamra L'elohai B'odi* - I will sing to my God my whole self. That is, I will sing to God accepting the good within me as well as the

evil. If we are able to accept it, we can transform our desire for self-fulfillment to a communal good and find ways to defeat the evil that threatens all of us.