

Sat 25 July 2015 / 9 Av 5775
 Dr Maurice M. Mizrahi
 Congregation Adat Reyim
 Tish'A B'Av Study session

B"H

How can anybody commit atrocities?

Background

Tish'a b'Av: Saddest day on Jewish calendar. Long list of catastrophes befell the Jews on that day.

Mishnah recalls five tragedies that occurred on Tish'a b'Av in ancient days:

- First, the spies Moses sends to scout the Promised Land bring back a largely negative report, which demoralizes the Israelites.
- Second, the first Temple is destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BCE.
- Third, the second Temple is destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE.
- Fourth, Bar Kochba's revolt against Rome fails when he is killed in the destruction of the city of Betar in 135 CE.
- Fifth, Jerusalem is razed a year later, and the Exile begins. [Ta'anit 4:6]

Many later catastrophes also happened to us on Tish'a b'Av.

But let's focus on the last two: the failure of the Bar Kochba revolt, which triggered the diaspora.

Ferocity of repression

The Midrash on Lamentations, *Echah Rabbah*, describes in detail the ferocity of the Romans in putting down the revolt:

- Rabbi Yochanan said: [At Betar,] the brains of three hundred babies were found upon a single rock...
- Rabban Gamliel said: There were 500 schools in Betar, and the smallest of them had not less than 300 children... [The Romans] wrapped each and every child in his textbook scroll and burned him [alive]... [Lamentations Rabbah 2:4]

Not to mention crucifixions, horrible torture and gruesome executions.

The Roman emperor, Hadrian, was determined to wipe out Judaism.

On Yom Kippur, we remember the ten rabbis who were martyred in that period [Midrash Elleh Ezkerah]. The Talmud says:

- Rabbi Akiva [the greatest of the Talmud] ... was taken out for execution... While they [skinned him alive, combing] his flesh with iron combs, he [recited the Shema]... He prolonged the [last] word, *echad*, until he expired while saying it...

- Rabban Shimon Ben Gamliel was beheaded...
- Rabbi Haninah ben Teradion was wrapped in a Torah scroll and burned alive. Damp wool was packed into his chest to ensure he would not die quickly. While he was being burned, he told his students that he could see the letters of the sacred Torah "flying up" to heaven... [Berachot 61b]

-It wasn't just the men:

- The Roman ruler's daughter coveted Rabbi Yishmael for his physical beauty... She asked that the skin of his head be flayed while he was still alive, so she could stuff the skin and look at his face. [Berachot 61b]

-It wasn't just the soldiers:

- Romans loved to go to the circus and watch wild beasts devour human beings, gladiators slaughter one another; they came by the thousands and cheered lustily.

-It wasn't just that period:

- Before, Pharaoh ordered all male Jewish babies to be killed.
- In all cultures, children were burned alive or disemboweled on an altar, as human sacrifices, to appease angry "deities".

-Did later religions and isms help? No:

- People took their families out for a picnic to watch public executions, slow torture, heretics burned at the stake by the Inquisition in the infamous autodafés.

-Did civilization help? No:

- Witness Nazi savagery by highly civilized people. One million Jewish children murdered -- gassed, shot, beaten to death, injected with poison, subjected to so-called "medical experiments", etc.

-Is this still done today? Yes:

- 19 January 2015: The Islamic State (ISIS) publicly executed 13 teenage boys for the crime of watching a soccer game. They left their bodies lying in the open and their parents were not allowed to retrieve them.
- They burned a pilot alive on camera.
- They beheaded dozens of Christians on camera.

How can anybody commit such atrocities? Especially against children?

Is humanity worth saving?

In light of this, is humanity worth saving?

Talmud: It would have been better if man had not been created:

Our Rabbis taught: For two and a half years Beth Shammai and Beth Hillel were arguing, the first saying it would have been better if man had not been created... and the second saying it is better that man has been created... They finally took a vote and decided that it would have been better if man had not been created..., but now that he has been created, let him investigate his past deeds [and, if he find them at fault, make amends] or, as others say, let him examine his future actions [before committing them.] [Eruvin 13b]

In other words, now that we are here, let's make the best of a bad situation.

Midrash and Zohar: Before creating our world, God created many worlds and destroyed them, because He did not like them:

Rabbi Abbahu said...: The Holy One, blessed be He, went on creating worlds and destroying them until He created [ours], and then He said: 'These please Me; those did not please Me.' Rabbi Pinchas said: 'The proof... is [in Genesis, where it says]:

And God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good.'

[Genesis 1:31]

[ALL that He has made means ALL the worlds, the good ones and the bad ones - and behold, only THIS world "was very good".] [Genesis Rabbah 9:2]

Why did God destroy these worlds?

Zohar: Because they would not follow the Torah. He asked, and no one would. [Zohar, Bereshit 1:24b] (In our world, only Israel did.)

The Torah is necessary to sustain the world. Mishnah:

Al shlosha devarim ha-olam omed: al hattorah, ve-al ha-avodah, ve-al gemilut hassadim. [Avot 2:1]

The world rests on three things: On Torah, on worship, and on good deeds.

But later God had a change of heart and almost destroyed our world during the Flood:

And God saw that the wickedness of man was great upon the earth, and that every product of the thoughts of his heart was always only evil. And the Lord repented that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart. And the Lord said, I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth... for I repent that I have made [him]... The earth had become corrupt before God, and was filled with violence. And God saw the earth, and, behold, it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted its way upon the earth. God said to Noah, 'The end of all flesh has come before me; for the earth is filled with violence through them; and, behold, I will destroy them from the earth.' [Genesis 6:5- 13]

So God reboots the world with just Noah and his ark.

Why? Because Torah says:

Noah was a just man and perfect in his generations, and Noah walked with God.
[Gen. 6:9]

So righteous people earn us a reprieve. Talmud: Even today, only 36 righteous people keep God from destroying the world:

Abaye said: [To survive,] the world must contain not less than 36 righteous people [*tzaddikei*] in each generation, who are allowed to greet the Divine Presence [every day]. [Sanhedrin 97b, Sukkah 45b]

They are called "*Tzaddikim Nistarim*" (the hidden righteous ones) or "*Lamed Vav Tzaddikim*" (36 righteous ones), or *Lamed Vav(niks)*.

Later, many times God wanted to wipe out Israel, and Moses convinced Him not to.

How can anybody commit atrocities?

Especially against children?

Especially while thinking they are serving a just cause?

1-Just following orders.

2-Brainwashing and propaganda: Charismatic authority figure said so, knows better, takes responsibility.

3-Belief in a cause: The end justifies the means: Terror will cause submission to the "good guys".

-For perpetrators, perhaps. But not for onlookers who cheer.

4-Mob psychology: People around you do it, so follow the crowd.

5-Fear of retribution: If you don't do it, the authorities will harm you or your loved ones.

6-Promise of reward: If you do it, you will get a lot of money or services you really need or want.

7-All human beings have the potential for being destructive, ferocious, sadistic, in certain circumstances. Torah:

Yetzer lev ha-adam ra' min'orav

The inclination of a man's heart is evil from his [birth]. [Genesis 8:21; 6:5]

[Y Berachot 3:5: "from his youth" means "from his birth"]

Talmud: This "evil inclination" (*yetser ha-ra'*):

-Cannot be eliminated and must be fought constantly.

-Must be channeled to:

-good acts (if born with lust for blood; become butcher, surgeon, or even soldier in wartime); or

-neutral acts (if like violence; play in sports, watch sports, watch violent movies).

-Yet is necessary for any accomplishment! Midrash:

Nachman said, in Rav Shmuel's name...: Can the Evil Inclination be "very good"? That would be extraordinary! Yes, [because] without the Evil Inclination, no man would build a house, take a wife, beget a family, and engage in work. So said [King] Solomon [in Ecclesiastes]:

And I saw that all labor and all achievement in work was the result of man's envy and rivalry with his neighbor. [Eccl. 4:4] [Genesis Rabbah 9:7]

This is a severe indictment of mankind. It suggests that we achieve things, not for noble motives, but:

-to gain the admiration of others, to show off,

-to have more money, more possessions,

-to impress the girl (or the boy),

-to do better than our neighbors, to be ahead of the competition,

-to win prizes,

-to exercise power,

-to show those who said we would never amount to anything, or

-to leave worthy deeds behind, so we are remembered after we die.

None of these incentives are altruistic. But without them, there would be no achievements, no progress. They are essential for the continued existence of the world. The driving force behind all our successes is bad impulses. So it is no surprise that the Talmud says:

Abaye said: The greater the man, the greater his Evil Inclination. [Sukkah 52a]

-Ordinary, normal-acting people do it: When sadistic murderer caught, neighbors say: "But he was so nice, so polite, so considerate, so kind!"

-Nazi Reserve Police Battalion 101, made up of ordinary middle-aged German family men, was sent to Józefów, Poland, in 1942. The commander, Major Wilhelm Trapp, told his men to round up all 1,800 Jews, separate the men so they could be sent to a work camp, and slaughter all the women, children and elderly. He added that those who did not want to do so could step aside. Of the 500 men, only 15 chose to opt out. The rest went on slaughter the Jews as told.

-Historians and prosecutors have not found a single case of anyone being threatened with death or imprisonment for refusing to commit atrocities.

Milgram Experiment: Showed people CAN act against their conscience, harm others against their inclination.

Jewish Yale professor Stanley Milgram, told his (male) subjects in 1963:

Here is your payment. We are studying the role of punishment in teaching. You will teach this man word pairs, then quiz him. If he answers wrong, shock him. The first shock is programmed to 15 volts, then 30, then 45, all the way up to 450 volts.

The "learner" is an actor who stays in another room, pretending to be shocked. He plays a taped response that grows more and more desperate, begging the subject to stop. If the subject hesitates, the experimenter tells him to continue with authoritarian voice, telling him, "No permanent harm will come to learner and I alone am responsible."

Result: 100% went up to 300 volts. 65% went all the way to 450 volts!

Variations:

- Basic: 65%
- Subject tells assistant to administer shocks (rather than do it himself): 93%
- Subject is part of team of 3, the other 2 being actors that never protest: 73%
- Subjects are all women (rather than all men): 65%
- Place is rundown office of private "research firm" (rather than Yale): 48%
- Subject and learner are in same room (rather than invisible to each other): 40%
- Subject forces learner's hand on plate to get shock (rather than flip switch): 30%
- Experimenter leaves and gives orders by phone (rather than in person): 21%
- Experimenter leaves and lets assistant run experiment: 20%
- Subject is part of team of 3, the other 2 being actors told to disobey: 10%
- Subject chooses shock level (rather than level increasing each time): 3%
- Two experimenters arguing, one telling subject to stop, the other to continue: 0%

Conclusion

We are wired that way. Yet:

For the wretched race of beings we surely are, we do, on occasion, manage to soar.

[Charles Krauthammer, commenting on recent incredible feat of mission to Pluto:

http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/pluto-and-us/2015/07/09/6b44471e-2665-11e5-aae2-6c4f59b050aa_story.html]

May this be the last Tish'a b'Av we spend in mourning.