

Rabbi Jay TelRav
Temple Sinai – Stamford, CT
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We Are Cosmic Warriors

This past summer, my family and I got away for a few days to an Air-BnB rental in Vermont. We brought with us some of our favorite books and some toys without batteries. We brought Julie’s father and a list of things we wanted to bring back as mementoes. It was a beautiful time to escape the craziness of life in the “real world” and we filled the days with kayaking, biking, swimming, eating and good time for the kids spent with their grandfather. And, while we were hoping for a complete retreat, we found a television in the house, which meant it would be almost impossible. The Republican National Convention was taking place during our trip. I recall an evening that we were watching the festivities and a news commentator came on the screen. My father-in-law described her as a raging supporter of the candidate I cannot support. And, what I found so shocking was not what I heard her saying on the screen but by my own reaction: I immediately began watching for rhetoric and listening for proof that this pundit was an idiot.

It was a remarkably rapid gulf that opened between me and this stranger on the screen. We grew up under the same flag. Our skin color is the same. We speak the same language and yet, we have experienced such different Americas. And, you don’t need me to point out how the same thing is happening all across this great country of ours – and not just on matters of political affiliation. “Black Lives Matter vs. Blue Lives Matter vs. All Lives Matter”: these are shorthand expressions for our perception of the societal rifts. “The 1%” quickly gets us right to the crux of class tensions and the disproportionate power which is inherent with great wealth. “Religionists vs. Secularists” help us know what kind of language to use with the person we’re speaking with. And, “Liberal vs. Conservative” has far too many connotations to summarize briefly but you know immediately what I mean when I employ the terms. These are all ways we use to organize an increasingly complex world – to help us work in shorthand. However, it’s problematic that it felt so natural for me to describe each pairing using the word “versus” between the poles. Obviously, it is because of the adversarial nature of these opposites but to

put it in different terms, the two sides of these conflicts are locked in a Cosmic War with each other.

I first came across this expression some years ago and it helps explain so much about the enduring problems in the world. A “Cosmic War” is an imagined battle between opposing forces—good and evil, right and wrong, order and chaos. The adherents to each argument are engaged in a zero-sum game in which there can only be one winner and they are endlessly sure, not only of their own righteousness in the matter, but in the Divine Will that they win. In the words of Mark Juergensmeyer, “[Cosmic War] is an imagined image of grand encounter between two sides gripped in an all-or-nothing struggle, a confrontation so grand and complete that it almost always is confined to the imagination or to representations in myth and legend...”¹ In his characterization of the matter, he uses a fantastical dynamism to show that we are mortals involved in a struggle that is representative of the forces of reality. It would be the stuff of comic books alone if not for its remarkable truth. We’re talking: The United States against the forces of evil in the form of *Daesh*, or ISIS. We’re talking: The Supporters of Bernie Sanders against the 1%ers. We’re talking: The Faithful of God against the Minions of Satan. It is where we get statements like “A Basket of Deplorables.”²

There are a few reasons that Cosmic War is such a helpful framework for human beings to understand how they are locked in conflict. First, it provides a coherent worldview – the black and white of a matter is much easier for our brains to manage than the gray areas – we know precisely who the bad guys are. Second, it provides an explanation for why bad things happen – because the “bad guy” is the source of my trouble. Cosmic War dehumanizes the enemy – and allows us to talk about and behave towards the enemy in ways that we normally could not towards other humans. This type of war empowers its participants – and makes even the least powerful person feel that s/he has something to offer to the cause. This is why it becomes so easy for radicalized factions to mobilize extremists – it elevates them to a level of high importance. Cosmic War provides transcendent timelines which remind us that, though

¹ Juergensmeyer, Mark. *Cosmic War: Global Perspectives on Religion*. University of California, Santa Barbara. May, 2016. <http://religion.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.001.0001/acrefore-9780199340378-e-65>

² This was an expression used by Hillary Clinton on September 9, 2016, to refer to the segment of Trump supporters who are racist, xenophobic, nationalist, white-supremacists.

we may not win this battle, the war began before us and will rage on long after we're gone. And finally, being a participant in a Cosmic War is personally exciting. Again, Juergensmeyer writes so clearly, "To live in a state of cosmic war is to live in a world in which individuals know who they are, why they have suffered, by whose hand they have been humiliated, and at what expense they have persevered."¹

The earliest forms of Christianity chose the Jew as an opponent to pit itself against in the battle that raged between Right and Wrong. And while the doctrine was reversed in the 60's, the conflict raged (and still rages in some places) across the fundamentalist Christian world...serving as a foil for those looking to direct their righteousness. Within Judaism, we have used the personage of Amalek to represent our endless war against the most despicable of people – he being the one who operates from his own self-interest and preys on the weakest and most vulnerable.

Amalek represents the evil from without – the stranger we should be wary of but there is another, more concerning example of a Cosmic War within our Jewish people – that of Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai. These were two schools of students who trained under the tutelage, first of Hillel and Shammai and then their students and the students of their students. The schools of Hillel and Shammai had variant relationships to the tradition which meant that these two bodies of students argued over just about everything during the course of 200 years. The conflict came to a head in an episode related to us through the Talmud in which both groups of students were called to a single room and locked inside to reach an outcome on some long-forgotten matter of ritual importance. They found it impossible to work together and the violence which erupted left many dead from the school of Hillel.² In fact, the hatred-for-its-own-sake between these two representative groups is blamed for our national inability to maintain our hold upon our homeland of Israel 2000 years ago.

But, what is most important for us to remember is that this animosity (to the point of murder) was not the model presented them by their beloved patriarchal teachers. Much has been written about the differences between the schools of thought of the individuals, Hillel and

¹ *ibid.*

² Jastrow, Marcus. Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai. The Jewish Encyclopedia, 1906.

Shammai. The former has greater concern for the welfare of the individual and the latter was more focused on the preservation of the tradition. On matters of religious practice, Hillel is more accommodating, Shammai stricter. The first is more universalistic concerning the Jews' place in the greater world, the other more isolationist. A Progressive approach versus an effort to Conserve tradition. In the most literal way, their fundamentally contradictory approach to interpreting the Law is the clearest example we have of vastly different approaches to Judaism but, and this is important, I would not call the relationship between these two men a Cosmic War. There is one really important difference to illustrate.

Hillel and Shammai refused to submit to one of the mainstays of the rules of engagement in a Cosmic War – they would not dehumanize the other. They maintained the humanity of their adversary during the course of their work together on the Sanhedrin. They recognized their ongoing interaction and the outcome of their disagreements was important but, more than that, they recognized the Divine Face in the other. They preserved their interactions as a *מחלוקת לשם שמים* – a disagreement for the sake of God's name. They insisted on staying at the table and listening to the other and working towards a shared outcome that would include the participation of each.

Our ancient rabbis knew that dissent and fractionalization was inevitable within community. For that purpose, they transmitted lessons to us to counteract the tendency to dehumanize the stranger. Rather, they provided material to re-humanize our foe. They taught us that humanity's origin begins with a single human being so that none could claim that his ancestors were greater than that of his adversary.¹ They tell us not to turn away from the stranger in our midst but to treat him the same as we do our family.² They teach us that even the least members of our society reflect the same divinity as our greatest makers. The prophet Zechariah takes it one step further reminding us first to “dispense true justice” and then he prevents us from creating a Cosmic War when he warns us, “do not devise evil in your

¹ b. Sanhedrin, 38a.

² In Exodus 12:49 we read, “The same law will apply to the person who is native-born and to the foreigner who lives among you.” This prevents the exclusion of the foreigner who is without any social safety net.

hearts against one another.”¹ Evil, according to the author of Zechariah is something we very much devise ourselves!

Flash forward 2500 years in today’s age of genetic sequencing, and most of us have let go of the fundamentalist presentation in which humanity spontaneously appeared 5777 years ago at the command of God. Instead of the classic rabbis, you have your own rabbi telling you that science proves to us, even more convincingly than the bible stories, that we share 99% of our DNA with every other human who walks the planet today. What causes us to differ from each other, genetically at least, is that last 1%.² You’ll acknowledge that the electronic impulses coursing through your brain and informing everything you believe are simply differently configured but identical in every externally observable way to the beliefs formulated in your adversary’s mind. It’d be a lot easier if we could claim that we were so different from each other.

There are ways to minimize the dehumanization of the other but, I caution you, they’re not easy and, at times, they are even spiritually dangerous. Andrew Rice lost his elder brother David in the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center. Three months later, the mother of one of the hijackers contacted a group called Murder Victims' Families for Reconciliation. She had an outrageous request: She wanted to meet some of the families of the 9/11 victims and ask for their forgiveness. The meeting was arranged. As a group of the victims' families waited in one room to meet Mrs. al-Wafi, one mother-whose son was killed in the World Trade Center did something extraordinary. She got up and walked down the hall to meet the mother of her son's killer. Andrew recalls the moment: We heard footsteps, then silence. Then we heard this...sobbing. Finally, they both came into the room-both mothers their arms around each other. By now we were all crying." Looking into the eyes of the mother who raised a murderer that took your own child’s life. Can you imagine the courage required to remember that the other mother is also human and suffering both the loss of her own child and the losses caused by her own child – would it be possible to see Mrs. al-Wafi’s angst as equal if not more than that of the parents of the victims?

¹ Zechariah, 7:9-10. Here, not only does the text

² Korgen, Ben. Reinventing the World, We Can do Better. First Edition Publishing. 2015. Chapter 10.

That sounds admirable? But for most of us, the opinions of the other side are so far from our own and our minds are so closed to them that we cannot sit together and we cannot listen to their point of view. Think of arguing with someone who feels as strongly opposite in their opinion as you do on matters of gun control, a woman's right to choose, marriage equality or immigration. The conversation can become so difficult, so quickly that you'd want to retreat. This inability to relate to the other could, understandably cause some significant degree of upset. Which is why a recent conversation on a massive list serve of psychologists identified an explosion of Americans seeking therapeutic help for their extreme anxiety as a result of this election.

An unnamed respondent who chose the name Liz stated what I certainly feel. She said, "her fear stems from her incredulous realization that so many of her fellow citizens inhabit a reality that barely intersects with her own. "I can no longer see where they're coming from...I feel like I'm in The Twilight Zone." She believes that "we're getting closer and closer and closer to something that seems so insane," she goes on to say, "The thought of him winning, or even the thought of her winning and parts of the country imploding in chaos as a result—it all just seems like a nightmare."¹

If this describes the way you are feeling and if it is beginning to affect your ability to manage the details of your life, you should seek out a mental health professional to speak with. And, for the rest of us, what is there to do for a country of citizens engaged in a Cosmic War? Well, first steps might include recognizing that anxiety in a situation as extreme as this election is not an irrational response! It's also important to talk about more than the candidates, the polls, the predictions and the headlines. It is crucial to find a friend or a partner and to talk about how this whole thing is making you feel.

First and foremost, accept that the future may not be exactly what you hope it will be.² After all, when have you ever *really* had complete control over the future? And take a deep

¹ Goldberg, Michelle. [Fear, Anxiety and Depression in the Age of Trump](http://www.slate.com/articles/double_x/doublex/2016/09/trump_induced_anxiety_is_a_real_thing.html). Sept 23, 2016.

http://www.slate.com/articles/double_x/doublex/2016/09/trump_induced_anxiety_is_a_real_thing.html

² Based on: Meyer, Robinson. [How to Preserve Your Mental Health Despite the 2016 Election](http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2016/05/how-to-preserve-your-mental-health-despite-the-2016-election/484160/). May 24, 2016.

<http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2016/05/how-to-preserve-your-mental-health-despite-the-2016-election/484160/>

breath, the world is not going to come to an end on November 9th if your preference is not realized.

Of course, it is your responsibility to look deeply at the foundation of your values and to make choices in line with them. A dear friend of mine is a long-time Republican with preciously-held Conservative values. He cannot vote for Hillary but he is thoughtful enough to know that he cannot vote for Donald, either. That reflects the type of thought necessary if we are to preserve the sacred art of disagreement – the *Mahloket* of Hillel and Shammai.

The next matter is taking some action to effect an outcome in line with what you hope for. One of our congregants is not sitting here today because he is in shul in Ohio and, afterward he'll stay and will volunteer his time for the electioneering effort. This is someone who will someday look back at this chapter and say, "I did not sit idly by." American writer, Ta-Nehisi Coates, charges us: "You are called to struggle, not because it assures you victory but because it assures you an honorable and sane life"¹

I know that each of you care about the future of humanity and you feel that you have a stake in this Cosmic War. To accept that responsibility is so very Jewish. It is the origin of our patriarch's earned name: Yisrael – One who wrestles with Godliness. But, just as important is the fact that we also wrestle with the forces of Evil wherever and whenever we are confronted by them.² We must commit to engage in the battle but we must insist that we do it as Jews. Unwaveringly committed to the humanity of those we see as the "other".

Following the service this afternoon, I invite you to take your seat as a foot soldier in the Cosmic War and listen to the war stories of other participants. David Cohen will facilitate a panel of those who've been actively fighting for their right to participate in this country's narrative. They will each share some of their story and then, after listening carefully to what they have to say, you'll be able to ask questions. And, finally, a word about UNITY. Our experiential art installation has been such a remarkable success. I have watched Jew, Christian, Muslim and non-religious people walk through. Atheists have added their yarn to that of

¹ Coates, Ta-Nehisi. [Between the World and Me](#).

² Rabbi Neil Hirsch and Rabbi Ed Bernstein have both made the point that this election cycle presents some archetypal characters which make us think of some of the most evil individuals recurring throughout our Jewish story. <http://www.hevreh.org/amalek-in-every-generation/> and here, too: <https://rabbiedbernstein.com/tag/amalek/>

believers. People of every skin tone and place of origin have visited and as their yarn is pushed aloft to join the rest, it becomes indistinguishable. The post-script on my friend Reverend Mark Lingle's emails reads: Because Diversity was God's Idea. The people of UNITY hold every imaginable position within the Cosmic War raging around us but every one of the visitors to our property becomes a member of the sacred *Machloket* – the holy unity that exists with our diversity. As they left their mark, they joined the others and became so much greater than any of us could have been alone. This is not an annual project, this will be your only opportunity to wander through it and add your personal mark at Temple Sinai. This is how we transform a Cosmic War into *Yisrael* – Wrestling with God.