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The Lessons We Must Learn from Charlottesville

Rabbi Neil Cooper

It is, to be sure, a strange phrase with which our parasha begins:

Re’eh, Behold, I set before you today a blessing and curse...

Later in Deuteronomy/Dvarim (30:19), the choice is between life and death. But is that really a choice? Doesn’t everyone know, without being told that life and blessings are much better than death and curses?

The Torah encourages us to embrace life by performing mitzvot, by living in accordance with the values of Jewish Life. In the Midrash (Midrash Devarim Rabbah 3:3), however, this choice is portrayed as a reminder that, despite the fact that this doesn’t seem like a hard choice to make, it is still a choice. The children of Israel are taught here that they do have the power to choose and the choice may not be as simple as they might think:

R. Eleazar said: From the time when God uttered these words on Sinai it has been laid down that “Good and evil do not emanate from the mouth of the Most High. Evil comes to those who do evil things, and good comes to those who do good. R. Haggai said: God said, “And what is more, not only have I set two paths before you, but I have not dealt with you according to the strict letter of the law, for I said to you therefore choose life”.

According to the Midrash, there is a choice that we make. God says: I am giving you two choices, so choose one. But good and evil, says the midrash, do not come by virtue of God saying that there is a choice. Moreover, good or evil is not automatically attained by choosing a path. Good and evil are the results of the way we choose to act. That is why, according to the Midrash, when the Torah says, “therefore choose life” (Dt 30:19), God is saying, choose to act in a good way rather than an evil way, but I can’t make that choice for you, says God, because good and evil do not come by choosing a path on which to walk. The good path and the evil path are determined by the way that you act. Therefore, you must choose for yourself.

This week, we have witnessed in Charlottesville what it a clash between good and evil looks like. This is what it looks like when people decide to choose evil
instead of good. The images of evil, which have been broadcast around the world, have left many of us stunned, shocked and in a state of disbelief.

Interviewing Alan Zimmerman, the President of the Reform congregation in Charlottesville, Mr. Zimmerman noted: If I had filmed in “black and white” what was going on in the streets of our city, you would think that you were watching a newscast of Germany in 1933. How is it possible that in 2017 we are witnessing what occurred in 1933?

How does this happen? One answer is provided by the Midrash: Good and evil do not enter the world not through God’s voice but through our choices and behaviors. How does something like Charlottesville happen? It happens quite simply. People choose to act in hateful, racist and bigoted ways. To this our Midrash responds in a profound and surprising way. When we see evil in the world, don’t blame God. God doesn’t create evil. We do.

Having just returned from Eastern Europe, which included visits to Auschwitz and Terezin, the issue of the ubiquitous presence of evil in the world, is something about which I have been thinking a lot. (I’ll speak more about this on Yom Kippur). In terms of Europe, God was not the perpetrator, or even the source, of evil. Evil is man-made. Evil enters the world when people follow those hateful instincts and act on those instincts. I believe that this is a partial explanation of the events that have occurred over the weekend in Charlottesville. This happened because people chose to act in bigoted, cruel and hateful ways.

How could this happen? I think that President Trump has fallen woefully short in his support of the city of Charlottesville and in denouncing the nefarious forces of White Supremacy and Neo-Nazism. A stronger statement could have united our nation and focused our attention on the clear distinction between the far right and far left protestors. But his lack of unequivocal condemnation is not the culprit.

The people who gathered were there, so they claimed, to protect and defend the flag of the Confederacy and the statues of Robert E. Lee and other heroes of the Confederacy during the Civil War. But this crowd was not about nostalgia for the “good old days” of the Civil War. This is not about history. This was about hate. This was about antisemitism. This was about racism.

This was clear because, as they marched through the streets, they held, not just flags of the Confederacy but flags with swastikas. As the marchers chanted, they invoked blacks and Jews. And, in the language of Kristallnacht, they threatened
the synagogue, an institution which has no connection to the debate about Robert E. Lee.

Once again, the words of Alan Zimmerman, president of the Reform synagogue in Charlottesville:

I stood outside our synagogue with the armed security guard we hired after the police department refused to provide us with an officer. ...

For half an hour, three men dressed in fatigues and armed with semi-automatic rifles stood across the street from the Temple. Had they tried to enter, I don't know what I could have done to stop them, but I couldn't take my eyes off them, either. Perhaps the presence of our armed guard deterred them. Perhaps their presence was just a coincidence, and I'm paranoid. I don't know.

Several times, parades of Nazis passed our building, shouting 'There's the synagogue!' followed by chants of 'Seig Heil' and other anti-Semitic language. Some carried flags with swastikas and other Nazi symbols. ...

Later, I noticed that the man accused in the automobile terror attack wore the same polo shirt as the man who kept walking by our synagogue; apparently, it's the uniform of a white supremacist group. Even now, that gives me a chill.

When services ended, my heart broke as I advised congregants that it would be safer to leave the Temple through the back entrance rather than through the front, and to please go in groups.

This is 2017 in the United States of America."

What must be said about Charlottesville, I believe, should not be confused by what President Trump did or did not say. That is for a different conversation. Rather, I focus on the stench of evil which has once again spread across our nation.

It is astounding to note the emergence of hundreds of neo-Nazi and White Supremacist groups throughout this country, with PA home to one of the largest state-contingents in the country. We must realize that this mindset is pervasive in this country. But knowing this, we need to articulate a response to this. In the face of evil, we must craft a coherent and unifying response. And this is of crucial importance.
When I visited Auschwitz/Birkenau this past June, I was overcome by sadness from many things that we saw and by many stories that we heard. But nothing was more upsetting to me than the last exhibit in Birkenau. At the end of the tour of the facility, after the over-crowded barracks, the unfit infra-structure and the thousands of relics stolen from dying or dead Jews, the Memorial at the end said simply:

   From this place, a cry went forth to all humanity.
   Here millions were killed, mostly Jews, by the Nazis.

There are over one million visitors to Auschwitz every year. That is, a million opportunities annually, to teach about the lesson of Auschwitz. And what lesson does that memorial plaque teach? There is no lesson.

   No: “You must respond whenever hatred and bigotry rear its head.”
   No:” This is what happens when good people do nothing”.
   No: “In the face of evil, stand for good, stand for right, stand for compassion, humanity, kindness. Stand for peace”

I learned, painfully from the silence of Auschwitz, that lessons must be articulated. Passivity is silent acquiescence. Neutrality favors only Evil, never Good. This is the first lesson to learn about Charlottesville.

**Among the lessons I learn from this week’s events is that this is Evil.** Hatred, bigotry, anti-Semitism and racism must be called out and given no safe haven in a democratic and multi-cultural society. This is the hatred and anti-Semitism which has marred Jewish History throughout history. This is the anti-Semitism which went unchecked in Germany and throughout Europe 75 years ago and gave rise to the Holocaust. At that time the comments were, “this will pass”, “this will blow over” and the world turned a blind eye and the hatred went unchecked and six million Jews were murdered. Anything less than an unequivocal, unfiltered and unambiguous denunciation from the highest levels of government down must be heard. Anything less must be seen as tolerant of what occurred.

**Another lesson to learn, I believe is that this is not a blip on the screen of either American or world history.** This was, is and will always be part of the world, including the United States. By identifying this as an event rather than an ongoing situation is naïve and dangerous. Those marching did not just become
racists. They, and millions of Americans, and many more millions around the world, believe as they do. I do not believe that it is ever possible to uproot and eradicate anti-Semitism and racism. The best we can do is to shine a light on it and force its retreat. The only way for it not to spread is if we stand up to it.

And thirdly, Pres. Barrack Obamas tweet:

No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite.

I disagree. I believe that it is easier and more natural to hate than to love. It is natural to be wary of that which is different. Better something familiar than something different. Wariness of that which is different from me, I believe, leads to a sense of caution, to fear and, in some cases, to hate. That is why hate is so pervasive. Hating the other is easy. It is love, not hate, which must be taught and learned.

Hatred for Nazis came easily. It is love, acceptance and the belief in the sanctity of all human life which is the hard lesson to learn. But that is the lesson we must champion and teach. Without this constant, positive message, hatred, bigotry and racism become normal, understandable and even acceptable. The events of this past week must teach us that one must not only fight for every human life, this week must teach us the power of acceptance and inclusion. One must realize that without the fight for the sanctity of life, the default position is not “nothing.” The default is hatred.

This is a fight which must not only be waged in the halls of Congress and throughout government. This is a fight that all religious communities must wage together. No group, religion or nationality has been immunized from being hated. This is something which we must all fight together. And this is a fight which each of us must wage individually:

We can scrutinize our own language, our quips and our jokes, conscious of the pervasiveness of racial slurs and bigoted language.

We can scrutinize the careless comments and object to the slurs we hear. We can protest against the unsavory references made in our presence and the derogatory terms which the speaker “didn’t real mean anything by it” when they said it.

We can refuse to be silence, to acquiescence and to remain indifferent, because silence, acquiescence and indifference are the breeding grounds of hatred.
We will, we must, teach the hard truths of life because without those truths, evil finds its safe-haven. And it is our duty and commitment to remove from our midst the places and the opportunities where evil might reside.