

Erev Rosh Hashana 5780
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Betsy and I stopped in Paris last January. It was cold, windy, and wet, yet somehow still beautiful, as only Paris can be. Shivering and tired, we stepped into a fancy hotel to warm up and have a snack. Soft music wafted through the perfumed air in the polished, marble-clad lobby. Even in winter, there were flowers everywhere; handsome men and beautiful, seemingly carefree women with Hermes bags slung over their arms making their way toward the plush taupe chairs in the café off to the side.

After we ordered our coffee and croissants, I Googled this magical place. The Hotel Lutetia was built in 1910. Its famous guests over the years included Pablo Picasso, Charles de Gaulle, André Gide, Peggy Guggenheim and Josephine Baker. James Joyce wrote part of *Ulysses* there.

Things changed when the Nazis occupied Paris in June of 1940 and requisitioned the hotel. They used it to house, feed, and “entertain” the officers in command of the occupation. Suspected collaborators were tortured in a prison across the street so the torturers could easily make it back to the hotel in time for tea. Holocaust survivors were housed there immediately after the war. When de Gaulle met the first of them and heard what they had endured, he wept.

I felt so strange nibbling on my perfect, flakey croissant and sipping cappuccino in that terrible, beautiful place. So it is, I thought, with buildings, places and people. We are all so many things...

I was reminded of the words of Soviet era dissident Alexander Solzynetsin (who survived the Gulag by eating rats and knew a good deal more than most about evil). “The line between good and evil,” he said, is not a line that separates us from them. It is a line that runs down the center of each of us.”

Of course, we like to pretend otherwise. When we're really honest with ourselves, and tonight is the night for that, we know how morally complex we are, but we so often judge others without that same complexity. It's either "She's the best. He's great," or "He's a total jerk" and "She's awful." So often we see the world like a comic book. It's good vs. evil, us vs. them. If only things were really that simple.

The complicated truth is that the question of good and evil is not about our essence, everyone here tonight is basically a good person, but about our essence at any given moment. Ask any addict fighting to stay sober one day, one hour, one minute at a time. Ask any man or woman with a wandering eye deciding whether or not to remain his or her best and truest self. Ask anyone who has ever felt tempted by anything, eaten of the apple and then felt shame. When it comes to good and evil, we are each at the center of a battle that sometimes rages and sometimes smolders within us until we die.

In religious circles we tend to over simplify good and evil in terms of heaven and hell. You end up in one or the other, never both. Like every rabbi I know, I have told this famous heaven and hell story I am about to tell you countless times. It seems like a simple story, but it's not. Because just like this story, when we really look inside ourselves, we see that heaven or hell is a far more complicated matter than us or them, and up or down.

A man wants to know the secrets of heaven and hell. God grants his wish and sends him a guide to escort him first to hell. They enter a large room in a beautiful palace. The residents of hell are seated around a banquet table. Golden platters are piled high with the most delicious food imaginable. But none of the food has been touched. The emaciated dinner guests moan from the constant ache of hunger. "If these people are so hungry why don't they eat?" the man asks his guide.

"Look closely," the guide replies. "They have no elbows. Their arms are locked straight in front of them. They can't bend their arms to bring the food to their mouths."

Next, the guide takes the man up to heaven where they enter a banquet room identical to the one they had just visited in hell. And the diners had the same, unbendable arms as those in hell, but everyone was fed and happy. "What gives?" the visitor asks his guide. "Why are these people so happy if they can't help themselves to the food?"

"Look more closely," the guide tells the man. He does and realizes that each person is lifting his or her stiff, unbending arms to feed the person across the table.

The story challenges us to ask why people in hell behave differently. Don't the people there want to be fed too? Of course they do. If everyone in heaven and everyone in hell wants to eat, that means hell lacks something heaven does not. That something is the ability to care about others who are starving too.

Schopenhauer asked this question. How is it that an individual can respond to the pain and suffering of another as though it were his own pain and suffering? How is it that an individual can forget his own safety and fly to the help of another at the risk of his own life? Schopenhauer's answer is, this emotion of compassion is the experience of a truth that you and that other are one. That the experience of separateness is secondary. And deeper than that, all life is one life, all consciousness one consciousness, that when we help another human being, when we affirm the oneness of us all, that is when we are closest to God.

The first law of biology is self-protection. The first law of the spirit is compassion. Yes, these can come into conflict, but it is compassion that makes us more than animals. Compassion is God. Compassion is heaven on earth.

Hell is the place where people do not care about other people. And that hell sometimes exists inside each of us. Why do I sometimes give money to the homeless woman who offers to wash my windshield at the gas station but other times look away? Because like all of us for whom empathy comes and goes, I am sometimes in heaven and sometimes in hell. There are moments of light, many of them, when I can feel so keenly the suffering of others, and moments, many of them, when I am in a dark too dark to see and can think only of myself.

You know. You know when you were suffering alone and afraid, you know who reached out, who showed up with a meal, a note, a hug, a ride, a laugh. We all know compassion when we feel it.

Many of you reached out this summer asking me to talk about Trump, or about some on the left's irrational hatred of Israel, or about racism, homelessness, gun control, mental health, anti-Semitism, immigration... So I am. I am talking about all of it. Because it is all rooted in whether or not we can win the war within us again and again and again. The misery in the world and in our families, all of it stems from the simple but terrible temptation we have, often many times a day, to take and not to give, to shout rather than to listen, to believe the hearts and souls of others are different and less complicated, less human than our own; that whether they are people who look very different from us and live far away or they are our own family, somehow if we prick them they do not bleed and if we do not acknowledge them--they do not matter. We live in a world where it is so easy to objectify the other.

Maimonides said, "Each person should feel as if all the deeds of all the people in the world are being weighed on the scales of the heavenly tribunal and he or she should feel as if all the deeds of all humanity are in a perfect balance, and that the next deed that he or she does will tilt the scales for the entire world one way or the other." In the Maimonidean cosmology, the world depends upon whether or not, in that ever reoccurring moment, we care about others and reach across the table of hell in order to transform that hell into something else ... into a place where another's pain is not ignored, where no one hungers for kindness, where no one starves for dignity.

We are all here seeking forgiveness because we know the complex truth about ourselves. We know that the answer for each of us to the question, "Do you care; do you really care about other people?" is neither yes nor no, but sometimes.

We're all essentially good people or we would not even be here tonight. But rarely a day, rarely a minute goes by when we don't have to decide who we really are. This year, will we be more kind? Will we remember Torah more often—that sacred book that is our moral imperative to care about others? Will we care about the stranger because we were strangers so often and for so long? Will we be kind to the widow and the orphan, the ill and the elderly, the poor and the lost? Because we sometimes feel powerless, because we feel pain, because we want to matter, can we find the empathy to feel and to know that others we are tempted to objectify hurt like we hurt and matter as we matter?

I know how you feel when you watch the news networks—any of them, all of them. I feel that way too--helpless. "When I was a young man, I wanted to change the world," said Rabbi Israel Salanter. "But I found it was difficult to change the world, so I tried to change my country. When I found I couldn't change my country, I began to focus on my town. But I discovered that I couldn't change the town, and so as I grew older, I tried to change my family.

"Now, as an old man, I realize the only thing I can change is myself, and I've come to recognize that if long ago I had started with myself, then I could have made an impact on my family. And, my family and I could have made an impact on our town. And that, in turn, could have changed the country and we could all indeed have changed the world."

The deepest, spiritual response to those on the left who hate, to those on the right who hate, to guns, homelessness, antisemitism, sexism, racism and every other ism is to battle the spiritual darkness within us that sometimes obscures the humanity of others. That hard-won empathy, moment by moment, is the answer to what plagues our society, and to what plagues our sometimes painful personal lives; our sometimes fractured families. We cannot change the world if we do not change ourselves.

That is the challenge God and Torah and 1,000 generations of our people place before us tonight—work harder, they say, work harder to win that battle within yourself when you must decide so many times each day whether to take or to give, to demonize or empathize, to feign blindness or to see. These ten days are about changing yourself; they are about winning the war within.

That person sitting next to you tonight, no matter how much you already care, care more about him. Care more about her. That stranger sleeping in a tent downtown tonight, care more about him. Care more about her. That person whose politics you despise, who you are so certain is so wrong. Reach across the table. Care more about her, care more about him.

Banish that selfish and self-righteous darkness that sometimes creeps into your soul. Vanquish it with the light of our sacred Torah that commands us to love others as much as we love ourselves. Embrace your faith, embrace each other, care about each other, care for each other with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your might. Confront that line that runs down the center of each and every one of us. Reach across the table. That is our three thousand year old mission, that is our answer, our only hope, and our loving path to a shanah tova.