

Shabbat Shalom

We are back to the beginning this Shabbat. It's a good place to be, back at the beginning. If we could only do that, if we could only go back to the beginning to live our lives with the knowledge that we have gained through experience. That's folly, that's a fantasy. It couldn't be done. We can only pick up from where we are at and be grateful for the years that we have been granted.

But, think about it for a second if we could live life from the beginning, how would we live life differently? What things would we change? Certainly in our individual lives we can think of mistakes that we made and how we would have done things a little differently or time where we were simply passive and could have made things different. When we think of human history, we have a different perspective of it. There aren't just little things that happen to humanity. On a grand scale tragedy has taken place, an evil has taken place. We wonder if people had done things differently, if others had responded in different ways, could horror have been avoided. I guess hindsight is 20/20.

Parsha Bereishit is filled with so much beauty and so much to consider. Beyond creation, there is the story of the very first murder. It is in Chapter 4 of Bereishit and we know the story. Abel's offering is found to be much more pleasing to God and it apparently evokes a tremendous amount of jealousy. So, Cain who was much distressed and he said upon his brother and he killed him. God then said to Cain, "where is your brother Abel?" And he said, "I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?"

We read in the commentary in Etz Hayim that the Vilna Gaon faults Cain for calling Abel his brother and then not treating him like a brother. But, over time through the generations, these words have taken on an obvious meaning. The question has become self-evident and that is that we are not here on this earth not only to take care of ourselves, but rather we have to take care of others. We are to understand the world in terms of the family of man, the family of humankind and see we have responsibility to each other. The Midrash takes God's words – "your brother's blood cries out to me" to mean "your brother's blood cries out against" Me – accusing me of letting injustice happen! You see, even God here is accused of standing by the face of evil! Isn't this familiar?

When we think about the horrors of the Shoah, we not only think about God, we do not only think about the victims and the perpetrators, and we also ask questions about the common man, the average man and woman neighborhoods and streets. The people who live comfortably with Jewish neighbors and witnessed them disappear from their midst. We think about the Shoah, we have grown accustomed to the vision of images of Nazi victims, shadowing naked figures on the edges of ditches about to be dispatched by the SS Einsatz Gruppen, huddled wide-eyed children, skeletal human beings, piles of bones. Too often we forget another side of that story as it were, the other side to the history from

which continue to have so much to learn. It's the story of apathy and acquiescence. Perhaps we don't go there because it would force us to look at us! Fifty-two years after the liberation of Auschwitz, 116 photographs found their way in a circuitous way to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Photographs from people from Auschwitz, but not the Jewish victims, nor the SS guard, but rather the people who maintained the camps, the nurses who worked with Mangela, the average guards who worked their shifts and then went home to their families; we see people sitting at picnic benches outside the camp enjoying meals or gorging themselves on fresh fruits, lounging on deck chairs in the shadow of the crematorium. The pictures here can be viewed on the internet from U.S. Holocaust Memorial of German murderers and all their dumb humanity joking and flirting and even lighting Christmas trees as if they were workers in a summer camp or in a hospital on their break.

I have a vivid image from the camps from a visit on the March of the Living. This is the image that stays very much alive within me. It is the image of the apartments and the houses that one sees on the March between Auschwitz and Berkenau. Apartments with porches along the train tracks, tracks existed in the 30s and the 40s. And another image...As vivid as the image as the gas chambers and crematoriums at the Majonek. There is also an image of the apartment buildings that surround the camp, building just a breath away from the smoke which bellowed out burning ashes of our ancestors. These are images of normal people, living normal lives in the face of something horribly abnormal.

When I was in Germany, in Berlin, about eight years ago, I met with a group of high school students and I remember the conversation about their grandparents and how introspective those students were. All of them saying that they have asked over and over again where their grandparents were? How painful the conversations have been in their families, and share the guilt that they live with and the realization that no only the perpetrators were guilty, but the people who stood by in silence were also guilty. Goethe wrote "two souls are harrows within my breast and each will wrestle for master there. The light and dark of Germany, the disturbing proximity of a civilized world to the barbarism speak of the battle. The battle that exists in Germany to this very day. The German's have been engaged in a very distinct post-war examination of not only the Nazis, but what happened to their culture that allowed for the Nazis to come to power, to exist, to thrive and to perpetuate their evil. That's a very important conversation...that has implications for us who sit here.

The playwright, filmmaker, philosopher, Gunter Grass, wrote about an entire credulous nation that believed in Santa Claus. Santa Clause, he wrote, the gas man. And how difficult his introspection was, was illustrated when Gunter Grass broke his own sixty-one year silence and revealed that he was a 17 year old in the SS. Perhaps more such revelations are needed, but it is not just. If we look deeply into that mirror, we know that if not the potential for evil, certainly the reality of silence in the face of evil is a terrible human problem.

That is the call of Genesis. That is the call of God and that's the way the rabbis understood "Am I my brother's keeper." We are.

We know that the German's were guilty of standing idly by, but we also know that American diplomats, American political figures and the President of the United States stood idly by.

The issue is not only the Shoah though. The Shoah and the pictures are currently being shown at the Holocaust Museum in Washington just bring the issue into focus. The issue was raised in Genesis and the issue remains our issue. The issue is about a human tendency to shirk its responsibility as one's brother's keeper. There are models of people who stand up to power, but very few. And this maybe a core call of this tradition.

The real call is for us to hold those models high. And also to be willing to look at ourselves. It is obviously very easy to point fingers at the average German, but what about the average person who lives in the free country and not under the tyranny of an oppressor. Even the response of victims themselves and their inability to reach out to their brothers who suffered next to them or more than them. That still remains the unspeakable when we consider the Shoah.

Hannah Arendt, a philosopher who studies evil encapsulated the issue of the photos when she wrote "under conditions of terror most people will comply, but some people will not." She added, "humanly speaking no more is required and no more can be reasonably be asked for this planet to remain a place fit for human habitation." So, on some level she accepts this as the human condition. Most people don't respond to evil, but some people do.

Our question is, "where are we in all of that? Will we respond to human suffering, injustice, to wrongs that are committed or are we like most people? This is the question that we have to ask ourselves. Where are we, what do we do? Are we our brother's keeper?"

So we begin a new year as products of the old. There is no escaping that. The past cannot be changed. We can't go back to what was, but I guess the real hope is that we will learn lessons from the past and internalize those lessons to lead to change and hopefully to teach our children well, to show our love for and respect for all creations and courage to respond.

May we find insight and inspiration from Torah to improve the created world.

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