

Erev Rosh Hashanah 2009 - A Religion of Sacred Discontent

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In the early 1960s, just after the start of the Eichmann trial, Stanley Milgram performed a series of experiments in social psychology at Yale. Milgram was interested in determining people's willingness to behave in ways that fundamentally contradict their core values when instructed to do so by authority figures.

Here's how it worked: a subject was instructed to ask simple questions of a student, and for every incorrect answer given the subject was to administer painful electric shocks, increasing in 15 volt increments each time. In reality, there was no electric shock, but with each shock authorization the student –really an actor -- let out cries of pain and agony. The results were astounding. Approximately 65% of all participants were prepared to inflict fatal *450 volt shocks*, simply because they were instructed to do so.¹

What is it that makes this so deeply distressing? Is it a core, visceral reaction to anything resembling the Nuremberg "I was only following orders" defense, which turned masses of regular people – in Nazi Germany, in Cambodia, Bosnia, Rwanda, Darfur -- into soldiers operating the machinery of genocide? Or is there something even deeper – something foundational that urges us to question, to defy, to refuse to blindly accept what seems essentially wrong?

I remember many lost nights of sleep after reading Shirley Jackson's *the Lottery* growing up, a tale of the routinization of death, the refusal of individuals to challenge the status quo, even at their personal peril. Every summer all of the villagers in the town would gather in the square and choose lots to determine who would be stoned to death. The barbarism of the murder is only roughly concealed by the banality of the events leading up to it: the heads of each family draw a slip of paper, and Tessie Hutchinson receives the one marked with a dark spot, indicating that she has been chosen. While a few villagers timidly mention that the tradition has been abandoned in neighboring communities, their voices are quickly silenced – and Tessie is brought forward to be killed by her family, friends and community. Even her son, little Davy Hutchinson, too young to draw his own slip of paper, is handed a few pebbles to throw. Of the entire community, it is only Tessie herself who challenges the fairness of the system, and that is only after she is slated to die.

Now here's the Jewish version of the story. The Torah instructs parents who have a son who is a *ben sorer u' moreh* —stubborn and rebellious -- to:

¹Blass, Thomas. "The Milgram paradigm after 35 years: Some things we now know about obedience to authority," *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 1999, vol. 29 no. 5, pp. 955-978.





...lay hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his city, and to the gate of his place, and say to the elders of his city: This our son is stubborn and rebellious, he will not obey our voice. He is a glutton and a drunkard. And all the men of his city shall stone him with stones, that he die; so shall you put evil away from among you; and all Israel shall hear, and fear.²

It's in the Book, and so it must be!



Not on your life, say the Rabbis. We don't want to live in that kind of world! Active resistance to systems that contradict our moral impulse is the defining character of the Talmud. So they set off in an absurdly creative legal tailspin, working to render the entire category virtually null and void. What kind of person could classify as a *ben sorer u'moreh*? Only one who is no longer a boy but not yet a man, whose parents speak not only in identical pitch, but also share the same exact appearance and stature as one another. And even still, he only qualifies if he is not only a glutton but a glutton who eats insufficiently cooked meat, and drinks wine and only wine. For if his meat is cooked too much or if he dares take a sip of water with dinner he is, according to our Rabbis, excluded from the category of *ben sorer u'moreh* and therefore cannot be punished. Indeed, they conclude, *lo haya v'lo atid l'hiyot* -- it never happened and never will happen.³



It never happened and never will happen. The classic Jewish response to dogma that undermines basic moral impulses? Creativity! Courage! Reformation! "Disobedience in the name of moral conscience is no heresy," writes Rabbi Harold Schulweis. "Disobedience in the name of moral conscience is loyalty to God."⁴

To be a Jew is not to defy for the sake of defiance, or to reject all standards and norms. Tradition is dear and halakha – Jewish law – shapes our community's normative practice. But to be a Jew is to recognize that Torah is an inheritance of willful opposition – one that makes it possible for us to live in a world that flows with love and understanding.



To be a Jew is to cultivate a moral playing field, to oppose an unjust status quo and to find the courage to strengthen voices of dissent. I am fond of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks's formulation of the resistance built into the Jewish ethical and religious system:

Opium of the people? Nothing was ever less an opiate than this religion of sacred discontent, of dissatisfaction with the status quo... It was Abraham, then Moses, Amos and Isaiah, who fought on behalf of justice and human



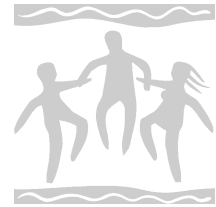
² Deut. 21:18-21.

³ Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin 71a.

⁴ Harold M. Schulweis, CONSCIENCE, Rosh Hashana 2008.



dignity, confronting priests and kings, even arguing with God [directly]... In Judaism, faith is not acceptance but protest, against the world that is, in the name of the world that is not yet but ought to be. Its aim is not to transport the believer to a private heaven. Instead, its impassioned, sustained desire is to bring heaven down to earth. Until we have done this, there is work still to do.⁵



A religion of sacred discontent. A sacred scripture that is fundamentally counter-cultural. A set of rules that challenge us to break the rules. "Judaism is," says Sacks, "God's perennial question mark against the condition of the world. That things are as they are is a fact, not a value. Should it be so? Why should it be so? Only one who asks whether the world should be as it is, is capable of changing what it is."⁶



Primo Levi describes a moment in Auschwitz when he was suffering so terribly from thirst that he reached out to break off an icicle outside the barracks window. A Nazi guard saw him, grabbed the icicle and threw it beyond Levi's reach. Levi, not yet habituated to the utter depravity of the Lager, asked *Why?* And the guard responded *Here there is no why.*⁷



Levi argues that the brutality of life in the Lager was multiplied exponentially as "logic and morality made it impossible to accept an illogical and immoral reality... A simple man, accustomed not to ask questions of himself, was beyond the reach of the useless torment of asking himself why..."⁸ But a special kind of torture was reserved for those who needed to ask, who simply couldn't adjust to a world without questions, and therefore a world without possibility.

Tomorrow we will read the story of Hannah, who struggled desperately but could not get pregnant. In anger, she cried out to God with the fervor of one who has suffered the deepest unfulfilled longing.

O Holy One, Hannah cries out: of all the hosts and hosts that You have created in Your world, is it so hard in Your eyes to give me one son? Hannah spoke from her heart: Really, God, in a world of abundant blessing, you must deny ME the only thing I need? You shape me with breasts from which no baby will ever eat? Why would torture me like this? I don't deserve this, God! You can do better! Hannah's posture is severe, unrelenting. "And Hannah prayed *at the Lord (vatitpalel al hashem),*" R' Eliezer says -- she spoke *insolently* toward heaven."



⁵Sacks, Rabbi Jonathan, *To Heal a Fractured World*, p. 27.

⁶Sacks 26.

⁷Levi, Primo, *Survival in Auschwitz*, p. 25.

⁸Levi, Primo, *Drowned and Saved*, 142-3.



The same spirit is echoed by R' Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev thousands of years later, who turns holy defiance into a spiritual practice:

A tailor once told R' Levi Yitzhak about an argument he had with God. The tailor said: "I declared to God, You wish me to repent my sins, but I have committed only minor offenses. I may have kept leftover cloth, or I may have eaten non-kosher food, or not blessed my meal. But You, O God, have committed great sins: You have taken babies from their mothers and mothers from their babies. Let's call it even; You forgive me, and I will forgive You."



After listening intently, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak rose in anger and said, "Why did you let God off so easily? You should instead have forced God to redeem the whole world!"

My friend, Andy Sherman, lost his beautiful daughter in a tragic accident 9 years ago. In his grief, Andy was struck that "funerals outside of the normal life cycle turn the customary pat theological nostrums about death into mockery and torment. Really, what we need from God," Andy felt, "is some sort of apology, or at least an acknowledgement of the wrongness of what has happened."

Recognizing that no such thing would be forthcoming unless we ghostwrite them, he wrote the following confessional -- *Al Chet* -- in his daughter's memory:



I am Adonai, your god, the god of your ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah. I have brought you out of Egypt to become a great nation, mighty, numerous and prosperous. In your midst, in each generation, I give you men and women of exceptional intelligence and compassion, who are loved and respected by all who know them. They shall be for you an example of the type of people I want you to become.



And then I make them die before their time.

For the sin I have sinned against you by letting them die too soon, I ask you, my people, to forgive me, although I know you never will.⁹

For Milgrom's subjects, the rule is to acquiesce.

For the Rabbis, for Levi Yitzhak, for Andy Sherman, the rule is to challenge.

To ask.

Even to defy the system, *for the sake of* the system.



⁹ Andrew Sherman, *Al Chet*, October 24, 2004.



Yamin Noraim bring with them the opportunity for a spiritual catharsis that comes from finding the courage to rediscover life's essential questions.

Ma anu?
Ma Hayenu?
Ma Hesdainu?

Who are we?
Who am I?
What am I doing here?
What is the purpose of my life?
What will it take to change?



WHY am I so stubborn?
WHY am I so impatient?
WHY am I still in this relationship?
WHY don't I take better care of myself?
WHY – when the whole world is changing – must I stay the same?

WHY, WHY, WHY?



Critics of religion claim that it is only about answers, never questions. In reality, a religious life devoid of questions, a faith that resists the eternal and innate urge to ask, to challenge, to debate, at best will stagnate, at worst will veer into fundamentalism. Indeed, both the vitality of our tradition and the possibility of our personal transformation depend on our willingness to ask.

So this year we ask three great Jewish questions, posed originally by Hillel over 2,000 years ago, and with them we begin to open our hearts to the possibility of change -- in our lives, in our community and in our world:



If I am not for myself, who will be for me?
If I am only for myself, what am I?
And if not now, WHEN?

The problem with these questions – like all good questions -- is that they are not only penetrating, they are often destabilizing and roundly disorienting. Aren't we better off building hedges around the heart and staying a safe distance from anything that might threaten the stability of our lives?



Several years ago I organized a group of students to travel to Central America on a human rights delegation. A friend of mine met the students there and worked as their counselor for about a week, introducing them to sustainable development and community organizing. One of my students returned and proudly told me that



5 days into the trip, she confronted my friend. “Why aren’t you ever happy?” she asked, derisively. “Did you notice that you haven’t smiled once in 5 days?” I was mortified. I called to apologize but she refused to talk about it. About half a year later, my friend called me. “I just want to thank you,” she said. “That student really embarrassed me. I was so angry at her. But a couple of weeks after we got back from the trip I started to think about what she had said, and I realized – it hadn’t been 5 days since I had smiled, it had been well over 5 years. I realized that I had to make a change in my life.” She went on to apply to graduate school, and actually met someone and fell in love. Somehow that question, as destabilizing as it was, opened her up to a deep truth and freed her to begin to make change in her life.



While it would surely be safer not to ask, I can assure you this: if these holy days are to work their holy magic on your soul, you are going to need to create an opening. The Rabbis say: even as big as the head of a pin, and I will stretch it wide enough for chariots to ride through.



Let us join together over these 10 days – strengthening one another as we pry open our hearts and make space for the most penetrating questions -- the deepest expression of human freedom and the greatest testament to our Jewish inheritance.

Shanah tovah.

