

Living in the garden of good and evil

A sermon delivered by
Rabbi Bennett F. Miller

Anshe Emeth Memorial Temple
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As I was preparing my sermons for these holy days I came across a very interesting custom. In the *Kuntres Minhag Tov*, written about a hundred years ago, a custom developed in the Jewish community in which Jews would not speak at all from the lighting of the candles on Erev Rosh Hashannah until the close of Rosh Hashannah. As the text describes the custom: “neither in the secular tongue nor in the sacred tongue, neither in the Beit Keneset nor in any other place, neither with non-Jews nor with Jews.” And the custom suggests that if one wants to communicate with others, to greet others, “let him nod with his head,” as the Psalmist declares: “For You, O God, silence is praise.”

I thought about that in relation to my words for last night and again this morning. After all, for thirty-three years now, you have heard me deliver sermons on the High Holy Days and on Shabbat. Many of you have studied with me in classes, we have traveled and learned together, we have even sat together and counseled one another. And how many times have we broken bread together, celebrating all of the sacred moments of life and living? What more could I have to teach you that I haven't already said? Perhaps a few simple motions, a “nod of the head” in this direction or that direction might suffice. I could then sit down and all of us could return to our silence for some time, reciting the prayers of liturgy to ourselves so that only our hearts alone could hear the words. I suppose some folks might think this a brilliant idea! But then... the words of one of my teachers come to mind. I still remember what he once told me: “Anyone who has not grown has nothing to teach; and only he who teaches nothing should remain silent so as not to teach foolishness.”

I

For the past five weeks a number of us have gathered on Tuesdays at lunch time to grow, by sitting together and studying one of Judaism's great texts known as *Pirke Avot*. According to Jewish tradition, Jews are to study *Pirke Avot* before Rosh Hashannah because this text is the paradigm for modeling our behavior. It is not a text in which God speaks to us and tells us what to do. Rather, it is a series of statements from the rabbis who lived about two thousand years ago imploring us to look carefully at what we do and why. *Pirke Avot* consists of six chapters. In the five weeks that we gathered we only got through two. We have agreed that we will meet again next year and make

study of this text a regular part of our lives. Maybe next year we will get through chapters three or four. By the way, I invite you to join us. Put it on your calendar now, beginning Tuesday August 14 at 12:30, 2007.

If one looks carefully at Pirke Avot, it becomes clear that the purpose of this text is to encourage its readers to engage in the study of Torah so that they will discover the difference between good and evil in order to give meaning to life. Good and evil, that is what I want to speak with you about today. In theological parlance, the subject is called theodicy, the justification for why God permits evil to exist in the world. Scholars of every faith have studied the question: why is there evil in the world? Volumes have been written to try to make sense out of it, to find ways to answer it. Yet, the truth is that none of us know, since we cannot fully fathom the meaning of God's ways.

The rabbis tell us that Moses asked the question in this way: "Sovereign of the Universe, how is it that one righteous person prospers while another righteous person suffers? How is it that sometimes the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer? Rabbi Harold Kushner, in his famous book asks the question in this way: "Why do bad things happen to good people?"

Over the course of the years this same question has been asked of me in a variety of ways. "Rabbi, why does my love one suffer?" "How do we reconcile the death of the young?" "Why are there tragedies that occur in the world?" "Why does God allow such things to happen?"

On a more global scale I have been asked the question in these ways: "Why does God permit people to engage in war?" "Why is it that the nations of the world are willing to let Israel suffer? Why can't God just let the Jewish people have their own land and let them live in that land in peace?"

And sometimes, the question is asked of me as a statement that goes something like this: "if it weren't for religion we wouldn't have all of the wars and hate that exist among people."

I don't have all of the answers. Some times the questioner is really not looking for an answer. They just don't know what else to say. They only know how to see suffering from the perspective of good and evil and they can only blame God for the suffering that their loved one endures. Some times the answer is an honest "I don't know." But, on occasion I do have the opportunity to talk with people about this subject. It some times gives us the chance to share with each other in extraordinary ways.

II

I believe that the world in which you and I live is a wonderful garden. We are truly blessed to live in this place we call Earth. But this garden is not a perfect one; such a perfect garden only exists in Torah or in our imaginative mind. The garden in which you and I live is a place where both good and evil co-exist, the two constantly at odds

with each other. From time to time what we call “good” prevails. When it does we can feel it in extraordinary ways. And similarly, from time to time evil prevails. And when it does we can feel its destructive power as it ravishes communities, relationships, human hearts. And in this garden some times people suffer, not because of good or evil but because that is the nature of the human condition. We are not perfect and in our imperfection suffering can be one of the consequences of living. It is how we react to suffering that determines the quality of our lives, the nature of our communities, the kind of people we become.

The truth is that you and I decide what to do with goodness and with evil. Our faith informs us that we are born free and innocent, possessing the possibilities of letting goodness prevail or allowing evil to overwhelm us. A few moments ago we read in our prayerbook, *elohai shenata bi, t'hora hi*, “O God, the soul that you have given me is pure.” What we do with our souls is up to each one of us. What we make of our lives we alone determine.

Some of you may be a bit skeptical. You say people are basically good. There is a universal morality that all of us know and understand. There are human ethics by which we all live. I think not. In some faith traditions there is a belief that a person’s nature is evil. It is only through God’s grace and kindness that such a person’s nature does not overwhelm them. For many of no faith it is purely by accident that they come to have a moral compass at all. At any one moment they could discard their sense of goodness for there is no foundation upon which it is built. Our faith, however, teaches that we make the choices about the nature of our lives. We are the ones who can permit the goodness in us to flower and hold the evil in us in check. And that the reason for doing so is so that we can build God’s world here on earth, for we are partners with God in creating a world where good prevails and evil is contained. Can there be a more noble purpose for you and me?

III

On this Rosh Hashannah morning, here are questions that you and I should ask: What have I done this year that I would classify as evil behavior? How have I hurt those whom I love? What pain have I inflicted on my spouse, my children, my parents, my co-workers? What have I done that has diminished the holiness of the world in which I live? Conversely, what is it that I have accomplished that would be described as good? I am not speaking here about helping an elderly person across the street, getting an “A” on an exam, or doing well in the work place. What I mean is how have I touched some one’s life? How have I made a difference? What act of goodness did I perform that makes my life and someone else’s life more meaningful? Living is not about the acquisition of material goods and wealth. They are simply the media of our exchange of our values. But life is determined by what we do with what we have, how we use our wealth, our power, to make a difference, to mend a broken will, to alleviate suffering.

Rabbi Sidney Greenberg describes it this way:

A Rabbi making his way through the corridors of the Albert Einstein Medical Center met a friend who was carrying a heart-breaking burden of family problems, including serious illness and divorce. When he asked her what she was doing in the hospital, she proudly announced that she is a volunteer.

“With all your troubles,” he asked, “where do you get the strength to help others?”

“Rabbi,” she answered, “this work saves me. If I didn’t come here twice a week, I don’t think I’d be able to carry on at all.”

As he left her, he thought of the answer Dr. Karl Menninger gave when he was asked what to advise a person who felt a nervous breakdown coming on. “I would say to that person: ‘Lock up your house, go across the railway tracks, find someone in need and invest yourself in helping that person.’”

The poet put this same basic truth about us in rhyme:

“Man, like the graceful vine, supported lives;
The strength he gains is from the embrace he gives.”

Permit me to give you a list; on one side I give you evil, on the other side, I give you good: Here is evil:

Hurting someone and knowing that you have chosen to do so.
Demeaning a person’s worth in the presence of others.
Telling your children that they are stupid, that they are lazy,
that they have no worth. Embarrassing your parents on
purpose.
Ridiculing your spouse, mocking them at their expense,
humiliating them in private or in the presence of others.

And here is evil on a larger scale:

Permitting your children to perish for the sake of your beliefs.
Creating instruments of destruction for the aggrandizement of
power.
Being willing to destroy innocent people simply because they
are in your way.
Using the innocent as human shields.
Telling the poor that they will be blessed in the world to come
rather than helping them have dignity and integrity in this
world.

Now, here is good:

Teaching a child to read so that he or she can have the tools to be free.

Alleviating suffering with the use of your hands, your mind, your heart and your wallet.

Saying I'm sorry and truly meaning it. It could be the finest act of goodness you can perform, for it expresses kindness to another and frees you from the burden of carrying your anger.

And here is good on an even larger scale:

Creating communities where goodness and kindness abound.

Electing leaders who truly possess wisdom and speak words of kindness and not words of hate.

Eliminating injustice and pursuing peace. These are the gifts of goodness that can transform our world into a garden of blessing for all who enter it.

Of course this list is not complete. In the scope of a few minutes of a sermon it would be impossible to be so definitive. But you and I should be keenly aware that it is we who create the garden of life. God gives us the tools of mind and body and heart and soul and will to determine and build the kind of gardens of life in which we wish to live. Our faith gives us the blueprint, the architectural drawings, to fabricate such a world and make it our reality.

Here is an example of what I mean. In Pirke Avot we are told what should be the necessary ingredients for building such a garden. Let me share them with you.

Build communities of wisdom

Do not engage in gossip

Find teachers for yourselves and create fixed times of study

Be concerned about community

Seek peace

Judge fairly but charitably

Do not engage in retribution

Be wary of power for it is very corrupting.

As I thought about these ingredients I thought to myself: This is what a synagogue should be. A temple, our Temple, should be the place where people feel safe and secure, where they know that every person is valued and human dignity is treasured. Imagine if this was the mission statement of our synagogue, emblazoned proudly on the front of the building so that people in this community would come to know that here on Livingston Avenue there is a garden of goodness, a sanctuary of holiness, a community of faith where the people who enter are people who seek wisdom and do not engage in gossip, where they are students of Torah and teachers of tradition and where members young and old engage in growing through the study of our sacred texts. Imagine with me

that from this sacred place people are judged both fairly and charitably, that all who enter are seekers of peace. That retribution is anathema to us and we are terrified of power because we know that power can corrupt us and keep us from pursuing the goodness and kindness that will make our world the kind of garden we want to build for all of God's creations.

That is the choice we make on this day and at this season. There is evil all around. How easily it could consume us and destroy our spirit. But our faith demands a strength and power in us that each of us can possess. We can restrain the evil in our selves, we can contain the evil in our communities and we can shape and fashion a world of goodness starting with us and expanding outward for the entire world to behold. I pray that during these Days of Repentance we will choose the path of good and make ourselves worthy of being called God's chosen people, chosen for goodness, for holiness, and for peace.

IV

I close with these words of the poet, David Rokeach. May his words inspire us to build gardens of goodness where evil and despair are contained and where hope springs forth like the refreshing waters of a bounding brook.

Glory to those who hope!
 For the future is theirs;
 Those who stand unflinching against the mountain
 Shall gain its summit.

So hopes the river, running to the sea,
 To fulfill its dreams in the crash of waters.
 So longs the tree, branching skyward
 At last to touch the palm of sun.

Therefore we love dawn as a promise of day.
 The nightingale's love-song as a longing for birth,
 The flowing of streams as the beat of dreams made real,
 Streams cutting channels for rivers of the future
 And never growing weary.
 And all who join hands, trusting creation –
 These are the companions of hope.

Forge, then, the vision of days to come:
 As the waves shape the rocky shore,
 As the smith moulds white-hot steel at will,
 Form dreams of faithfulness.

Desolation will not leave the desert,
 Until it leaves the heart.