

## **The Monster is Me, But It Doesn't Have to Be:**

Choosing Goodness in the Face of Evil

*(Draft written for speaking by Rabbi Michael Schwab for RH 5778)*

Rabbi Tamar Eldad Appelbaum from Congregation *Tzion* in Israel shared that one day her young daughter, in an attempt to feel safe, placed a poster on the front door of their home that read, “Monsters - Keep out”. Her daughter thought that her sign would ward off the *external* evils that lurk out there in the world, preserving the safety and goodness she thankfully experienced inside their home. But then unexpectedly, only a couple of days later, that very same daughter approached Tamar with sincerity and anxiety and said, “*Ima*, my sign may keep other monsters out, but what if sometimes that monster is me?!”. As often occurs with children, such an innocent comment points to an uncomfortable truth, in this case a distressing puzzle: that we as human kind, and we as individuals, have the potential for incredible goodness, and at the same time we are capable of terrible evil.

We know, and our tradition tells us over and over in so many ways, that we humans have the ability to be partners with God. But it is equally apparent that we can also turn into the monster, hurting those around us.

Defining *who* we are, even on this basic level, is actually *far* from simple, prompting us to ask ourselves: How can I be the same person who was kind, giving and thoughtful yesterday with one individual and also be the person who was cold, impatient and hurtful with someone else today? And how can I recognize when I have gone from being the one to being the other, so I can learn to be better? On this Day of Judgment and Reflection, how can I unravel the enigma of who I am and evaluate a constructive way to become who I want to be?

To help us address these question I would like to take you on a journey back in time to Adam and Eve. God created them, gave them life and placed Adam and Eve in a form of heavenly paradise: they wanted for nothing. And God very politely requested only one thing: that they not eat from *one* specific tree in the garden. And what did they do? They *ate* from it. And then, like little children, they denied responsibility, “*He* did it, not me” - “*She* told me to do it” - “No, it was the *snake*’s fault”. And thus not only did they *disobey* God’s one rule -- they attempted to lie and to manipulate God! With these actions Adam and Eve violated the

relationship between themselves and God and demonstrated a major weakness of character!

And then came Cain and Abel, the first homicide in world history. Cain was so overwhelmed by jealousy that he killed his own brother. The first generation, sinned against God and the next generation sinned against his fellow human being.

And if that wasn't enough – only a few chapters later, the second parsha of the Torah, the text states “and the whole world is filled with evil and corruption.” And with that phrase we are launched into the Noah story, which you all know. The entire world, the project of humanity, now needs to be recalibrated.

Yet powerfully and instructively, at each of these low moments, at each time when we readers of the Torah might have thrown up our hands thinking how could God tolerate such blatant ingratitude and disobedience – a miracle happens: God ultimately forgives! Now notice that I did *not* say that God forgets, ignores, or looks the other way. What I said was that God forgives – **God does not let the evil actions of the past foreclose on the possibility of a better future.** What was the stated punishment for

eating of the tree? Death. But that doesn't happen – at least not as an immediate consequence. God averts the severity of his own decree. There *were* consequences for their actions – Adam and Eve were kicked out of the Garden and made to work for their own survival; life had changed forever. For the fratricide of Cain, death could have also been the punishment, but no -- Cain was exiled from his home and made to wander, but was given the eventual ability to create a family and live his life. And when the entire world was acting reprehensibly, God could have started over *completely* with new rules or entirely new beings. Or God could have decided that our world was a failed experiment and simply caused it to cease to exist, but again God did not. There *was* a major consequence but ultimately God saved human and animal kind and gave our world a second chance.

What the Torah teaches us about the nature of human kind through these powerful opening narratives is that God understands that while we human beings *are* capable of great acts of goodness, which is why we were redeemed, we also have the ability to commit terrible acts that rupture both relationships with God *and* with our fellow human beings. And further not

only does God *understand* this but God *lives* with, and more importantly lets *us* live with, our mistakes – even the really bad ones. God created a world that was not perfect at all and **never was**. That is simply how we were made.

But this is not the end of the story. When God redeemed and forgave Adam and Eve it was not business as usual – the world changed in reaction to their behaviors. When God renewed the world after the flood, he put Noah and his family in a world that made demands on him, demands to act with kindness, righteousness and a sense of God. For without that demand, the understanding was that we could easily go astray. Therefore, knowing that we will make mistakes does not *absolve* us from taking responsibility for them– quite the opposite: knowing that we are capable of such evil should create the strongest of motivations for actively cultivating our sense of goodness and for working hard to *overcome* our base impulses. And *this* is the core insight: recognizing our capacity for evil and misjudgment is *precisely* the key to unlocking our powerful inextinguishable drive to be good. And this crucial exercise, which we call *teshuvah*, is exactly what

we are attempting to do today. It is *the* key to helping us understand who we are and to become who we want to be.

To illustrate this wisdom there is a beautiful *midrash* that begins by asking the following seemingly simple question: what were Adam and Eve wearing when they were expelled from the Garden? (*not what you thought the question would be, right?*) The answer that most people know and which pop culture has accepted, is that they were wearing a girdle made from fig leaves. But one voice in our tradition says something surprising. Rabbi Eliezer says, they were wearing a girdle woven from the “skin of the snake”. According to this opinion, Adam and Eve were wearing, in intimate proximity to their being, a sign of, a very specific reminder of, the sin that had just gotten them expelled from the Garden. They were quite literally dressed in their mistake.

Was it out of shame? Was this a punishment from God? The Hasidim (Sefat Emet) say no; it was actually the opposite – the skin of the snake was to remind them that their evil act must remain *external* to their identity. It must be labeled as not being a part of the core of who they are. In other words, Adam and Eve wanted to acknowledge the mistake by

displaying it and not dismissing it, but by wearing it as clothes, it would reinforce the idea that such evil actions are not integral parts of who we are. Like clothes they can be exchanged for better choices at any time we choose. Thus for the Sefat Emet, Adam and Eve's wearing of the snake's skin was to remind them that they were indeed essentially good, with a soul from a God who lovingly created them but who suffers from the temptations of impulses to do evil that could easily get mixed up and mixed-in with their essentially holy character.

There is a deep recognition here with an accompanying responsibility that we humans are the ones who make the choice; we choose to dress ourselves up in life how we wish: we can cover our soul in anger, jealousy and malevolent intentions or we can let our soul define our external actions and appearance; let it shine through us into the world. Wearing the skin of the snake reminded Adam and Eve, and therefore us, that we *have* control over how we live the life we are given. We do indeed have souls of goodness but unless we behave in soul-full ways, the power of that goodness remains concealed. Our job, therefore is to recognize our potential for evil and *use* that recognition to cast aside our selfish, base

choices and marginalize them, while we elevate the sacred tendencies embedded in each of us.

There is another really powerful tradition in our *Midrash* taught by Rabbi Appelbaum from *Avot D'Rabbi Natan* which reads very deeply into the biological fact that we humans are created with a front and a back. One of the teachings points out that our fronts have a face, which houses *all* of our perceptive powers and senses, and which orients our body towards things, enabling us to create relationships and to be a productive positive influence on the world. And then we have a back, a back that doesn't see, that doesn't perceive, that doesn't seem to care. It is from this notion that the expression "turning one's back" was created. The back represents the human capacity for indifference and cruelty. And on this the Sefat Emet, a great Hasidic master wrote, "Ecclesiastes states: 'God has made the one, as well as the other'. The back as well as the front. This means that all those characteristics that are good, are shadowed by evil - just as the back is attached to the front. And even the letters of the names of the sacred essence *and* of the misleading covering of that essence come together; only their combination is reversed. For example: In the sacred



there is קשר, connection, *kuf-shin-resh*, and in the covering, using the same letters, שקר - lies. In the sacred, תם, pure, and in the shell, using the same two letters, מת -death. In the sacred ענג, joy, and in the shell נגע, wound, etc, etc. And the attribute of the covering is to *reverse* any truth, and to make of the good, evil, and of the evil, good as it is written: “Woe unto them that call evil, good and good, evil”.

If you didn't follow, what the Sefat Emet is saying is that in the life of the human being evil and goodness are often intermixed, they can *appear* almost as twins. It can be so tricky to distinguish between them. Like when love for family might cause us to harm others. Or desire for success might tempt us to justify immoral behavior. But despite the difficulty -distinguish between them we must! We must take the reflective time to be aware of the intermingling and to sort things out so that we do not mistake the impulses of the soul for the desires of the ego. It is in not being careful and thoughtful in our approach to the decisions of life that we fall prey to that warning in Ecclesiastes, “Woe to them, that call evil good and good evil”. The message is that our choices matter – a world of goodness is *not* assured. Reflecting on our behaviors, understanding our

mistakes and the type of decisions we make, is actually the vehicle we must use which will define for us the answer to, “Who am I and who do I want to be”.

Thus, the awareness of the snares, and our temptation to be lured into them, is precisely what saves us from them. We acknowledge our own capacity for sin, we acknowledge what we have done wrong in the last year, not to *depress* us about who we are, but rather to proclaim the exact opposite: that this is *not* who we were meant to *be*. *Because* we have capacity for both, by seriously participating in the *teshuvah* process we are proactively taking the first steps towards choosing goodness. We come here today, baring our souls, to proclaim to ourselves and each other that we wish to be a herald for good, joy, justice, and compassion. We say to ourselves and to each other today that we wish to love and celebrate each other, and our world. We pledge that we wish to protect and provide for others in need and *not* turn our backs. That we choose the empathy of our soul over indifference. That is the work of today and these *Yamim Noraim* – these Days of Awe.

And this is a message the world needs to hear; this is a practice we need to cultivate more than ever in our country and in our world. With the encouragement of many who heard me speak a few weeks ago, I want to share that there is no better illustration of this need than what happened in Charlottesville.

Last month it was painful to watch what unfolded in our country. And now looking back - it is painful to reflect on it. Yet, this is what we must do. As you all know, tragedy, created by the willful choice of individuals, occurred in Charlottesville. The sacred life of a human being was needlessly snuffed out by hatred and many more were injured by acts of violence, by those who call evil, good; those who decided that inflicting bodily harm on their fellow human beings is an *acceptable* way to make their point. Further, due to the professed beliefs of a group of people who proudly honor the swastika, who wear as labels “white supremacist” or “white nationalist” or “anti-Semite”, a message of hate, intolerance and division is being spread through our society. In too many places, for minority groups, former decades of fear and intolerance have returned. For some, including some of us, there is a growing worry, a feeling in the pit of

one's stomach, that maybe for *more* than a small fringe group of people, Jews, people of color, and other minorities, are not welcome here. And that we are even so hated that we are seen as eligible targets for indiscriminate violence, transgressing even the most basic sensible notion of ethics or civility. This ideology is a scary illustration of our tradition's warning, "Woe to those who call evil, good" - And it must be stopped!

I was moved by the piece written by Alan Zimmerman, the president of one of the shuls in Charlottesville, whose reflection on that day helps us understand on an emotional level what it was like to be confronted with such hate. He wrote: "On Saturday morning, I stood outside our synagogue with the armed security guard . . . For half an hour, three men dressed in fatigues and armed with semi-automatic rifles stood across the street from the temple. (Try to imagine how you would feel if that happened here, across from our synagogue) 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 . . . 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. 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.

And this is 2017 in the United States of America.

Soon, we learned that Nazi websites had posted a call to burn our synagogue . . . .Fortunately, it was just talk – but we had already deemed such an attack within the realm of possibilities, taking the precautionary step of removing our Torahs, including a Holocaust scroll, from the premises. Again: This is in America in 2017.”

Fear, hatred, division – these are the results of such evil ideologies. How traumatic an experience for fellow Jews here in this country, along with so many others who have been marginalized, because of persons willing to turn their back on whole groups of people, to ignore with their faces and hearts both the goodness of their *own* souls, in choosing hatred over understanding, as well as the goodness of the souls they choose to spurn, by publicly professing hatred and intolerance against individuals they do not know, except by the hateful label they attach to them. Our

Torah tells us that *we* are the people who were enslaved in Egypt, *we* are the people who are asked to remember this very fact multiple times in our Torah when *we* make choices about how to treat others: others who are also threatened by this movement of hatred. And therefore we are also the people who must turn to our fellow human beings with our faces, to see others for who they are as creations of God and then we must decisively choose the path of blessing when we act. We must see the evil within, and without, and consciously make decisions that steer us down a path of goodness that blocks the trail of evil, hatred and violence and we must encourage others to walk this path of light with us. Even those who are attempting to turn their back to us.

The United Synagogue called for Shabbat dinner conversations around this subject, organizations are organizing peace demonstrations, protests and rallies. Others are joining with various communities: Christian, Muslim, African-American, to express unity around the idea of civility, tolerance and peaceful interactions. Still others are working the government and political system. JUF created a fund to support the Jewish community of Charlottesville and there are other worthy initiatives and

defense organizations, like the ADL, to which you can donate time or money. All of these initiatives and ideas have merit and each one might speak differently to each of you, as being the best way to express yourself on this issue. The key is that we cannot remain silent and that we cannot allow this be a partisan issue. These ideologies are evil and we have to work together to defeat them.

Whatever we do, we do this both for the sake of the other and also for the sake of our own souls. There is a great vignette about Elie Weisel telling a Hasidic story that imagined a *tzadik*, a righteous man, entering the infamous Biblical town of Sodom where he preached to the people there to stop their murders and sinning. Finally someone said to the man, “why do you march and preach, you know you will never change them?” The man responded, “I don’t march to change *them*. I march to keep *them* from changing *me*”. Knowing that many of the perpetrators of hate will not change simply because of our efforts should *never* stop us from actively choosing goodness. First, there *are* many Americans out there who need these public displays of condemnation of intolerance and the promotion of love and seeing the other face to face. Not because they themselves are

full of hate and through our demonstrations we will change them. Rather, it is so the hatred of the haters doesn't unconsciously spread to others, become *acceptable* in our country and influence the otherwise decent people in our society.

And we need to express these messages of love and opposition to hate in the model of what we envision ideal behavior to be. Our opposition must be peaceful and law-abiding – not violent like some of the groups that have been active. We cannot condone physical attacks on demonstrators, even demonstrators who profess vile ideologies. We cannot turn the good into evil and the evil into good. We are not vigilantes nor should we support those who wish to take the law into their own hands. Our people, we, have suffered way too much from behavior like that. We must stand up for lawful and ethical means of expression even as we stand up for justice and against bigotry and hate of all kinds.

What rabbinic wisdom and these High Holidays remind us, is that blessing and curse both truly exist – good and evil are both choices that can be made by human kind. **It is not a forgone conclusion that in each circumstance love, tolerance, blessing and compassion will triumph**, as



those who survived the Holocaust have been telling us for decades. We must reflect, be aware and then *act to ensure* that blessing and goodness become the trope of our lives and of our national culture.

So today, using the power of the day as *Yom Hadin* and *Yom Hazikaron*, a day of reflection and of honest evaluation, we must see that potential for evil inside of us and the evil that has already seeped into our society. We need to use that awareness we create to remind us that this is not who we are! We *are* the people that choose compassion, justice, love and kindness and we *are* the people that choose blessing! We have seen our capability for compassion again and again, when people do extraordinary things, putting themselves in terrible danger for the sake of others: like the heroes of 9/11, or more recently the first responders and compassionate neighbors in Texas and Florida, and on a daily basis when one of us goes out of the way for another. As Zimmerman continued in his reflection on his experience in Charlottesville, I quote: “John Aguilar, a 30-year Navy veteran, took it upon himself to stand watch over the synagogue through services Friday evening and Saturday, along with our armed guard. He just felt he should. We experienced a wonderful turnout

for services . . . including several *non*-Jews who said they came to show solidarity. And a frail, elderly woman approached me Saturday morning as I stood on the steps in front of our sanctuary, crying, to tell me that while she was Roman Catholic, she wanted to stay and watch over the synagogue with us. In addition at least a dozen complete strangers stopped by as we stood in front the synagogue Saturday to ask if we wanted them to stand with us.”

The Great sage Maimonides wrote, *Ani Ma'amin*, “I believe in the coming of the perfection of the world with perfect faith and though it may tarry I will continue to believe and will wait *every day*”. Maimonides reminds us that seeing the ugliness in the world does not mean we accept that ugliness. So, who are we? We are a people who are obliged to see the monster, within and without, to confront it and then not only wait for the perfection of the world but seek it by meeting wickedness with action inspired by faith and hope, a faith and hope anchored in the knowledge that we have a soul from which goodness can always flow. Today we take stock of ourselves and the world, we assess our incredible and endless capacity for good and direct it to heal the evil we also detect. And thus we

*will* be the people who always hope and work towards redeeming the world. Through our sincere self-reflection and *teshuvah* we *can* live a life that reflects our front and not our back, and we can certainly build the future of blessing and goodness that God told us explicitly in the Torah that we could, and should, create! This is our mission, may we have the strength and wisdom to fulfill it. Shanah Tovah!