

AL CHEIT SHECHATANU
Yom Kippur Morning 2016 / 5777

Attention shoppers! Attention shoppers! This is the manager. A wallet has been found with a large sum of money in it. Would the owners please form a double line outside my office.

If Yom Kippur is about sin and repentance, then it is also about temptation. I'm not sure if it was Mae West or W. C. Fields or someone else who said "I can resist anything except temptation!" Here's a small story about temptation, from our Hasidic tradition:

There once was a Rebbe who worried that he could find no good person his generation. So he performed a simple experiment. He opened the window, and called over the first person passing by. When the fellow approached the window, the Rebbe asked him: "Suppose you found a wallet, filled with money, lying in the street. What would you do?"

Without even a moment's hesitation, the man responded confidently: "I would do the right thing, Rebbe. I would go into the marketplace and find the owner so that I could return the lost wallet and the money." "You are a fool," the Rebbe responded, and dismissed the man.

Then he tried again. He flagged down a passer-by and asked his question: "Suppose you found a wallet, filled with money, lying in the street. What would you do?" This man also answered quickly and confidently: "You know, Rebbe, it's a tough world. A man has to take advantage of every opportunity that's tossed his way. I'd take the money, Rebbe, and tell no one."

"You are a bad lot," the Rebbe responded, and dismissed this man.

A third time, the Rebbe waved down a man and asked his question: "Suppose you found a wallet, filled with money, lying in the street. What would you do?"

This man didn't answer right away. He looked into the Rebbe's eyes, then down at his shoes, then up into the Rebbe's eyes again, and then shrugged. At long last, he ventured a tentative answer:

"Rebbe, to tell you the truth, I don't know what I would do. I would certainly hope to do the right thing. But I know the power of my evil impulses, my selfishness and short-sightedness, and what a temptation a wallet full of money would be. So I would pray to God for the strength to do what was right. And I'd hope I'd do the right thing."

The Rebbe shook his head: "You are a true sage."

Three individuals. Three answers to an elementary moral question. Three moral types, three kinds of moral character. Perhaps you've met them. Perhaps you know them. Perhaps you are them.

The first man has the right answer, so why is he called a fool? He offers his answer without a moment's hesitation. Without a moment's reflection, he knows exactly what he'll do. He doesn't consider the power of the temptation and the weakness of his will. He is unaware of the possibility that his good intentions might become twisted. He can't conceive that he might fail.

He knows what's right, but he doesn't know himself. He doesn't know his own dark side. He doesn't know his own capacity for doing evil. He has never met his own shadow. He has carefully hidden from himself his selfish impulses and desires, hidden his moral shortcomings. It's not that he won't confess his capacity for evil; he simply doesn't see it. It's not there for him. Try and point out this moral blindness and he'll interrupt and recite for you what a wonderful person he is, what wonderful things he does. Persist, and he'll politely inform you that you must have him mistaken for someone else.

So certain is he of his own goodness, he believes that whatever he does is right, by definition. And no matter how it turns out, he will go on insisting that what he did was right. After all, he's a good man and he meant to do well. In this, he becomes profoundly dangerous.

In 1961, the *New Yorker* magazine sent Hanna Arendt to Jerusalem to cover the trial of Adolf Eichmann, the notorious Nazi. Her reports were compiled and published in a book entitled, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. It's a frightening book, because Arendt didn't find in Eichmann the moral monster that the world expected. He wasn't the devil. He was a little man, balding, with thick glasses and a rumpled suit. And it turns out, he was a nice man. Nice. He loved his wife and his kids. He was playful with his dog. He didn't hate Jews. He had Jewish neighbors and friends. He went to work every morning, arranging train schedules for the SS. What was on those trains? Could have been widgets or sprockets; turned out it was Jews. It didn't matter-- all he did was arrange schedules. And each night he went home to his wife and his kids and his dog. Nice man.

We have a cultural penchant for imagining evil personified in moral monsters and mad geniuses. It's safer that way. It's more comfortable to think of Nazis and terrorists as belonging to a different species than ours. They are madmen, insane, inhabiting a world

different than ours. Perhaps that's true for Hitler, perhaps for Saddam and Osama. But Eichmann is the guy next door. Arendt subtitled her book, "A Report on The Banality of Evil." Eichmann is no monster. He's just like us! And if we protest that we could never do such evil, sometimes we have to catch ourselves, lest we protest too much.

We are not Nazis and we are not evil. But we live near the top of this society's economic pyramid --a society that is at the very tip of the world's prosperity. We choose to look upon our privilege as a fact of life --a given, a datum of existence. Very subtly, we shift the burden of moral proof from off our shoulders and onto those who suggest that something here is wrong, that something demands change and reform. Somehow it escapes our attention that living a life so privileged, in the midst of so much need, is itself a moral fact that demands much of us. It escapes us that we carry a moral burden. "For the sins we have sinned against You, O God, *chatanu*, let us pray for forgiveness."

A second man arrives. His answer is different: You're a rabbi. You live your life in books with your head in the heavens. I live here, in the real world. In the real world, you grab what you can. And if you don't you're a fool. And I'm no fool, rabbi. You can have your ideals and your ethics and your spirituality. I'll take the money.

He tells us our visions, our ideals, our goals are foolish. Maybe in books, but not in the real world. He laughs at us. What sort of fool gives away found money? For what reward? What do I get from it? And why do you ask? Why do you care so deeply? Why do you try so hard? What is this illusion you call meaning that you pursue with every ounce of your being? Not me, he says, not me. I'm no fool.

Who is he? Who is this cynic, this skeptic, who calls into question the ideals, the purposes we strive for?

Often, he's a person who has himself tried and has been hurt, disappointed, betrayed by life and has given up. And he says, the only thing I can get out of this life is what I can grab, and what I can keep.

What the cynic fails to remember is that every benefit he enjoys, every comfort and freedom of his life, was won because others sacrificed, and others cared for more than themselves. He's like the wicked son of the Hagaddah who says: What is this that you are doing? And the Hagaddah rightly says, were he in Egypt, he would not have been redeemed. Of course. Because only one prepared to dream, to hope and to risk, would have followed Moses across the Sea and into the wilderness.

The cynic forgets that evil in the past was overcome only because there were those in the past who were willing not to be cynics, not to despair, not to surrender, but to take on the burden of others.

This second man has lost faith in human goodness. He scoffs at our expressions of moral vision. He suspects our motives and distrusts our plans. Too many times has he walked down the road to hell paved with good intentions. He doubts even his own intentions -- especially his own intentions. Because he knows how convoluted and complex and dark is his own heart, he trusts no moral gesture. Selflessness, altruism, generosity, moral greatness are foolish delusions. And *rabbi*, he repeats, I'm no fool.

Ultimately he believes in no morality, except one: Take. Grab. Hold tight.

“For the sins we have sinned against You, O God, *chatanu*, let us pray for forgiveness.”

And finally, the last fellow, the man who isn't sure. An unlikely hero for a Hasidic tale -- What kind of moral hero is he? Why is he the true sage?

He hesitates. He reflects. And he prays. He knows well his own moral complexity. He knows his capacity for evil. He is well acquainted with his shadow. But he also knows what is right. He responds to the tug of conscience. He doesn't give up his moral vision. He believes in what might be -- what the world might be, what he might be. He is caught in a struggle.

You remember the Talmud's story? Once, a stranger approached the two sages of the first century, Hillel and Shammai, and asked each of them to teach him the Torah, all of Jewish wisdom, while he balanced on one foot. Shammai whacked him with a builder's rule, and dismissed him. Hillel brought him in and taught him: What's hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. That's all of Torah. The rest is commentary. Go and learn.

Our tradition embraced the answer of Hillel, because he welcomes the outsider and offers gentle teaching. And that's right. But Shammai was also right. Because Judaism can't be done on one foot. It's never so simple, never so resolved. The image is suggestive: The Yogi so possessed of inner calm that he balances effortlessly on one foot, or the moral hero so possessed of righteousness that goodness flows effortlessly from him -- this is not Judaism. Serenity is not a Jewish value. Judaism is about struggle. It is about living in an unending tension. Judaism is about living within the struggle of self-transcendence -- between the is and the ought, between the way things are and the way they should be, between who we are and who we might yet become, between the actual self and true self that seeks to be born into the world.

"Rebbe," says the third man, "To tell you the truth, I don't know what I would do. I would hope to do the right thing. But I know the power of my evil impulses. So I would pray to God for the strength to do what was right."

He is a sage because he has insight. He is a moral hero because he seeks self-transcendence. And he needs help. He asks God to change nothing in the world. He asks God only for the strength to fulfill the vision of his truer self. He prays for the power of self-transcendence. And the prayer is answered. Because the prayer itself is an act of self-transcendence, a reassurance that we can be more than we are, or as one of our sages attested, "he who rises from his prayers a better person, his prayers have been answered."

"For the sins we have sinned against You, O God, *chatanu*, let us pray for forgiveness, and may we rise up renewed, in our faith and our commitment to making ours a better, more moral world."

Amen