

Rosh Hashanah I

September 21, 2017

How many of you remember the band *Deep Blue Something*?

They were a one-hit wonder. In the nineties, they recorded the song, "Breakfast at Tiffany's." It is about a guy desperately trying to convince a girl not to break up with him:

You'll say we've got nothing in common

No common ground to start from

And we're falling apart

You say the world has come between us

Our lives have come between us

Still I know you just don't care

And I said, "What about Breakfast at Tiffany's?"

She said, "I think I remember the film

And as I recall, I think we both kinda liked it"

And I said, "Well, that's the one thing we've got"

Can one relatively minor thing in common save a relationship?

Probably not. But there are times when trying to find even one positive among negatives can give us the strength to go on. It is very easy to become depressed by anything we perceive as a setback. There are significant numbers of people who thought we were entering a new era when the U. S. elected a black president. Some of those same people fell into despair when America then elected someone criticized by many for using intolerant-sounding language. Many of us were thrilled when Israel agreed to create an official space at the Kotel for liberal prayer services. Then, for political reasons, the deal was summarily put permanently on hold. For many of us as Jews, the sight of Nazis with weapons marching past a synagogue felt like a major step backward.

Since the beginning of the modern era, Jews and others have wanted to believe in the march of progress. Man continues to advance, marching toward the messianic era. But those of us who want to think

this way get our hopes continually dashed. The advances of the early 20th century were followed by two world wars and Auschwitz. The end of Black slavery in America was followed by 100 years of Jim Crow. We can all think of our own examples.

We Jews pride ourselves on rejecting the doctrine of original sin. *Elohaim neshamah she-natata bi tehorah hi*, God, the soul You gave me is pure, we say every morning. We quote Anne Frank, “In spite of everything I still believe that people are really good at heart.” Not so fast. There is plenty of evidence that the Bible and the Sages did not trust human nature. When God sees the world in the time of Noah, He says:

וַיַּרְא יְהוָה כִּי רַבָּה רָעַת הָאָדָם בְּאָרֶץ וְכָל-לִצְרָת מַחְשַׁבֹת לִבּוֹ רָע כָּל-הַיּוֹם

The LORD saw how great was man’s wickedness on earth, and how every plan devised by his mind was nothing but evil all the time.¹

OK. So then after the flood comes a rainbow in the sky. God promises

¹ Jewish Publication Society. (1985). *Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures* (Ge 6:5). Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society.

he will never again destroy the entire earth. What is his rationale?

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-לְבוֹ לֹא אֶסְפֹּף לְקַלֵּל עוֹד אֶת-הָאָדָמָה בְּעִבּוֹר הָאָדָם כִּי יֵצֵר לֵב הָאָדָם רָע
מִנְעִרְיוֹ וְלֹא-אֶסְפֹּף עוֹד לְהַכּוֹת אֶת-כָּל-חַי כַּאֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתִי:

the LORD said to Himself: “Never again will I doom the earth because of man, since the devisings of man’s mind are evil from his youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living being, as I have done.”²

What is strange is that the wickedness of man is the reason God destroys the world, and then it is the reason God says he will never destroy the world. The difference is that after the flood God emphasizes that human beings naturally possess a shaky morality, if not a natural evil. He created within them the *yetzer ha--ra*. The Talmud says the *yetzer ha-ra* is like the yeast in dough. It is only one ingredient, but with time it causes the rest of the dough to get puffed up with pride and behave badly. According to the sages, the *yetzer ha-ra* is part of us at birth. It is when a child becomes Bar or Bat Mitzvah that the *yetzer ha-tov* enters.

² Jewish Publication Society. (1985). *Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures* (Ge 8:21). Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society.

The yetzer ha-tov is that inner moral compass that stops us from murdering someone we can't stand.

Human beings are not automatically good at heart. When God sees the violence of the world at the time of Noah, he is angry and wants to fix the problem. After the flood God senses that human beings are still going to do bad things. But God has now learned, as it were, to live with that reality.

We must live with that reality, too. It feels good to see humanity as inherently good, but then every setback is a blow to that belief. Rather we must see human beings as inherently and constantly flawed, and then every positive advance we make is a miracle. Racism, xenophobia, intense class distinctions, genocide. All of these are attested evolutionary mechanisms. The instincts that drive them have helped human beings protect their families and food supply. We cringe and mourn at every act of man's inhumanity to man. I certainly am not saying we shouldn't. But perhaps we should rather celebrate all the

numerous occasions where the yetzer ha-tov triumphs over the yetzer ha-ra. Heather Heyer was a 32 year old woman who went to protest the Nazis in Charlottesville simply because she hated injustice. She was murdered by the scum of the earth. The scum of the earth who killed her will always be an inescapable reality. She was light in the darkness.

The Sages tell us that the final brachah of birkat ha-mazon, in which we proclaim God as *ha-tov v'ha-meitiv*, the One who is good and does good, comes from a time of great tragedy. The Bar Kokhba revolt against Rome had just failed. The Roman government forbade the bodies of the vast number of slain to be buried. In the end, through rabbinic prayer, fasting, and bribes, the Emperor Hadrian allowed the burial. The Rabbis understand the brachah: *ha-tov, she-lo hisrichu, v'ha-metiv, she'nikbru*, God is good, for the bodies miraculously did not decompose, and He does good, for they could finally be buried. Now the failure of the Bar Kokhba revolt was one of the worst tragedies that ever occurred to the Jewish people. Tens of thousands of children died.

But because of this one little bright spot in a time of tragedy, we make a blessing about God's goodness to this day. The Sages found something to be thankful for in a world of misery.

So I am trying to make this paradigm shift. I invite you to do so as well. We may cry and yell and scream when people act with inhumanity. But the sobering reality is that inhumanity is part of our nature. But every day, there are people whose yetzer ha-tov shines forth in glorious ways. They protect the vulnerable and take care of the stranger. They go to far away countries and adopt abandoned babies of a different race. They speak out against injustice. I don't know if I can really say people are normally good at heart. But in a world of all too common immorality or amorality, every day we experience the miracle of what people can do with their yetzer ha-tov. So may it be in 5778.

