

Rosh Hashanah 1 5776

“The Only Sermon”

It once happened in the village of those wonderful agents of the pure, good and simple in life. Beryl had had an unfortunate week. Even in a town where most things go a little bit wrong, Beryl's week stood out as having gone exceptionally wrong. Sarale his wife, and many other of the righteous in that village were convinced that Beryl had let his Yetzer HaRa, his inclination to do things that are a tiny bit evil, get out of hand. Naturally, trouble breeds trouble.

They convinced Beryl that they were right, so that night Beryl stood and waited for the Yetzer HaRa to show up. Now, I'm not going to say whether Beryl really stayed up all night, or if he perhaps shut his eyes every so often, but Beryl claimed the next morning to have captured the Yetzer HaRa in a pickle barrel. With the pickles still inside, no less.

Now, the sages of that village are of two minds as to whether capturing **a** Yetzer HaRa is the same as capturing **the** Yetzer HaRa, and everyone in the village agreed that nobody could remember anybody ever capturing either kind of Yetzer HaRa.

That next night, throughout the village, two impulses warred within the breasts of everybody but Beryl. The one impulse was to stay in bed and

wait for the morning's gossip to see if the Yetzer HaRa, or even Beryl's Yetzer HaRa was really captured. The other impulse was to find out the answer to the burning question - What did a Yetzer HaRa look like, anyway?

I'm sorry to say that the impulse of scientific investigation won out. The sages may say that we should rely upon God and watch life as it happens, but I am afraid that most of the village were concerned that life might wind up being lived while they were snoring, and they would miss all the best parts.

I don't know what, if anything, Beryl actually caught. I do know that after that night, each of the people in that village behaved a tad better, as if Beryl had caught their Yetzer HaRa by mistake.

I really wish the problem of evil was that simple. That I could point to one thing, even as ephemeral a thing as a reflection in a pickle barrel and say, "That's evil. Stay away!"

Stay away.

Could I tell my son, when he was very young, how to stay away from evil using one sentence that applies everywhere and at all times? If I were to find a sentence which fits, does that sentence work for adults?

Those are the questions on the table tonight.

If evil were a location, I could tell my son not to go there. He might not listen, but I could tell him. What **do** I tell him?

Maybe I should start with something fairly obvious, related to one of the Big Ten. I think we can all agree that being killed is not something we'd like to do over vacation – or any other time, for that matter. Perhaps I can tell my son not to kill, and that would be enough. Sounds like a sensible solution. Let's try it out.

“Son, I want you to avoid all killing. Killing is evil, no matter what.”

“But Abba, don't we read in Numbers 25:6-13 something like this?”

““So an Israelite man arrived, bringing a Midianite woman with him while Moses and everybody else it seemed stood and watched. They approached the Tent of Meeting in a fairly vocal state of arousal when Pinchas, son of Elazar, son of Aaron (the priest) turned and noticed them. He left the gaggle of gogglers, grabbed a spear and skewered them in their united state ... God responded to this, “Pinchas, etc. did the right thing, and deserves to be covenanted peacefully. His covenant is for him and his descendants to be my eternal priests.”

“If killing is evil, then Pinchas is evil. God rewarded Pinchas, so God rewards evil people. Abba, I shouldn't stay away from killing. I should kill as many people as I can, so God will reward me too.”

I thought this was too easy.

So killing, and by extension any action, is not evil. Not everywhere and everywhen – so we're back to square one.

We've now seen that evil isn't found in any single action. Maybe evil could be found in – inaction? There was a set of commercials a while back which seemed to agree with this. You might remember them – Friend One is drowning or about to be run over by a huge truck, and Friend Two is just standing by, looking the other way. “You wouldn't stand by while your friend was being hurt, would you?” [paid for by one of the groups against drugs]

Inaction is wrong. Inaction is evil.

Let's try it out.

“Son, you must never stand around when somebody else is hurt, harmed or in danger of being hurt or harmed.”

“Abba.”

“Yes.”

“Do you think, if I can't swim, I can still rescue people in the water?”

“What do you think, son?”

“Not helping them is evil, and I don't want to be evil, so I should help them, and I guess dying while helping them is ok, since God likes people who don't do evil, so God will like me.”

Right.

I think you know where I'm going with this.

So we cannot act, and we cannot not act. Is there anything left?

Possibly I'm being too hasty. It wasn't like we ended the discussion by saying that killing or being a bystander was good, after all. There must be an aspect or two I've missed.

How about ... Motivation?

Why something is either done, or not done, must be as important in pigeonholing evil as the act (or "inact") itself.

SIDEBAR: WE CAN'T ALWAYS KNOW FOR SURE ANOTHER PERSON'S MOTIVATION. WE HAVE A BETTER HANDLE ON OUR OWN MOTIVATION. NOT PERFECT, OR EVEN CORRECT, JUST BETTER.

Let's think this through a bit. Motivation ... and ... consequences. I've got it.

Never cause anybody else pain simply for the sake of causing them pain. Elegant. Concise. Applies everywhere, everywhen. Great.

I'm now moving away from the pediatric portion into the adult section. It is important not to cause pain just because you like seeing and hearing

other people squirm, squeal and scream. Well, I hope you don't. Like those things, I mean.

I could end our discussion right now, if it weren't for a story I read once in M. Scott Peck's book, *People of the Lie*.

A child was referred to him for diagnosis and potential treatment based on some criminal behavior that was exhibited. The exact action doesn't matter. The story the child told does. It seems that during the summer his older brother died in a tragic accident, caused by that older brother taking a rifle he had had for years and shooting himself in the head. Over the course of the months since his brother's death, the child had decided that he was probably to blame for the death. The child's birthday was about a week before the crime spree. The child's parents gave him a very special gift. They gave him his older brother's gun. Not a similar gun, but the exact same gun his brother had used to kill himself with.

When Dr. Peck questioned the parents, they said something like, "I should think you would be happy that we gave him a gift. Not every parent in our situation would have given him anything."

Now, was this act of the parents an evil act? According to our childhood definition, it is not. They would not realize they were causing their son pain, so they weren't causing him pain simply for the sake of causing him pain.

If the parents were still children, then the childhood definition could be used. We need a definition that includes both the childhood evils and the adult monstrous acts. I cannot accept that this act of theirs was anything other than evil and twisted, even if they expressed a belief that it was not. The context in which an action takes place is important. At least equally important is the relationship between the entities involved.

If I take this piece of furniture and torment it, clobber it, smash it to bits and bend the bits out of shape – I may have done something pointless and stupid, but I haven't done anything evil. I have, legitimately, an I-It relationship with the piece of furniture. Martin Buber brought up the difference between I-It and I-Thou relationships. In a nutshell, I-Thou relationships are the goal, and having an I-It relationship with a person misses the point.

If I did to a person with whom I have an I-Thou relationship that which I described doing to the piece of furniture, it would usually be wrong. So when I relegate a person with whom I should be attempting to have an I-Thou relationship to an I-It relationship, or as I call it, an "I'm the only important one here" relationship, then I have put that relationship into a position just ripe for the growth of evil. In general, I must surmise enough about the other person to guess what might cause them pain, so I can

avoid causing them pain just to cause them pain. The more often I have an opportunity to interact with a person, the greater the level of my awareness of their pain should be.

It comes down to caring and connectedness. As an adult, I no longer have the option of being consciously care-less. How might you tell if a careless act is an example of unconscious, accidental carelessness or conscious intent that could possibly even be evil? I propose two questions: Did I think about how this would affect the person on the other end of the relationship? Am I willing to admit that I might have been thoughtless?

People are different, which makes it very difficult to accurately guess how somebody might act. Mistakes are not necessarily evil. Ignorance is not necessarily evil. Assuming you would react the same way I would is not necessarily evil.

Not caring how or if you react to what I do to you is evil. Assuming you never have any responses to anything done to you is evil. Willful ignorance is evil.

In short, if any adult answers no to both questions above, there is a pretty good chance that the person has let their evil inclination take control.

Returning to our village now - Suppose that our villagers had the capacity to maintain their focus on what they saw in the pickle barrel. They

would then be focused on their Yetzer HaRa. The consequence of such laser-like focus on this image is that they would most likely no longer have any desire to be in relationship with anyone else. It actually doesn't matter which image they were focusing on – it could be the Yetzer HaTov, for that matter. Focusing solely on the image would keep them from understanding that as long as they retained that focus, even if they interacted with another person, they were not in relationship with them. The Yetzer HaRa often easily convinces us that interactions without caring can be considered relationships, and that specific aspect of the evil inclination is something we must all try to avoid in our lives. Caring relationships are the goal.

With God's help, maybe we can all try to care about the people around us, and in that way connect with each other. Which would leave our Yetzer HaRa exactly where it should be. In Beryl's pickle barrel.