

Yom Kippur 5782: *Opening the Gates of Judgment*

Here's a confession: many of the books I quote in my sermons I have not read. I do read whole books, often! But to quote a book, to understand the main theme, I don't always feel the need in all cases. Some books I quote to you I have read the first chapter, some I have read the jacket cover or a press release, and some I have, HONESTLY, just really liked the title.

But at least until this moment, I have never let the fact that I have not read a book or seen a movie stop me from opining on the subject...

So let me tell you about a movie I have not seen.

I did not see the movie Cruella this summer.

But I really really like the idea of it... Cruella Da Vil, the villain of the 101 Dalmatians story, gets her own backstory... It turns out, as a NYTimes article about it writes, she lies and steals but with a clear motive: Revenge. And, as a lower middle-class girl who becomes a rising fashion star by cleaning bathrooms and scrubbing floors, [she is] weirdly relatable.

It reminds me of one of my favorite musicals that I did actually see, Wicked... also a backstory kind of show, trying to reframe the evil Wicked Witch of the Wizard of Oz and offering her a hero edit, giving us a chance to see how she became the way she did... it's so cool that so many authors are writing fanfiction about villains, seeing them as perhaps more sympathetic than they may have originally seemed.

This seems to me to be a very Jewish process. Attempts to reframe evil are downright Biblical. Look at the book of Jonah: God takes the MOST EVIL NATION EVER (at least in this allegorical tale) and turns them in only a few verses. Jonah merely mentions that they are in trouble and they fast, dress in sackcloth and mend their ways.

And the Talmud talks about Nevuzarada, the commander in chief of the Babylonian army that destroyed Jerusalem and killed the leaders of our people... he repented at the end of his life, and is considered by the Talmud to be a GER TZEDEK, a righteous convert.

These texts seem to suggest that perhaps there IS NO PURE evil that stays that way forever.

We even have to wonder about one of our people's worst enemies, Haman, whom we try to blot out through the gragger on the holiday of Purim. The rabbis teach that on Purim, we're supposed to get so joyful, so merry that we actually confuse the good guy with the bad guy, confuse MORDECHAI for HAMAN. On Purim, in our outrageous costumes and wild fun, we

acknowledge, for a moment, that any of us could be EITHER... that ALL of us, in the right or wrong moment, could be MORDECHAI OR HAMAN.

Purim, the springtime Carnavale-like holiday that recognizes the arbitrary nature of human existence... forces us to see that in real life, the clear distinction between Mordechai and Haman is actually a bit confusing. Purim, which literally means LOTS, or LOTTERY, “epitomizes the instability, uncertainty, and vulnerability which characterize human life generally but particularly govern the destiny of the Jews,” as Rav Yosef Soloveichik wrote. “It alerts the Jew to the sudden turns of fortune, lurking dangers, the fickleness of life, even as the goral itself seems to operate through blind chance.”

Mordechai, Haman, Wicked Witch or Glinda... So much of it seems left to FATE, to CHANCE, to PURIM.

And it's not just Purim. Mystically, the rabbis of the Zohar teach that Yom Kippur, or Yom Ha-Ki-PURIM, is a day LIKE Purim, teaching the very same lesson...

Yom Kippur ALSO acknowledges the uncertainty and vulnerability of human life. And it also acknowledges that we are more the same than we know.

IN the core sacrificial service of the day, the Avodah service, two goats are selected... One goat is sacrificed for God, the other-- the scapegoat-- carries all the sins of the people and is sent to “AZAZEL” -- down a ravine with all of our sins. It is essential that the goats are IDENTICAL... same age, same size... it's just a matter of lots which one gets which destiny. The Mishnah in Tractate YOMA (39a) shows the Kohen Gadol-- the High Priest-- has to mix the lots for the GOATS in a קְלָפִי -- a ballot box (still the same word used today 2000 years later!) and he would draw the two lots for the goats. One said “For God” and one said “For Azazel.”

..אָדָּה כְּתוּב עָלָיו "לְשֵׁם", וְאָדָּה כְּתוּב עָלָיו "לְעִזְאֵזִל",

The Talmud asks: Why do we need the High Priest to have mixed the lots in a receptacle before he draws the lots? The Answer: In order that he not be able to intentionally take the lot for God specifically with his right hand. Since it is a fortuitous omen for the lot for God to arise in his right hand, there was a concern that he might force the result. The designation of the goats had to be made through a random lottery.

The point is the same. Either goat deserves or DOESN'T deserve the fate, and if that's the case then BIAS doesn't belong.... Any one of us could have any destiny, and just as true, any one of us could be GOOD, could be EVIL...

On YK, Yom K'Purim, we acknowledge that any of us could be Mordechai OR Haman. And that even Cruella herself has, perhaps, a backstory that we don't know.

Who among us can be sure that, born in a different place to different parents, in different circumstances, we would not have made different decisions in our lives? Would we truly have the same values and the same commitments? Would we act quite as "perfectly" as we do now?

Yom Kippur forces us to open the gates of judgment a bit, especially when it comes to OUR neighbors, fellow citizens, and closest loved ones. We're all just randomly selected for our fates... and perhaps our actions as well.

So if this is the case, then we might as well offer a little bit of compassion and understanding... we might as well forgive. Because there are so many things we might be missing.

Here's another book I haven't read: Adam Grant's *Think Again*, published this past February. It sounds really good! In it, he shows research that the best thing we can do for ourSELVES is to learn to see OTHERS differently.

"Intelligence is usually seen as the ability to think and learn, but in a rapidly changing world, there's another set of cognitive skills that might matter more: the ability to rethink and unlearn. In our daily lives, too many of us favor the comfort of conviction over the discomfort of doubt. We listen to opinions that make us feel good, instead of ideas that make us think hard. We see disagreement as a threat to our egos, rather than an opportunity to learn. We surround ourselves with people who agree with our conclusions, when we should be gravitating toward those who challenge our thought process."

Remember when we came together 20 years ago, after September 11? When our country came together and tried to band together? If ONLY that were still the case. We have grown further and further apart, and we've turned each other into wicked witches, of the east or of the west.

I recommend the short film-- which I have ACTUALLY watched in its 21-minute entirety-- by an organization called Resetting the Table. *Purple: America, We Need To Talk*. There are longer versions, but the 21 minute version is REALLY good. You can find it on youtube.

Filmed in rural Wisconsin and Iowa – in a Purple, swing region, within two bordering swing states –it “gathers a group of citizens with opposing viewpoints -- red and blue-- who discover the concerns and experiences that lie behind each other’s positions.” It doesn’t deny the political differences, it goes TOWARD them, but it also offers a vision for what healthy debate might look like... what shared humanity might look like, in a divided world.

It was incredible to watch people come together across political lines, to see the humanity in the other...

How many things might we approach differently if we only gave a bit more reflection, if we only learned a bit more about the subject?

My husband and I drove through Pennsylvania this summer... it’s a bigger state than I knew! In some of the small towns we stopped in, we saw signs that surprised us. Political signs that we hadn’t seen in our New York neck of the woods. But when we stopped and chatted with people, in the diners, in the stores, even on the street (I’m chatty that way), they were... in a lot of ways... EXACTLY like us. This isn’t meant to be a shock (OMG they’re HUMAN!!) but more of a reminder... we’re just a bunch of human beings with different circumstances and therefore different ways of thinking. Neither one of us gets to claim Mordechai OR HAMAN.

And if this is true politically... how much more true is it in our own personal lives, with people who are neither perfect nor evil? At work or in our families? No one is the Wicked Witch, and NO ONE is Glinda. Everyone has a backstory. We just need to read it.

ON Yom Kippur, we acknowledge the deep randomness of our lives, and we GET, on a deep level, that MAYBE we are missing something when we don’t read the whole book.

I believe this is what leads to forgiveness. That the promise of Yom K’Purim is that we can forgive those we don’t fully understand, imagine a backstory that we have yet to read.

This isn't to say that we don't have a responsibility to fight for what we believe in... but I also think we have a responsibility to FIND something in each person that can connect us to their human experience... to acknowledge that there but for the grace of God go I... that Mordechai and Haman are only a lot apart, and the two goats are actually identical...

In our prayers tonight and tomorrow, maybe we can focus on those sins that remind us to be slightly more open...

ועל חטא שחטאנו לפניה בְּאִמּוּץ הַלֵּב:

And for the sin we committed before You by callously hardening the heart

ועל חטא שחטאנו לפניה בְּפִלְיוֹת:

.And for the sin we committed before You in passing judgment

ועל חטא שחטאנו לפניה בְּקִשּׁוֹת עֲרֹף:

And for the sin we committed before You by being stiff-necked and stubborn

ועל חטא שחטאנו לפניה בְּשִׁנְאָת חֵנָם:

And for the sin we committed before You by unwarranted hatred

The Heavenly Gates of Judgment are beyond our comprehension..it all feels RANDOM at moments and hard to understand. So instead, maybe we can open OUR OWN GATES of judgment and be more forgiving, be more compassionate.

I can't promise I will read full books from now on. There are a lot of books out there, and who has the time to really go through each and every one, page after page? But I do commit to *recognizing* that I'm NO EXPERT when I've only read the press release, and to know that there is more to the story than what is seen at first glance. May we be granted the ability to see more in the other than their JACKET COVER, may we be given the gift of OPENING THE GATES OF JUDGMENT, on high and within ourselves, and may we use this Yom K'Purim to bring more joy and more lightness to our relationships, to ourselves, and to the world around us. Amen.