



In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, the last book published before her death, Susan Sontag opens with this anecdote from the life of Virginia Woolf. It was June of 1938 and Woolf had just published her book *Three Guineas*, “reflecting on the roots of war,” particularly the development of fascism in Spain. She received a letter from a prominent British lawyer asking the question:

“How in your opinion are we to prevent war?”

His question was embedded in a larger commentary on her ability to comment on such things as a woman of education and privilege. In his mind, she was too far removed to truly understand the political necessities of war. For her part, she felt that his gender and station in life could not help but influence his justification for war. Resigned not to allow their differences to prohibit dialogue, Woolf decided to send the lawyer the horrific images of war released by the Spanish government. Her question to him was:

“Whether when we look at the same photographs we feel the same things.”

Re-telling Woolf’s story, Sontag’s question for her time—deep in the Iraq war-- is exactly who Woolf and the lawyer collectively meant when each of them wrote the word “we,” and whether the disturbing images of war had the possibility to forge a tentative alliance across divisions.

My partner Sam and I try to watch the news together every evening, but sometimes we fill each other in on important national and world events. With the advent of Roku, world events are often splintered into disjointed 2 minute segments.

On Tuesday, I asked him if he had seen the videos of the Syrian chemical attack.

“No, I’ve been busy all day, I haven’t had a moment. What happened?” He asked.

“You should really see it,” I said.

“I’m not sure I want to. Just tell me what happened.”

I started to describe what I had seen. There was one video clip that I couldn’t get out of my head. Maybe you are struggling with this very same clip. I started to cry as I started to describe it. “There was a chemical attack on civilians that is so horrible, Sam. There were these children, gasping for air, their dying bodies stacked in the trunk of a van trying to make it to the hospital...” I trailed off.

He shook his head. We were overcome with feelings of sadness and helplessness as if to silently say to one another:

*How could anyone do this to innocent people?
How can the world look on and no one can help?*

Yesterday morning, I turned to the radio to make sense of the week as I often do. There was the familiar voice of Scott Simon. The same images had struck him too. He said:

I watched some of the wrenching, sickening images (...) with our young daughters. I'd reached for a remote control to roll past the pictures of innocent people, including so many children. But then I thought- no, this is our world, they should see some of this. We watched in silence. I've covered a lot of wars, but could think of nothing to say to make any sense. Finally one of our daughters asked, "Why would anyone do that?"

For Scott, the terrible attack has moved him to use a word with his daughters that he thought he'd never have a use for, as a parent or as a reporter: Evil. He writes:

I have always avoided the using the word "evil" when covering terrible events, even those in Bosnia and Kosovo that would later be labeled war crimes. I was of a generation who was educated to believe that "evil" was a cartoonish moral concept, a word we used only when we didn't know what madness or imagined infraction might drive human beings to commit murder, even on a mass scale. I still avoid saying "evil" as a reporter, but as a parent I've grown to feel it may be important to tell children about evil, as we struggle to explain cruel and incomprehensible behavior that may see not just in history—in whatever they will learn about the Holocaust, Bosnia, Rwanda and Darfur—but in our own times.

Evil.

These are the same videos that President Trump presumably also watched with similar horror and disgust, moving his position towards retaliation.

Sontag wonders if images of war kindle a sense of shared emotion of empathy that can create a sense of "we" where before there was not. Simon wonders if these images of war are key to for his daughters to understand the human capacity for evil. He can only find this one word which feels appropriate. I can't think of a better word either. It's a word we liberal religious people don't feel very comfortable with either, I can guess. In fact, we have really centered our religious belief system on the exact opposite of evil, haven't we?

We believe that humans are ultimately good, and that our basic orientation in the world is towards kindness, compassion and justice.

For the most part, in our liberal religious evolution to Unitarian Universalism we've rejected two key Judeo-Christian concepts —sin and evil. We have rejected the doctrine of original sin in favor of original goodness, believing that humans are not born with a penchant for wrongdoing and moral failure, but have an orientation towards goodwill.

Our disdain for talk of sin and evil sets us apart from our interfaith neighbors and set us squarely, perhaps rightfully, with in a more secular humanist worldview.

Jewish views on sin talk about human's orientation towards sin and evil which are tempered by the righteous adherence to the written commandments and laws.

Christian views on sin talk about a separation from God's law and Jesus's teachings--remember Jesus' new covenant, codified in the New Testament, took the essence of Jewish teachings as interpreted by Jesus and divorced them from the written commandments of the Hebrew bible. In all three Abrahamic traditions, sins are actions that disconnect, or separate, people from God's laws and teachings. Since sin is so inherent in human behavior in these traditions, God acts as the highest moral judge and a yardstick to measure righteousness as well as a merciful and forgiving presence.

One way to conceive of evil is as a force outside of human nature that causes sinful actions. In Judaism and Christianity, think of the serpent in the Garden of Eden, holding out the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, tempting Adam and Eve to eat that which God had explicitly forbidden. One description of evil from an early rabbi resonates with me-- he describes human nature as having both good and bad urges... which if not channeled properly, bring evil in the world. Our power to bring evil into the world through our own free will also implicates us—thus—evil is contained both within and beyond our human nature.

In these religious understandings, evil can be understood the unchecked sinful impulses of humankind magnified into actions which, multiplied, have the potential for inconceivable destruction. Sin is the small action like tossing a cigarette butt out the window—an action which can start small and unconscious, igniting a few dry twigs--evil is the out of control forest fire that burns beyond control and can't easily be put out. Evil can manifest as social practices which produce moral, physical or emotional injury to others—genocide, slavery, child abuse – or as organizations and institutions which carry out such practices.

I'm not sure how this discussion of sin and evil is landing with you. Liberals—religious and political—have been accused of having an overly optimistic view of human nature, preferring the truths of philosophy and psychology over what we often view as archaic religion religious concepts. Many of us probably believe that we ourselves can persuade ourselves to overcome our lesser natures.

But if we are honest, we may struggle with our own “narrow places” in ourselves—our selfishness, our cruelty, our grudges and failure to forgive, our addictions and dangerous desires, our bad tempers, our racism, sexism and other prejudices, even our violent impulses. We may make bad decisions and consistently act against our own best interests, inflicting harm on ourselves, our friends and families. We are often powerless to know how to stop or how to change, and afraid of what we will lose if we ask for help. Tiny embers can easily turn into big forest fires. We are constantly stuck in the narrow places, getting unstuck, and re-stuck again.

This seems like an important conversation to start at Passover times, as we move into Easter next week, telling yet another violent story that still shapes our cultural consciousness and our religious imagination.

It is an important conversation to have in light of the terrible attack in Syria, and perhaps on the cusp of further military intervention. But it is a complicated conversation to have indeed. Just days after we heard of this terrible attack, followed by the controversial airstrikes by the Trump administration, another less publicized but just as devastating attack occurred—Isis executing 33 people in Syria and 22 in Iraq in coordinated attacks. And this morning, we hear of two more Isis attacks, bombs set off within Palm Sunday services of Copitic Egyptian churches.

British Rabbi Jonathan Sacks' book *Not In God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence* is an important read for these morally complex times of ours. He names a contemporary proliferation of an “altruistic evil—“an evil in which formerly “ordinary” people carry out terrible acts of violence and destruction in the name of a “higher good.” Too often, in the history of religion, people have killed in the name of the God of life, waged war in the name of the God of peace, hated in the name of the God of love and practiced cruelty in the name of the God of compassion.”

To Sacks, he traces the problem back competing truths and identities—creating division and tribalism instead of unity—he writes:

“Tribalism—identity without universality—leads to violence. Imperialism—universality without identity—leads to the loss of freedom and the suppression of the very diversity which makes us human.”

The Passover story acknowledges the immense suffering and cruelty inflicted upon the Jewish people, which today we can call by no other word but evil. The narrow place of Egypt was not only the place of the Israelites enslavement, but the place where Pharaoh’s sins—his indifference to suffering, his callousness, and refusal to hear the cries of the oppressed-- ended up causing even greater pain and suffering to himself and to his own people.

But the Passover story doesn’t end there. Exodus story also celebrates the power of human history to overcome, to bend the arc of the moral universe towards greater freedom and justice.

Without acknowledging the narrow places of bondage within in ourselves and in our world, there can be no deliverance from these places which hold us captive and perpetuate great harm. Without acknowledging our shortcomings there can be no accountability for our actions, no forgiveness. And without calling out and condemning evil there can be no way to undo its insidious grip.

I close with a quote from Michael Walzer, political philosopher and social theorist, from his book *Exodus and Revolution*:

He writes:

We still believe, or many of us do, what the Exodus first taught ... about the meaning and possibility of politics, and about its proper form:

—first, that wherever you live, it is probably Egypt

—second, that there is a better place, a world more attractive, a promised land;

—and third, that “the way to the land is through the wilderness.”

There is no way to get from here to there except by joining together and marching.

May we move from selfishness to compassion, tribalism to unity, bondage to liberation, from our narrow places to the wide open fields of possibility.

Amen and blessed be.