

Reflections on Evil

by Mel Waldman

In college, I minored in philosophy and was especially interested in the philosophy of religion. But after I studied logic and explored the arguments for and against the existence of G-d and the problem of evil, my faith seemed to dissolve. And my soul was ripped apart, vanishing in a black hole of despair.

Yet looking back, it was not philosophy that wounded and launched my soul into darkness. Perhaps it contributed to my loss of faith. Certainly the sword of reason seemed merciless to my G-d. Nevertheless, I believe that the traumatic events of my late adolescence and young adulthood delivered the final blows to my faith, destroying it in the arena of personal anguish and loss.

As I was sharpening my mind with the logical tools of philosophy, Father's war against me escalated while Mother was dying of heart failure in a fusillade of internal bodily assaults. Father and I, as well as my older sister, were helpless in the face of death. We prayed but to no avail.

Mother clung to life heroically. She fought for every breath with humor and an oxygen tank in her bedroom. But eventually, there was a massive explosion-implosion inside her ghostly body. Her aorta burst and, suddenly, she was gone.

With Mother's passing, we were lost. A month earlier, my older niece was born. My sister clung to her husband and daughter and, cushioned by their love, she survived. She learned to continue on and live for the living. But Father and I were left alone with each other, sharing an empty apartment, a Waste Land of ghostly memories, and mourning in our separate ways.

Without Mother to keep the peace, we did not know how to be together. Certainly, we did not know how to love each other. (Much later in life, when Father was close to death, we learned how. Like the Berlin Wall, the Wall of Hatred finally came down and our closed hearts finally opened up to love.)

Without mercy or compassion, Father kicked me out twice. When I left the second time, I never returned home. The outside world was brutal but, perhaps, not as brutal as the ancient home we shared alone.

Mother died over 4 decades ago. Father is also dead and almost 2 decades have passed since he breathed his last breath of life. But he died two deaths. And his mind departed before his body entered the grave.

Today, the philosophical debates about the existence of G-d and the problem of evil continue. I am compelled to ask how evil can exist if G-d exists. Historically, the problem of evil has been

formulated as an *inconsistent triad*. “An inconsistent triad is a set of three statements, the truth of any two of which implies the falsity of the third” (Earle, 1992).

The inconsistent triad “can be formulated as follows:

1. G-d is all-powerful;
2. G-d is all-good;
3. Evil exists.

Evil is understood here to mean the intrinsically regrettable anything that is in itself negative, anything that the world would be better off without. Physical pain and suffering are generally acknowledged to be examples of evil in this sense. (Earle, 1992).

Thus, if G-d is omnipotent, He could prevent all evil. If G-d is all-good, He would want to prevent all evil. If statements 1 and 2 are true, then statement 3 — Evil exists — “should be false” (Earle, 1992).

Now, if G-d is omnipotent and evil exists, it appears that G-d is not all-good. Or if G-d is all-good and if evil exists, it appears that G-d is not omnipotent.

Years ago, I read an intriguing book by a rabbi who said that He believed G-d is all-good but not omnipotent. He acknowledged the existence of evil and speculated that if G-d could prevent all evil, He would. (I apologize to my readers. I cannot recall the name of the rabbi or the title of the book. If you know the name of the rabbi or the title of the book, please contact me.)

Some philosophers argue that statement 3 is false and claim that evil does not exist. On the other hand, atheists argue that since “G-d is by definition a being who must be both all-powerful and all-good” (Earle, 1992) and since evil exists, either statement 1 — G-d is all-powerful — or statement 2 — G-d is all-good — “must be false” and “therefore, G-d does not exist” (Earle, 1992).

For the atheist, the critical assumption is that the triad is inconsistent and incompatible. Nevertheless, the theist claims that all three statements can be true.

According to the theist, G-d, who is omnipotent and all-good, granted man free will. With free will, human beings can generate good or evil. The kabbalists state that every human being has two inclinations. First, there is “*yetzer hatov*, the inclination toward good” (Berenson-Perkins, 2000). Second, there is “*yetzer hara*, the inclination toward evil” (Berenson-Perkins, 2000). Furthermore, two angels sit on the shoulders of every human being. Each person “must choose at every moment which tendency to follow” (Berenson-Perkins, 2000).

I agree that human beings possess free will. However, as Sigmund Freud pointed out in his theory of psychoanalysis, people often suffer from *repetition compulsion* and are often compelled to repeat their self-destructive and self-defeating behavioral patterns.

I suggest that human beings can exert free will after undergoing a comprehensive psychoanalysis or an in-depth therapy or after experiencing enhanced self-awareness in some other way. Otherwise, I speculate that what may appear as free will is merely obsessive-compulsive behavior masked as a person's choice of action.

Perhaps, a more controversial perspective on evil is the kabbalistic notion that evil does not stem from "some external influence in opposition to G-d" (Berenson-Perkins, 2000). The kabbalists believe "that evil arises from Gevurah (Judgment) and is also an attribute or potential within G-d" (Berenson-Perkins, 2000). Thus, "when the quality of Gevurah is unrestrained, it becomes evil" (Berenson-Perkins, 2000). (Please note that Gevurah, Judgment, is one of the 10 sefirot or divine attributes of G-d — spheres of divine energy — located in the Tree of Life.) It is "the sefirah that is paired with Chesed (Mercy)" (Berenson-Perkins, 2000).

This Kabbalistic conception of evil points to man's duality and the duality of G-d. In modern times, Freud developed his theory of psychoanalysis and also elaborated on the intrinsic duality of man.

The theist also argues for "the 'beyond understanding' defense" (Earle, 1992). Thus, even though human beings cannot comprehend how the existence of evil can be compatible with the existence of an omnipotent and all-good G-d, it must be so!

According to Judaism, an experience may seem evil only from an individual's "personal perspective since he is, unfortunately, the recipient of the tragedy. At the same time, however, he must recognize that what may seem to him as tragic, may actually be good from the absolute perspective of G-d" (Winkler, 1981).

There is also the Jewish notion that the purpose of suffering is to remind man "that his existence in the material world is not an end in itself but a means toward a greater fulfillment in another life, the World To Come" (Winkler, 1981).

The kabbalists also present complex explanations of infant mortality, mental retardation and physical deformity related to the theories of the soul, reincarnation, and the World To Come (Winkler, 1981). These concepts and explanations will be discussed in future articles.

But now, I must state that, after struggling with the question of the existence of G-d and the problem of evil for most of my life, I am humbled by my own ignorance and the vast scope of these critical questions.

Neither faith nor logic can prove or disprove the existence of G-d and His compatibility with the existence of evil. "The Talmud attributes 99% of tragic, untimely deaths to human carelessness, and only one-percent to G-d" (Winkler, 1981). It is also stated that "one may suffer as a result of certain transgressions of the Divine Will which he had committed deliberately, and for which he effects reparation through various means of suffering. Even this form of suffering is to be perceived as good..." (Winkler, 1981). Thus, the individual has the "opportunity for restitution" over an extended period of time rather than dying immediately (Winkler, 1981). These Talmudic explanations are intriguing but they cannot be proved or disproved.

I must confess that I still struggle with the idea of an omnipotent, loving G-d who allowed the Holocaust to occur, as well as other heinous events in the history of man. Perhaps, there is a greater good, but I do not see it. Nor do I comprehend the genocide that is occurring right now in other parts of the world. Indeed, evil is ubiquitous and I am overwhelmed by its prevalence.

Atheists have told me that G-d does not exist and that evil occurs because man chooses to be evil. According to them, no other explanation is needed. They also claim there is no grand scheme, design, or purpose for human beings. People create their own existential meaning and purpose in a universe evolving by chance.

Nevertheless, I choose to believe in Hashem. I suspect that human beings are not “wired” to fully comprehend G-d, my Hashem. Our human brains cannot grasp the nature of G-d and Absolute Truths. On the other hand, I have read that there are parts of the brain which when electrically stimulated produce spiritual experiences. What do these phenomena mean?

In my dialogues with Hashem, I speak with many voices. Sometimes I am gentle and humble. But sometimes I am a man of righteous wrath. Sometimes I thank Him for all the blessings of my life. Yet sometimes, I complain He is a cold, distant G-d. Sometimes, I embrace His presence. But sometimes I accuse Him of running away from man or not existing at all.

I do not know how to pray. I have been alienated from G-d for many years. Perhaps, I am a sinner too, for I have cursed and renounced my G-d, believing He has forsaken me.

I do not know how to pray. But when I approach Him in the vast silence of my anguished soul, I sometimes feel His presence. And He soothes me, like a sweet zephyr brushing against my face on a joyful spring day.

Sometimes I speak to Hashem in the depths of despair. But sometimes I speak joyously to Him, with passion and a faith as powerful as the invisible fabric of the universe that binds us to Hashem.

I do not comprehend the Will of G-d. But I will pray to Him, and ask for His guidance. And soon, I will enter the synagogue down the block — the ancient sacred home of my childhood and faith. It is the *Tree of Life*. Yes soon, I will enter the old synagogue and join the other members of the congregation in prayer.

I will recite the Jewish prayers although I do not know how to pray. I will assume that Hashem exists and that He listens to my prayers.

In this bewildering universe, there is an invisible kingdom of G-d. Thus, even when I do not believe — in my darkest moments — I will pray!

References

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