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"When Bad Things are Considered Good Things"

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It's so nice to see you all here tonight – I'm so glad you chose to be here...instead of home watching the season premier of "The Sopranos." How many of you are taping it? Can Tracy and I (and Fran and Rob) borrow the tape from you?

Fran and Rob's son, Eli – he's 8 now if you can believe that – has been trying to get his parents or grandmother to tell him what "The Sopranos" is about. He didn't fall for the explanation that it was a show about people who sing. He just wouldn't buy it that a story about his mom's life would make for a hit TV show. Fran didn't want to tell him she and his father were hooked on a "Critically Acclaimed Original Series depicting the life and times of a modern-day Organized Crime/Mafia family, living in New Jersey" [description from Sopranos website], so she told him it was about "people who do things that other people think are bad, but they don't see themselves that way." I don't know if that helped Eli, but it helped me – helped me understand what is fascinating about that show and those kinds of stories in general. We like stories about people whose codes of ethics are different enough from ours to make for an interesting story, but similar enough to cause anxiety in us while we watch their stories unfold.

I think we like the notion that a next door neighbor in a fancy neighborhood can be a killer, a crook, an adulterer, and still love his wife and kids, and still be a relatively good neighbor too. Maybe we just like to see our own fantasies played out. Maybe we like that even the big tough guy Tony Soprano has anxiety and needs to see a therapist and take Prozac.

This description of "people who do things that other people think are bad, but they don't" really hit for me. It's not just HBO that puts such people in front of us – not in our post 9/11 world (and not ever for that matter).

How many of you have read Rabbi Harold Kushner's book, When Bad Things Happen to Good People? Now we need the book called: When Bad Things are Considered Good Things, or Vice Versa. It's not yet been written, as far as I know, but I think we need it. Perhaps tonight we could begin to write it.

Of course one BIG problem with the "people who do things that other people think are bad, but they don't" analysis is not that the analysis is faulty, it's that there are people in the world who think that WE are "people who do things that they think are bad, even though we don't think so." And who is the "WE" in that sentence?

You name it – all the “we”s we are: we Americans, we Jews, we “lovers of Israel,” we queers, we privileged, we – just fill in the blank . . . I still remember one of the radio programs last year about 2 weeks after September 11 when the commentator said something like: “who knew there were people in the world who hated us so much?”

A year ago I so identified with what he was saying.

Let’s add a few more to our original list of “we”s we Jews, we Americans, we glbt people”...how about we liberals, we progressives, we Conservatives, we traditional Jews, we not traditional Jews, we Americans who think we should go to war with Iraq, we Americans who don’t think we should go to war with Iraq, we Republicans, we Democrats. . . If you’re noticing that some of us in this room are some of those “we”s and some of us are other of those “we”s – then you’re starting to see the larger problem. Look who thinks you do bad things even though you know you’re a good person who tries to do the right thing, who tries to be who God wants you to be. Look who’s calling whom names. Look who’s making judgments. Look who’s got to come up with a different answer for an 8 year old --- they’re so demanding, those 8 year olds.

Almost as demanding as the rest of the world – with its jumble of cultures and religions each fighting not just for its place in the world – how nice it would be if we could just share -- but fighting to be the pre-eminent one, to take up the most room, to assert the most authority, to retain the most power. Fighting to be God’s chosen, I guess, to be the one God picks over all the others (we Jews know something about that desire).

A year ago I was more naïve, I admit it, I thought we were all going by the same assumptions –and my assumptions no less! HA! what arrogance on my part. I’ve come in this year to understand that not everyone has the same goals I do. I’ve even come to understand, as our teacher Prof. Paul Liptz reminded us last summer during his visit to BCC, that it is arrogant for us to believe that there is common ground in thought or goals or beliefs between the “sides” in the world’s conflicts.

In this past year I have come to believe (though I’d be happy to be talked out of it), that there are substantial forces in the world that are working for the destruction of Israel and the United States – that that is their goal. And they do it cruelly – with violence and terrorism planned not just to inflict physical pain and death, but also to cause economic and emotional crumbling from within each nation they attack. They are experiencing some victories in their attempts.

There are no easy answers to the threats against our society – against our morality, our values, our ethics. These are true threats, I think, I don’t minimize or dismiss them. But I worry at our wavering in the shadow of these threats. At

our own uncertainty about what are Bad Things and what are Good Things. When Bad Things are Considered Good Things – or maybe more to the point, the sometimes easy way we seem to have fallen into thinking that what we once thought were bad things are now good things, or at least okay things. How easily we succumb, how fragile our ethics seem to be, even though our values stay fairly true and strong.

That's a tricky remark I just made: that our ethics seem to be wavering even though our values stay strong. We so often use those two words together – values and ethics – as though they always go hand in hand – if you know one, you know the other. But let's consider for a few minutes our values vs our ethics in the context of terror, and in the context of Yom Kippur – the day of Atonement, the day when we ought to be fully examining our behavior, fully examining our relationships to other people and to God, taking an accounting. Let's take an accounting of our values: I said our values over the past year have seemed to remain pretty firmly in place: as Jews and as Americans and as glbt people and allies -- we still value freedom (including a day of shabbat each week, a day of rest), we still value human rights, we still value the right to practice our religions, the right of people to live without fear, even the pursuit of happiness (which also has Jewish counterparts if we believe the 7th of the seven wedding blessings, where we bless God for creating gladness and joy, loving partners, glee, song, mirth and exultation, harmony and love, peace and companionship (sason v'simcha rei-im ahuvim, gilah, rinah...etc.), we still value life, we still value peace. What else? anyone want to add to my list of American and/or Jewish values? what's on your top ten list? tikkun olam, education khesed (kindness) humanity human connection

Our values remain firm – even a year after 9/11 and 2 years into the collapse of the search for peace in Israel. But what of our ethics? What “means” are we willing to use to uphold our “values”? What things do we now approve of (or at least allow) in order, we're told, to keep our values in place? That's where I worry. And it's a wide-ranging worry: it began within my own self—as I noticed some impulses and feelings and judgments springing up in me during the last year – as I noticed fences and walls going up inside of me to match the ones around our house.

And my worrying extends to our government leaders and Israel's leaders and other world leaders; I worry about American citizens and American Jews and Israeli Jews, I worry about residents of LA, I worry about the LA Jewish community –and let's narrow the circle to the people I love most -- I worry about all of us in this sanctuary. We are afraid and angry – with good reason, but fear and anger often tempts us to do things we wouldn't otherwise do.

So I want to invite us to stop and examine our responses – actually it's not just me who invites us – on Yom Kippur God invites us, and Judaism invites us, and the whole long history of the Jewish people invites us to stop for a day of reflection. What a gift – what a scary gift – we Jews give ourselves. Once a year we absent ourselves from our regular routine, and together seek out a sanctuary – a safe space, a sacred place – where we can reflect with seriousness, with intention on all that we most value: our ethics, our morals, our relationships, our lives, our past and our future.

In our post 9/11 world – are we still becoming the people we want to be? the people God wants us to be? Or have we been waylaid? If the former, how do we stay on the right path? If the latter, how do we return to the path we would choose to travel?

Tonight, by way perhaps of jump starting our day of reflection, our Day of Atonement, I want to ask some questions that have been helping me take the inventory of my soul that Jewish tradition instructs me to take this time of year.

My first question is what has happened to our Jewish ethic of asking questions? We come, after all, from a long line of questioners. And with good reason: questioning – of authority especially – is a way to help us and them act ethically. Do you recall the story that teaches us to question authority? It's the Genesis story of Abraham's outrage when God tells him of the plans to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah (a couple of cities, by the way, filled with "people who did things that other people think are bad, but they didn't see themselves that way.") "What if you find 50 righteous ones within the city?" asks Abraham, "will You then wipe out the place and not forgive it for the sake of the innocent fifty who are in it? Far be it from You to do such a thing, to bring death upon the innocent as well as the guilty, so that innocent and guilty fare alike. Far be it from You. Shall not the Judge of all the world deal justly?" [Genesis 18:24-25]

Are we asking enough questions these days? Will you destroy the innocent along with the guilty? Is "collateral damage" a legitimate price to pay? Are we stepping forward in the footsteps of our father Abraham? [Worth noting of course, that God did eventually destroy those cities – but not for lack of a good defense by Abraham.]

What are we willing to allow, to approve of – as citizens, or as lovers of this country or of Israel?

Are we willing to step on the rights of lots of people along the way to capturing and punishing our enemies, or in the name of protecting us from another terrorist attack? Are we willing to step on the rights of any enemies captured (they've given up their rights by attacking us, we tell ourselves)? Are we willing to go to war against another country if that country seems to threaten our freedom? (I'm not saying the threats aren't real, by the way—but how do we know for sure?) Are we

willing to bomb another country and bring down its government while in search of our enemies (I'm not saying the Taliban wasn't a bad thing, by the way)? Are we willing to fly our flag everywhere and to pressure other people to do so in the name of --what exactly? I'm still not sure. Do we agree that unity means standing behind our presidents and prime ministers no matter what they do because "this is a time we must all stand together"?

These actions that most of us are giving at least tacit approval to – aren't at least some of them in violation of codes of ethics that we hold dear?

What about the freedom to dissent – that's an American ethic – dating back to the Boston Tea Party at least. Is it being forgotten these days?

We've forgotten it before in our nation's history. Are there any today who do not see the McCarthy era as a deep scar in our nation's history? But did you know that after 9/11 the only congressperson who voted against handing over virtually unlimited war powers to the President had so many death threats against her that she had to hire bodyguards? Is that okay with us?

Of course it's another version of our main problem: In times of crisis, some think dissent is dangerous; others think it's vital. We need our book soon so we'll know what to do when bad is good and good is bad. Are we dissenting these days when we see the need? are we speaking up? are we protesting? or are we pressured into standing united? hands over our hearts, "one nation under God"? How do we know what to support?

Helping one another – that's certainly in our Jewish and American code of ethics, and Americans and Jews have stepped forward in record numbers to help this past year – but is there only one way to help? must we be united on how to help? It's our same dilemma again – we say only this way or only that way is helpful. But surely there are others.

[By the way, on the information tables in our lobby is information about any number of different ways and organizations you can support to help Israel – including Israel bonds, the New Israel Fund, Jews in Crisis, even a shop Israel day we're co-sponsoring at a neighborhood synagogue. And we only managed to get some of the organizations' materials here -- there are many other ways to help - Look around for the ones that feel right to you.]

I suspect we'll never all agree on what is good and what is evil. But can we agree to keep examining, and to live up to the Good as you understand it? If we can't change the ethical system of another, can we live by our ethics, can we talk about them enough to know that as Jews and as Americans we have some shared values, and shared ethics? Can we maintain them? Can we live by them? Are

they worth dying by or only living by? These are not small questions. But they seem compelling ones in our new world.

Our sages taught us long ago we are not obligated to finish the work, but neither can we desist from engaging in it.

Thank God we have each other for support and solace and community as we ask our questions, as we search for answers.

On this Day of Atonement and in the year to come, may we ask all the questions we need to ask.

g'mar khatimah tovah may each of us be sealed in the book of life.