

This is an essay Jonathan wrote and sent to his Jewish friends a week after the October 7th attack on Israel by Hamas.

Hamas and Israel

Confronting Evil and addressing the conditions that allow it to flourish in our Country

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I found the sermon at our local parish this morning unsatisfying. It was on despair, hope, and the cycle of reciprocal violence in Israel and Palestine. It was explicitly non-political, but in my mind, it didn't capture the moment or describe the situation correctly. Mayor Eric Adams had greater moral clarity when he described Hamas as "demonic energy." That's it. Hamas is Evil. I believe in both external Good and Evil. Devil with horns type stuff. I know this is dismissed in secular and intellectual circles. Still, I'd posit that the scientific method of continually asking questions until something is explained leads you to this conclusion. String Theory was derived with its eleven or more dimensions because phenomena like the difference between gravitational versus magnetic forces couldn't be explained without introducing new dimensions. Objective observation seems to point to the terrible and destructive phenomenon of external Evil. There are similar patterns of absorption, complete disregard for the uniqueness and value of individuals or groups, and relentless pursuit of total control. This consistent pattern is why we have the saying, "The banality of Evil." Pol Pot, Hitler, Stalin, Mao, etc all share the same traits. Good people, on the other hand, are a very odd collection of folks. Rabbi Jonathan Sachs, Gandhi, Wilberforce, and Tutu were whacky.

J.R.R. Tolkien does a marvelous job illustrating Evil in "The Lord of the Rings" series. The Ring, a vehicle for Sauron's Evil, consumes and controls all who wear it. If you wear the Ring too long, you become a wraith or something that exists only to serve Evil with no individual agency. Can you think of a better definition of Hamas? Hamas doesn't care about anything other than its power and the absorption of all who stand in its way. It is no different than ISIS, the Taliban, or the Republican Guard. This has nothing to do with religion; it has to do with cosmic Evil. Evil has hijacked every religion in the past. Evil was a foot in the Crusades and the Holocaust. Evil twists. It takes legitimate grievances and twists them toward its power-based objectives.

As noted, Hamas, ISIS, and the Taliban are one kind. Nobody suffers more from their Evil than their population. Who suffered more than the Syrians from ISIS? Half of Afghanistan has food insecurity. Now, we have the unfolding tragedy in Gaza.

Religions best align with the truth when they do not control a society. Evil often is at play when they dominate, and they end up exploiting their power. The Medieval Catholic Church comes to mind. It had many positives but did terrible things when it operated as a Theocracy. Blaise Pascal said, "Men never do Evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction." C.S. Lewis noted Christianity is at its best when it operates as an insurgency. Given the secular nature of our society, particularly in Seattle, it is a minority movement. In Europe, it is pretty much non-existent. That said, faith traditions that believe in external good and Evil are necessary to understand the world's true nature. Because we've lost touch with our faith traditions, Western society has lost its sense of external

good and bad. Because of this lack of a frame of reference, we fail to diagnose our present condition correctly.

I don't believe people are being purposely obtuse. Well-intentioned people can do the wrong thing for the right reasons. George Washington died because the best doctors at the time bled him with leeches. Similarly, our society and its leadership are misdiagnosing what is happening here because it lacks a cosmic frame of reference, leading to a mushy and dangerous relativism. This misdiagnosis goes back many years and is clearly seen in our naïve and now exceedingly dangerous accommodation of Iran. A clear-eyed understanding of the Evil the mullahs represent would have disabused us of the notion that they could operate in a post-Westphalian world and respect a Rules-based Order. We can wish, lecture, and rationalize all we want, but they are simply being who they have been since 1979, and now this misdiagnosis has spilled into this horrifying proxy war.

Evil comes in many gradations; it is at play whenever we're separated from relationships. It is hard not to see echoes of it in the pro-Palestine and thinly concealed antisemitic protests around the Country and World. Where did these come from, and why are they happening? Whenever I can't understand something, I reach back for a historical example that I can draw from. In this case, I turn to William Wilberforce, who led the Abolition of Slavery movement in the British Empire in the early nineteenth century. He was Abraham Lincoln's shining example. What is less known is that Wilberforce focused on dozens of causes, including the need for educational reform, child labor laws, prostitution, bear baiting, etc. He put all these causes in a bucket called "the reformation of manners." "God Almighty has set before me two great objects, the suppression of the slave trade and the reformation of manners." William Wilberforce in a letter from 1807. Wilberforce realized that slavery could only exist in a society that tolerated these evils. It's not surprising to me that the most equivocation and outright antisemitism comes from our "elite" institutions. In my admittedly jaded view, they've become far-left ideological madrasas. People with different political views aren't allowed to speak on campus. A judge who failed to use the correct pronoun was shouted down at Stanford Law School. A recent survey by the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education found that 83% of college students found themselves self-censoring what they say on campus. People are afraid to point out the most basic things, like the existence of chromosomes or the desirability of a border. They certainly aren't going to grapple with the ambiguity, like the benefit of vaccines or lockdowns. George Orwell's quotation from his 1945 essay called "Notes on Nationalism" comes to mind. "One has to belong to the intelligentsia to believe things like that; no ordinary man could be such a fool." Is it any wonder that Harvard University, which had the worst score in its history related to its acceptance of free speech, is also a place with rampant antisemitism and ambiguous leadership? Wash and repeat with other anti-small "l" liberal Universities, including the rest of the Ivys and the University of Washington.

Seven or so years ago, Elizabeth and I were the guests of Matt and Amy Ragen for the AJC annual banquet in Seattle. Bari Weiss spoke. I believe this is right before she left the New York Times. She spoke about the rising antisemitism on elite university campuses and throughout the liberal elite culture. As I recall, she was not well received. People didn't want to hear it. It struck too close to home. Today, we can see that she was prescient. As Wilberforce observed, the great Evil of Slavery existed in a society that tolerated all of these evils. In this case, antisemitism exists in cultures that tolerate intolerance. We could rework the opening sentences of German Theologian Martin Niemöller's poem and get at the same essential truths.

First they came for the Communists

And I did not speak out Because I was not a Communist

Then they came for the Socialists

And I did not speak out Because I was not a Socialist

Then they came for the trade unionists

And I did not speak out Because I was not a trade unionist

Then they came for the Jews

And I did not speak out Because I was not a Jew

Then they came for me

And there was no one left To speak out for me.

This is to say, we are all in this together. I hope that people can wake up and correctly diagnose the Evil that is Hamas. I also hope that fair-minded people can see the great Evil of antisemitism and more fully understand the conditions under which it is allowed to flourish. It is for the good of all humanity to do so.

Your Friend,

Jonathan