

Rosh Hashanah 2nd Day, 2018/5779

A movie currently in theaters, *Operation Finale*, tells the story of a squad of Mossad agents sent in 1960 to capture Adolf Eichmann, known as the Architect of the Final Solution, who is hiding out in Argentina as Ricardo Klement. Much of what the world first learned about what were the horrors of the Holocaust came from world-wide broadcasts of the Eichmann trial and the subsequent book by Hannah Arendt, "*Eichmann in Jerusalem: A report on the banality of evil*". This title was based on how Arendt was amazed by the ease at which people such as Eichmann planned and executed the collection and killing of Jews and other *untersmenschen* (sub-humans, as they were defined) on an industrial scale, all with the banality and efficiency of a low-level clerk. What Eichmann argued at his trial, and what his character argues to his Jewish captors in the movie, is that he should not be held responsible for the collective actions, and collective guilt, of the whole Nazi machine because he was just a small cog, an underling following orders in the time of war. The arguments that refute this, and that were used to refute this defense at the Nuremburg trials of top Nazi officers, go to the core of what separates guilt vs. responsibility, and how we differentiate collective vs. personal responsibility.

One might think that these issues are for another place, another time. But the truth is that we, as Jews, gather every year at the same time to contemplate exactly these issues about ourselves and our communities: how do we separate guilt from responsibility, how do we know what are our personal responsibilities and what are our collective responsibilities?

In her book, Arendt argues that Eichmann's argument- that he was only following orders and that he bore no responsibility for the collective Nazi guilt, was easy to refute because civil societies are governed by common principles and moral responsibilities. One example she cites is the "categorical imperative" described by the German philosopher, Immanuel Kant. This imperative states that there are absolute, unconditional requirements in a society that must be obeyed, such as to not kill an innocent person even if ordered to do so. We know this to be true because it has become a guiding principle of armies in democratic nations, including the U.S. and Israeli armies, that one must disobey an order that it illegal. In this concept, each individual is responsible for their moral actions, and all individuals are equal legislators of this morality. Thus, for any of us to live in a civil society ruled by laws and morality, each of us is an equal contributor and overseer of that society's morality. Eichmann, she argues, got Kant's

lesson wrong, because in Eichmann's formulation, Hilter was the only legislator, and as such, only he was responsible for legislating morality.

Herein lies the first lesson about Rosh Hashanah: that in Judaism, it is imperative for each and every one of us to understand our actions of the past year. It is incumbent on each one of us to reflect on both the right and the wrong actions we took, to reflect on the consequences of these actions, and, where there was wrong, to ask forgiveness from those we wronged.

Most importantly, for us to progress as individuals in a community, each of us must seek to improve ourselves in the year to come. This notion is so familiar to us, because every Passover we repeat the concept in the Hagaddah that "in every generation, it is incumbent on every individual to understand the Exodus as if he or she fled Egypt."

Arendt cites a very rare documented case in which two young Germans who were drafted into the SS refused to sign their induction papers because they knew that that particular branch's mission was to search out Jews in their hiding places and to kill them on the spot. According to Arendt, although these men "practically speaking, did nothing", they were seemingly absolved from guilt because they separated right from wrong. Yet, "they were neither

heroes nor saints”, because their actions remained completely silent. The action by these two young men served to only stop their involvement in the killing of Jews, not the greater killing of Jews by the Nazis. In contrast, there are dozens of examples of Christian clergy who went to their deaths in concentration camps for actively protecting Jews from the SS.

Arendt cites two contrasting examples of how different governments acted to save Jews. Knowing that the arrest and deportation of all of Denmark’s Jews was ordered for Oct. 2, 1943, thousands of Danes- policemen, government officials, physicians, regular folk, organized the escape of just about all of Denmark’s 8,000 Jews on small boats to the neutral country of Sweden. This was a shining example of people risking their lives, collectively, to prevent the slaughter of their Jewish neighbors. The example of Italy was different but also notable: commanded to round up their Jews for deportation, the Italian government responded with intransigence. In public, the government officials accepted these orders, but in private, they delayed deportations with layers of bureaucracy, so that in the end, only 10,000 of Italy’s 67,000 Jews were deported, mainly to Auschwitz.

Herein lies the second lesson about Rosh Hashanah: that it is incumbent upon us to engage in our atonement, in our change, with concrete actions and not by words alone. For us to move forward, words alone- especially in private, have little weight; each of us must strive in the year to come to set in motion some action that will bring about change, that will improve us, our personal relationships, our communities in the year to come.

A very recent op-ed letter in the New York Times by “Anonymous” has engendered much debate by bringing to the fore serious instabilities as well as potential questions of constitutional crisis in the highest levels of our Executive Branch. While this was a clear act to engage the public in protest, the biggest criticism has been that the author is hiding behind a wall of anonymity. Again, this fails Kant’s “categorical imperative” because it tries to shield the author from being a personal legislator of moral action. The long-term question will be whether the controversy surrounding the author’s choice to withhold their name and position will ultimately be what we remember, and not the alarm bells they tried to sound.

This brings us to the last lesson that Rosh Hashanah tries to teach us: that in Judaism, we have not only personal responsibilities to address wrongs,

we have collective responsibilities. As said by John Donne, the 16th Century English poet, “No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, part of the main...”.

On the High Holidays, this collective sense of responsibility even includes sins. We recite in the *Ashamnu* confessional an announcement of our collective sins, each in the plural, starting with sins beginning with the first letter, *alef*, and ending with those beginning with the last letter, *taff*. אָנָּחְנוּ, We have trespassed, בִּגְדָנוּ, We have betrayed, We have stolen; We have slandered; We have caused others to sin; We have given harmful advice; We have deceived; we have mocked; We have rebelled against God and His Torah; We have caused our friends grief; We have been stiff-necked; We have gone astray; We have led others astray.

Did each and every one of us do these sins. For sure not. So why are required to atone for sins we have not done, yet were likely done by someone in our community? The answer the rabbis give is that by reciting this confessional publicly, we take responsibility over our wider community and we also take it upon ourselves to repent for those who either cannot or will not. Just think about those times, when you were kids, getting into fights

with your siblings. When your parents came into the room, each kid would scream out, “he did it; she did it”. In most cases, the parents response was collective punishment for all the kids, because we were being taught that if we didn’t work things out together, if we failed to develop a working community, that we as a group would suffer collective punishment; each individual would suffer for the sins of others. If the community is committing sins and we do not act, we are committing sins. In the last several years, there has been an explosion against societal sins that we, as communities, no longer can tolerate. The Me-Too movement, the collective response to institutional protection of abusive priests, intolerance for the fact that institutional racism and bigotry still exist against people of color and members of the LGBTQ community, federal funding focused on replacing missiles at the expense of treating wounded veterans.

Rosh Hashanah teaches us that an avenue to improving our physical, spiritual and moral lives is not just by “looking out for yourself”, but by joining and participating in a community, and by performing concrete actions to heal and improve these communities.

If we, as Jews, can lead the world in remembering the Holocaust so that these horrors never happen again, how much more important, yet difficult it is to fight against everyday injustices that do not befall us personally.

I know that for us, for our community here, if we work with each other to improve ourselves and those around us, this will be, for all of us, the best year of our lives. I wish you all a sweet year of health, fulfillment and happiness. Shana tova u'metukah!