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CAN FAITH PERSIST IN THE PRESENCE OF EVIL? To My Cousin Binyamin

My cousin Binyamin lived in the period of the Nazi atrocities prior to and during the Second World War. The Nazis entered his town on Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year, on which eating and drinking are strictly forbidden. When the Jews in the synagogue heard that the Nazis were occupying their town, they divided bread amongst them, right there in the synagogue, and ate. They were trying to "break" their reality. Maybe if a Jew could eat on Yom Kippur, the Nazis wouldn't exist.

My cousin Binyamin was sent to the Buno work camp, in the area of Auschwitz. Toward the end of the war, in order to escape the advancing allied forces, the people in Buno were ordered to walk westward toward Germany. Whoever fell and was too weak to get up, would be put to death. My cousin Binyamin fell, and couldn't get up.

So he was loaded onto a wagon with other bodies, and taken to a clearing in the forest. There he was laid on the ground, with the other bodies.

And there, with the last bit of strength that a person gets from God, Binyamin got up, and ran. He ran to the forest. And ran, and ran, and ran.

The other day, I visited my cousin Binyamin at an old peoples' home here in Jerusalem. I told Binyamin that I wished to write on the question: Can faith persist in the presence of evil? And I asked him, "What should I say?"

He looked away and thought, and then, still looking away, he said, "I saw people who were full of Torah, whose whole life was serving God, they knew nothing else and desired nothing else, who were brutally murdered, right in front of me, in the most horrifying manner imaginable."

He was then quiet again, as though waiting, and then, still looking away, he said this:

"I miss it.
I yearn for it.
It was the love of my youth.
I want to pray.
But you can't convince me.
You can't convince me."

The question whether faith can persist in the presence of evil does not pose a philosophical or theological problem. It is a human problem.

To suppose it is a philosophical or theological problem is to think of God as a person, a thing, and to think of God's being good as a slogan, a simplistic saying. Only in this way would one form a prior expectation that there not be any evil in God's world, or that there not be as much evil as there is.

I have no prior expectations of my God that there not be any evil in the world, or even that there not be as much evil as there is. I also believe that Jewish tradition is not concerned with the question "Why is there any evil rather than no evil?" or with the question. "Why is there so much evil?" There is much in the Jewish texts about evil, to be sure, but it is an attempt to understand the evil: what it is doing here, what is its nature, power, and function. This is all within the Jewish attempt to understand God's world, to understand everything in the world, including the good. It's either that or the facing of particular evils on particular occasions, and wanting to get rid of the suffering caused by that evil. Job is not bothered by any *question* about evil. He is *suffering* from evil. The Jewish preoccupation with the problem of evil is simply not motivated by the wonder of why there is any evil at all or so much evil as there is.

I have no prior expectations about evil because my God is not a thing or a person, and because for me God's goodness is to be understood as a term in context, in the context of everything I think about God, not in isolation. In the context in which it is at home, the idea that God is good exists inside a world-outlook in which the evil is taken for granted, and in which the only issue is how to live in such a world and how to relate to God in such a world, not ever supposing that such an issue comes from a dismay or disappointment at there being the evil in the first place.

This may be compared to having to understand contextually the idea of "work" on the holy Sabbath. Religious Jews don't do "work" on their Sabbath. It would be foolish to charge them with inconsistency or incoherence when they insist that what seems to others a trivial act is actually in their eyes "work". The moral is elsewhere: to know what they mean by the term "work," look at the whole context of what is and what is not considered "work" on the Sabbath. That God is good, for me does not imply in the least any absence of evil, for God's "goodness" is given to me right along with all the evil that there is.

WHAT DO I BELIEVE IN WHEN I BELIEVE IN GOD?

I believe in: the reality of experiencing the world and myself in a spiritual way. To so experience is for there to be a spiritual quality to the way I am given to myself in my own experience, and to the way the world, but espe-

cially others, are given to me. This is to speak not only of so-called peak experiences, which punctuate my life only rarely, but to speak of a familiar quality of the spirit that could accompany me in my daily life, if I only so allowed it.

The spiritual quality of which I speak can be acknowledged independently of ontological claims about the objective ground of that quality. And, in any case, the ontological claims and their particulars all derive from our subjective points of view, pushed forward by the need for objective talk, but not to be taken as the fundament of spirituality. The spiritual way of experiencing is ineffable, to use a by now old word for this, but we all recognize it when we see it, or at least a good part of it.

In Aldous Huxley's *Point Counter Point*, one of the characters tries throughout the novel to prove God's existence. He finally comes up with what he takes to be a knock-down drag-out proof: Beethoven's trios. As proof of God the "thing"—that is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good—this is absurd. As discovery of the realness of a sui generis spiritual experience: yes—if you've heard the trios, that is.

My God is the God of the kabbalists.

A kabbalist would have a difficult time translating our word "God" into his vocabulary. He starts with the *Ein-sof*, the "Infinite," who, as the *Ayin* (or "Nothing") is beyond thinghood, or any principle of individuation. The *Ein-sof* is a possibility of spiritual yearning, out of whose emanations both good and bad, holiness and the satanic "Other Side" equally emerge, with no surprises whatsoever about the evil. You will even find in kabbalistic texts that the source of evil is to be found deep within the *Ein-sof* itself.

The *Ein-sof* emanates ten Sefirot out of itself, in a constellation of ten spiritual powers, the first of which is the first *yesh* or thing. These powers are a mixed bag, each with its own way of going about doing things and with a counterpart in evil. At best, God would be the Sefira *Tiferet*, the source of the Torah. But *Tiferet* is only part of an entire pantheon of Sefirot, consisting of different functions and opposing powers. In fact, the Sefirot may not even be entities or things at all, but merely rules or laws in accordance with which reality proceeds, as in the theory of Rabbi Moshe Hayyim Luzzato. In that case there is nothing to really talk about but the Infinite itself, beyond being, and beyond good and evil.

The kabbalist has no prior expectation that there be no evil or that there not be as much as there is. He does, though, have a whole vocabulary for experiencing evil spiritually.

My God is the God of the kabbalists. So as far as I'm concerned, whether faith can persist in the presence of evil is not a philosophical or theological problem at all.

The problem of faith and evil lies elsewhere.

For standing over and against the spiritual way of experiencing the world is an *experience* of evil, an experience in which one "sees" *right in*

the evil itself as one experiences it, the loss, the absence, of all and any spiritual dimension. And so one says:

"There is no God,"

Not a philosophical inference here, such as:

There is evil.
Therefore, there is no God,

but the *direct experience* of the slipping away of the spiritual quality from one's life.

Just as some simply see, not infer, God in the beautiful intricacy of a snowflake, and just as the heavens speak to some, directly, not by inference, of the glory of God, and, finally, just as Blake saw eternity in a grain of sand, still others see in evil that the world is nothing but, nothing more than, blood and pain, and suffering and heartbreak. These others experience the evil as disclosing to them a world devoid of the spiritual, just as surely as others experience a constant, daily renewal of the spiritual in their lives. And so these knowers of evil, in its most powerful and disturbing manifestations, say there is no God.

What then is the essence of the problem of evil?

The problem of evil is a defeat of the soul.

The experience of *spirituality* is a going out of oneself. It requires a going out of one's own self as the center of one's being. And the experience of *evil* can cause one to collapse in on oneself. The power of evil can be so great that it can cause one to withdraw into oneself, lose nerve, and become a broken body with a shattered soul. This is not written accusingly. Neither is this said in blame. There is no question of guilt here. This is a human problem to be understood for what it is.

There is no question of truth, either, in the problem of evil, nor is there any question of "justifying" a "belief." There is a question, though, of choice in the face of evil. The choices are these:

To allow oneself to be driven back, pushed back, into oneself, to be rendered immobile, to be cut off from the possibility of experiencing oneself and the world spiritually.

To despair of ever again being able to come out of oneself long enough to catch the special feeling of the glory of the morning sun, or of ever again participating in the inexplicable mystery of the Jewish people, or of once again sensing the depth of one's own soul in the words of the prayer-book; to give up on the possibility of singing full-throated the words of the Simhat Torah dance; and finally, to despair of ever again experiencing evil without being broken and stunted all over again.

Or: To refuse to be defeated; not to allow oneself to become the

object of evil; to refuse to become passive; to have the courage to reach for that fullness of being, promised in the spiritual quality of existence; to dig out from under oneself to the light of day.

Despair is an inauthenticity. It pretends that the world is such that we can only respond to it in one way. It wants to believe that our inner states are so determined that they do not allow for choice. Despair is an abrogation of our freedom.

I write this with sympathy and love, Binyamin. Had I been there I sense I would have felt no different.

To be defeated by evil is a form of *katnut ha-emuna* "smallness of faith." The Talmud says: "A person who raises his voice in [the silent] prayer is one of those of smallness of faith" (*Berakhot*, 24b). Rashi explains that the Talmud is describing a person who thinks that God doesn't hear him unless he prays loudly. His "smallness of faith" consists in having that belief.

On this the great Hassidic thinker, Rabbi Zadok of Lublin, comments: We are not dealing here with a fool who thinks God doesn't hear him, as though he has a primitive theology, to say the least. We are to understand the situation differently. The person of whom the Talmud writes has no faith in *himself*. He is given over to self-despair. And so, as he prays, he becomes anxious about himself, and being increasingly given over to his anxieties begins to cry out in his prayer. He raises his voice as a result of his loss of self-regard. "Smallness of faith," writes Rabbi Zadok, "comes from self-despair" (*Sefer Hazikhronot*).

And what does such a one, one in self-despair, say? He says: "God does not hear my prayer."

Is there not a way out of the problem of evil? Are we condemned by our past reactions to evil to be forever condemned to despair? There is a way out. The experience of evil is itself the way out.

There are times when we are driven to rage, when we demand to know "Where is God?" and when we then hear no response we stay with the question, over and over, refusing to believe. In the Sabbath prayer there is a refrain in which the question *Ayeh? Where is His glory?* is asked. Rabbi Isaac Luria, the Holy Ari, spoke of this word "Ayeh," and of its being comprised of the three Hebrew letters: *Aleph*, *Yod*, and *He*. The first letter, *Aleph*, signifies in kabbala, *Keter*, the highest realm of spiritual emanation from the Infinite. The second letter, *Yod*, signifies the next highest realm. *Hokhma*. And *He* signifies the third highest, *Bina*.

Indeed. In asking the very question, "Where is He?" we reach the highest levels of spiritual attainment. The very experience of evil, the very experience of there being *no* "God," can itself be the way to the God in which I believe. For in the "deep pit" of knowing evil, one can become free. For one can learn to let go of the God who is a "person," a "thing," who is "good," out of context and simplistically. And one can proceed out from this liberation to soar toward the God who is the name of the reality of spir-

itual experience. In the depths of evil, one can learn to overcome one's prior expectations that there be no evil or that there not be so much evil.

Cured of this expectation, one can once again begin to engage in the spiritual life.

This must be like what Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook meant when he wrote: "There is denial that is like assent, and assent that is like denial" (*Orot haEmuna*, p. 25). He referred to one who agrees that the Torah "comes from heaven," but whose understanding of that is so pictorial that his "agreement" constitutes in reality a denial of the truth, and to one who denies Torah "from heaven," but does so out of such spiritual sensitivity, that his denial is more like agreement. Just so, the person who out of a deep repugnance to evil declares that "God" does not exist, affirms a denial that could just possibly be the entry into a deeper, truer spiritual agreement.

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I conclude with a story for my cousin Binyamin, told before me by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel in his book, *A Passion for Truth*:

Rabbi Henoah of Alexandroff was in the dying moments of his life, when he told this story.

"The Cossacks invaded Poland in 1792 and over-ran the Jews. A Cossack rode up to a Jewish house and asked the Jewish man. 'Are you the *khazvayen*?' The Jew did not understand the man's language, but his wife translated to him, mistakenly: 'He wants to know if you are a cantor ("*hazzan*").' Thinking that the Cossack wished him to sing, the Jew began to sing a traditional Jewish song, a *niggun*, by the name of 'Sons of the Sanctuary.' Thereupon the Cossack became furious and began beating the Jew about. So then the wife advised her husband worriedly, 'I don't think he likes the *niggun*. Try another *niggun*. Try a new *niggun*.' "

And then, having finished his story, Rabbi Henoah passed away. What was Rabbi Henoah saying with these dying words of his?

I believe he was saying that all his life he had tried to figure out what the *niggun* was that he was supposed to be singing, and now he was dying. On the one hand, he could succumb to despair and see this moment as the end of a futile attempt to find the right *niggun*. Or he could see his death as a continuation. No. He could see his death as something new, a new opportunity to sing a different *niggun*. He was going to a new place, and would he ever be singing a beautiful *niggun* there! Too bad we won't all be there to hear it, to hear him finally sing it right.

Binyamin. When He beats you all around like a Cossack, when you don't even know what it is He wants from you, it hurts. It is deeply humiliat-

ing. You are in pain, both physical and spiritual. Please, Binyamin, please. You can choose to give up, to succumb to the blows and not go on. Or you can try a different *niggun*, a new *niggun*. Once in your life, when you got up and ran, that is exactly what you did. Binyamin, try a different *niggun*. A new *niggun*.