

Rosh Hashanah 5778 Sermon
Forgiving G!d for White Supremacy, Neo-Nazism and Racism
Rav Bryan Mann
Congregation Betenu, Amherst, NH

As I mentioned last night I want to spend some time throughout this High Holiday period bringing our attention to white supremacy and reflecting on what I learned from my experience confronting white supremacists in Charlottesville. These reflections come from my personal experience informed by our sacred tradition.

One of the things I confronted when I was down there is the very different approaches other clergy had when it came to confronting white supremacy. Many of my colleagues of other faiths, mostly Christian saw prayer as the answer.

As we stood in a single file line, white supremacist/Neo-Nazi/alt-right militia stood in front of us. Other white supremacists marched around us screaming anti-Semitic slogans, “Blood and Soil. “Jews will not replace us” while banging on their shields. They called me a kike and my colleagues dykes. In response to this, my clergy colleagues wanted us all to pray. Many of their prayers were that those in front of us screaming these horrific things would find G!d’s love and light. They would repent. They would see G!d’s light in those they found detestable.

This is not foreign to Jewish tradition. The Talmud relates a story that there were some rebels in Rabbi Meir’s neighborhood. Rabbi Meir prayed that they would die. His wife Berurya rebukes him citing a verse from Psalms that reads, “Let sins cease from the land.” She notes sins not sinners. Rabbi Meir recognizes she is right, prays that they will repent and they do.”¹

In all honestyn it is easy for me to dismiss this text. “But these are white supremacists.” “But these are oppressors.” “But these people would literally murder me given the chance simply for

¹ Berakhot 10a

being a queer Jewish man.” “But these people would literally murder any black or brown person given the chance.” How can you ask me to respond to this ideology passively? How can I allow the people perpetuating this ideology to continue espousing their world view and respond only through private prayer? Only through pleading with G!d?

One answer, is to remember the Torah we chanted today, the creation story. G!d created all things in this world including those espousing white supremacy and Neo-Nazism. This is extremely difficult Torah to think about, let alone internalize and truly believe, but this Torah too comes from our ancient sages, our prophets, and is in a way affirmed in our daily prayers.

For those who pray during the day, whether during the week or on Shabbat, after the Barechu, the call to worship, we say ברוך אתה הי אלוקינו מלך העולם יוצר אור ובורא חושך, עושה שלום וברא את הכל" "*barukh atah Ad-nai Elokeinu Melekh HaOlam yozer or uvorei hoshesh, oseh shalom, uvorei et hakol*. Blessed are you G!d, Ruler of the Universe, who forms light, creates darkness, makes peace, and creates everything”

The Hebrew word בורא *borei*, create is something only G!d can do. Humans can also יצר from things, עשה *oseh* make things, but בורא *boresh* that is what G!d did for the world. בראשית ברא *Bereshit barah elokim* In the Beginning G!d created.

In this prayer that verb is used for “creating darkness” and “creating everything.” In a long debate about how many prayers and how long the prayers before and after the Shema should be, we get a note about the language of this prayer which comes before Shema. This debate begins with a quote from Isaiah, “Who forms light and created darkness, who makes peace and creates evil, I am the Lord Who does all these things.”²

² Isaiah 45:7

Our ancient sages then ask since we euphemized “creates evil” since we have changed that to “create everything” should we not do the same with “create darkness.”³ Ultimately, they did not choose to change that language, but what is important for me is here we have a prophet speaking on behalf of G!d saying, “I (G!d), creates evil.”

Our ancient sages, instead of getting rid of this language entirely during prayer, instead keep it in the form of a euphemism. G!d creates everything. Everything includes evil. This oppressive ideology, these people who would potentially kill my friends and me if given the chance are in some way also created by G!d.

So what do we do with this? Can we believe in a G!d who creates evil?

That likely depends on if one attributes certain events to G!d and if one interprets those events as evil. One answer is to do our best to forgive G!d. Some of you may remember a Hasidic Tale I shared in Adult Ed last year called “The Paper Chicken.”⁴ It is too long to tell here and is really a story meant from Yom Kippur, but it is a tale all about an inn keeper who enumerates every natural disaster that befell his town, every child who died of disease, times where his family had no food. He does not call these evil, but rather sins. Sins G!d committed and essentially says, “G!d, you forgive us and we’ll forgive you.”

To complicate this, note that this story is all about G!d’s sins. Sin, in Judaism is not necessarily “evil.” Just because we do not live up to our best selves, just because G!d does not live up to G!d’s best self does not mean we nor G!d is “evil.” With that said, from our human perspective we might interpret or view these sins whether from G!d or other people as evil and still need to reconcile what we view as “evil,” whether the same as “sinful” or not, as being created by G!d.

³ Talmud Bavli Brachot 11b

⁴ http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/87879/jewish/The-Paper-Chicken.htm

To focus us back to today, to Rosh Hashanah. Four years ago Rabbi Avi Killip gave a Rosh Hashanah sermon about how Rosh Hashanah in certain parts of the Jewish world, is seen as the day we declare G!d as our King or Sovereign. This may be an uncomfortable metaphor for some, but she brings it in because there is a teaching from the Jerusalem Talmud that tells us there are three times an individual is forgiven of all sins prior to that day: The bridegroom on their wedding day, the elder on their ordination day, and the sovereign on their coronation day.⁵

The metaphor of kingship may be difficult for some and familiar for others. Regardless of how we feel about that metaphor this is an incredibly powerful teaching. If a sovereign or king is forgiven of all their sins prior to their coronation day and Rosh Hashanah is G!d's coronation day, today is the day we forgive G!d of all of G!d's sins prior to this day.

I will admit that this is not the sermon I intended to give this year. I was fully prepared to tell you a story of two from my time in Charlottesville and how we can act to resist white supremacy. That sermon may still come on Yom Kippur, but before we can do that, we need to recognize the Torah, the wisdom, that there is evil in this world. Evil that seemingly has no rational explanation. Evil that may come from G!d. When faced with that evil, yes we need to confront it, but we can and should admit we need help. For some: my Christian colleagues in Charlottesville, Berurya, and at times myself that admission, that request for help comes in the form of prayer.

Most importantly we need to recognize that yes white supremacists and Neo-Nazis are perpetuating oppression, but praying for the death of those individuals or even praying for them to die will not actually do anything. We need to look at the bigger structures at play. We need to

⁵ Bikkurim 3:3 65 d, <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/challenge-and-inspiration>

look at what is being taught, who is in power, how has society been structured to empower those perpetuating white supremacist ideology and oppression?

This year, may we learn from the wisdom of our tradition. There is unexplainable evil that has existed since the creation of the world. In order to reconcile this, let us use this day and these next nine days until Yom Kippur to forgive G!d for this evil. Let us also learn from the wisdom of Berurya, one of the few women in the Talmud who is given a name and reported teachings, that we do not pray for, nor seek the destruction, of individuals, but we pray for, work toward, and seek the destruction of oppressive ideologies so that one day we will not have to forgive G!d for the evils of white supremacy, neo-Nazism, and racism.