

**Rabbi Richard Agler  
Keys Jewish Community Center  
Tavernier, FL**

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Rosh Hashanah I**

**How Could People Do This?  
In memory of the life and work of Shimon Peres, 1923-2016**

**As some of you know, I participated in the “March of the Living” again this year. It is a program that takes Jewish High School seniors from around the world to visit death camps in Poland during the week of *Yom Ha-Shoah*—Holocaust Remembrance Day.**

**That’s followed by a week in Israel for *Yom HaZikaron* and *Yom Ha-Atzmaut*, Israel’s Memorial and Independence Days.**

**It is as powerful as it sounds.**

**This was my third March and owing to the quality of our group of students, all from Miami, it was by far the best.**

**The Holocaust raises so many vital questions and on this trip I made it my business to focus on three of them:**

- 1) “How Could People Do This?”**
- 2) “How Could People Let It Be Done?”**
- 3) “What Does it All Tell Us About God?”**

**I did not expect to answer them fully, or perhaps even satisfactorily.**

**We have all wondered how people, en masse, can commit mass murder?**

**And how other people, also en masse, could simply let them.**

**And yes, where O where is God in this all?**

**As it happens, these are more than “just” Holocaust questions.**

**They are High Holiday questions.**

**They go to the heart of what it means to be a human being.**

**They go to the heart of our faith, and**

**they even go to the heart of what it means to be a Jew today.**

**In a recent survey of the American Jewish community, the Pew Research Center asked a statistical sampling of us what we believed was the most essential part of being Jewish.**

**The number one answer was “Remembering the Holocaust,” 73%.**

**(It was followed by “Leading an Ethical and Moral Life,” 69%, and “Working for Justice and Equality,” 56%)**

**They didn’t ask why we felt that way, but we can guess.**

**The magnitude and the horror of it are off every chart.**

**The Holocaust hits home. Many of our own family members fell victim.**

**And it confirms too many of our long-standing insecurities and fears of anti-semitism.**

**Maybe it’s also because we believe that the Shoah was not just something that happened once upon a time.**

**Mass murder and genocide have not stopped in the seventy years since.**

**Every day, today, we see pictures of refugees**

fleeing from war, terror and oppression,  
 and being massacred in the process.  
 Nations still close their doors to people who are running for their lives.  
 State sponsored slaughter, widespread indifference  
 and even hostility to the victims, is not a thing of the past at all.  
 What's more, today we can't say we don't know about it.  
 It is on our front pages and screens more now  
 than it was during the Holocaust itself.  
 Perhaps we call it "essential to remember"  
 because we have not yet learned its lessons.

And this is critical.

If we haven't learned its lessons, if we can't answer its questions,  
 how can we expect anyone else to?  
 And if no one else can either, what was the point?  
 The Shoah is essential to remember.  
 But that needs to mean more than,  
 "They tried to kill us, we survived, let's eat."  
 So we'll begin our three-part series for this High Holydays.  
 Today, "How Could People Do This?"  
 On Kol Nidre night, "How Could People Let It Be Done?"  
 On Yom Kippur morning, "What Does it All Tell Us About God?"

"How Could People Do This?"

How could people round up other people, their fellow human beings,  
 innocent men, women and children,  
 treat them worse than you'd treat animals, and butcher them?  
 How can people, all of us created in the image of God,  
 even conceive of doing such a thing, much less carry it out?  
 We've all thought about this. And we've all tried to answer.  
 Some say the perpetrators were beasts, monsters, inhuman.  
 That may be true. But even if it is, it doesn't tell us enough.  
 They weren't born monsters.  
 They were taught and trained to do what they did—  
 and they learned well and they worked willingly.  
 What made them do that?  
 Some say they were just following orders.  
 Actually, we now know that isn't true. If you didn't want to be  
 a death camp executioner, you didn't have to be.  
 You had to want to do that job.  
 Some say they were seeking honor, glory, advancement.  
 Really? How much of that do you get  
 murdering defenseless men, women and children?  
 People also say that "one death is a tragedy but a million are a statistic."  
 Maybe so, how but do you do it the first time?

It is fair to say that behind every political murder—  
 and every mass murder is a political murder—  
 behind every one is hatred. And hatred is not exactly a rare flower.  
 It has always been around and until the messianic age it will be—in abundance.  
 Today we have hatred of Jews, hatred of blacks, hatred of browns;  
 hatred of Arabs, hatred of Communists, hatred of Fascists;  
 hatred of Sunnis, hatred of Shias, hatred of infidels, hatred of the West.

We have  
 hatred of Hindus, hatred of Muslims, hatred of Christians;  
 hatred of women who cover their skin and hair, hatred of women who don't;  
 hatred of the rich, hatred of the poor.

We have  
 hatred of the smartest kid in the class, of the slowest, of the prettiest.  
 hatred of the fat kid, the skinny kid, and the one who wears thick glasses.

There is  
 hatred of gays, hatred of the police, hatred of the government, hatred of self.

There is  
 hatred of the other tribe, of the other people, of the other faith, of the Other.  
 People rarely commit one murder, much less mass murder, without hatred.  
 It is powerful, it is primal and it is present.

Where does it all come from?

According to the Bible it began with mankind's first very children.

We know the story.

Abel offered a sacrifice that was accepted.

His brother Cain offered one that was not.

All of a sudden, Cain hates his brother. And he kills him.

Since we teach this story to children

it means that a child can understand it.

Cain was humiliated. Worse, by his little brother. Worse yet, in front of God.

It wasn't a contest in the first place but no matter. In his mind he lost.

His inadequacy was exposed.

We hate when that happens.

We hate it more when it happens in front of someone else.

We hate it even more when we think that someone is the cause of it.

Cain was embarrassed and resentful—he took his frustration and let it rip.

What's scary is that we recognize every one of those emotions,  
 every bit of that progression. It is not the least bit alien to us.

Maybe it's not so hard to murder the first time.

When something doesn't come out the way we want,  
 there are two ways we can deal with it.

The first is to try and figure out why.

To ask ourselves the hard questions and try to find a way to grow through it.

It is no coincidence that this is the agenda of the High Holidays.

We recognize that we have fallen short and  
attempt to transform our lesser qualities into nobler ones.

By the way if you ask me, this might be the most essential part of being Jewish.

It should at least get honorable mention.

In no small measure, it is how we've become the people we've become.

At any rate, the second way is find someone else to blame.

This way is MUCH easier.

It requires no introspection, no soul searching, no painful growth.

This was what Cain did.

He was not the last one.

“How Could People Do This?”

They can do this when they let frustration morph into hate—  
and that's ridiculously easy to do.

Hate can also come from fear.

There's plenty of that to go around as well.

The world can be a frightening place.

We may fear for our health and safety—and for that of our loved ones.

We may fear for our financial health.

We may fear becoming ill, hurt, unemployed or disabled—  
especially if we have a high deductible.

We may fear not being able to provide for our family, or our old age.

We may fear that when things change—and they always do—  
we won't be able to keep up. Snapchat anyone?

We fear what we don't know—and is that ever a lot.

As with resentment, there are two ways to respond to fear:

We can face it, deal with it and start growing.

Or we can find someone else to blame and start hating.

Again, the first requires effort, self-control and discipline.

The second, none.

“How Could People Do This?”

A better question might be, “How come more people don't?”

Maybe more people don't because not everyone is captained by fear.

Some of us are guided by hope and faith.

For others, it's fear and resentment.

So now, moment of truth. Ask yourself, “Which one are you?”

Do it privately. Be brave. It's the High Holydays...

Time's up—and we know the answer: it's both.

The one we lean to, the one that predominates in us,  
may be determined by our cultural makeup,  
it may be determined by our emotional makeup,  
it may seem hard wired.

But the Torah tells us it is a matter of choice.

“See I have set before you this day, life and good, death and evil.  
Choose life that you and your descendants may live.” (Deut. 30: 19)

Hope and fear are like the two ends of a seesaw.

When hope and faith are up, fear goes down.

When fear is high, hope and faith are low.

And all of us are along for the ride.

When the future seems bright, say we’ve just closed a big deal,  
we have more faith, we’re more hopeful; it’s only natural.

When we haven’t had a win in a while, our faith is challenged,  
we’re more fearful—maybe even afraid.

And if people around us are hopeful but we are not, we may be resentful—  
and that’s the gateway drug to hate.

When hope outweighs fear, in individuals and in society—  
there is less need to blame—anyone else.

When individuals or a society are struggling,  
there can be desperate need to blame.

We call that scapegoating. It too is as old as the Bible.

It is easy to do and it can put a lot of distance  
between us and our own shortcomings.

We’ll go a long way to get some of that.

But to turn our own ship around takes guts.

To say I need to make myself better—

and I’m the only one who can do it—takes guts.

To admit that I’m not all that I can be or should be—takes guts.

To say I may be the reason this enterprise is failing—takes guts.

To say I need to get to a 12 step program—takes guts.

To say that I may be as responsible for the state of this relationship  
as my partner is—takes guts.

To say I haven’t got time for pity, I need to make myself over—takes guts.

Like the Israelis did after the Holocaust, to cite one example.

But to point at the Other and say “it’s all his/her fault” takes no guts at all.

Like some of Israel’s enemies, to cite one example.

The fact is we’re either going to push ourselves up on that seesaw with hope.

Or we’re going to plummet down into fear—

and be ripe for the hatred that too easily follows.

“How Could People Do This?”

Sometimes it’s the path of least resistance.

Collect enough resentment, fear and hatred,

and you can build a pretty good bomb.

But you still need someone to light the fuse and throw it.

And it's an amazing thing—that someone is never hard to find.  
Sometimes the bomb thrower is a lone wolf, like Cain.

Other times there's a pack of wolves with a leader.  
That shouldn't surprise us.

The Holocaust wouldn't have happened without one.  
Leaders of wolf packs, pretty much by definition, do everything they can  
to increase their power. And they are not always ethical about it.  
This example may be a bit dated, but it makes the point.

Remember Governor George Wallace of Alabama? Many of us do.

If you don't, you may know him from history.

He was the one who stood in the doorway of the University of Alabama  
in an effort to keep black students out. From there he shouted,  
“Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever!”  
To his credit, later in life he repented. He recognized how wrong he was and  
made at least some amends with the African-American community.

He eventually told the story of how he became such a militant.

He claims he didn't start out that way.

But, he said, campaigning around the state,  
trying to make a name for himself,  
talking about the everyday stuff of politics,  
schools and taxes and roads and bridges  
people would look at him glassy eyed.

But, he said, “When I started going on about the [N-word],  
they'd stomp their feet!”

It didn't take him long to realize where the path to power lay—  
and he rode it for all it was worth.

No doubt he bears a share of the blame for the murders and other savagery  
he helped inspire. For that there is no atonement in this world.

Wallace was not the first, nor the last, nor the worst demagogue in human history.

And I'm sorry to pick on his corpse after all these years,  
but he is a legitimate example of those who fan the flames  
of hatred, fear and resentment in order to gain power.

He's also a good example of how people will follow almost anyone  
who tells them that it's someone else's fault.

Hating someone else doesn't make your problems go away.

We'll eventually have to face them, with interest.

“How Could People Do This?”

Because in the meantime, it feels so good.

This summer. the President of Turkey, immediately after the coup attempt there,  
purged tens of thousands of people.

Some people claim the coup was his version of the Reichstag fire,  
a ruse to justify a crackdown. I don't know.

But they had lists of people to arrest prepared in advance and they started the roundup within hours.

The victims may have been democratic opponents, but they were also loyal citizens: judges, generals, teachers, journalists, doctors, more.

We have heard or seen little of them since.

I've chosen this example because I have Turkish friends.

But similar things have happened in Russia. And a number of other countries where civil rights safeguards are not what they are here.

Their populations have largely acquiesced, either in assent or in fear.

And what about us?

We Americans and we Jews? We, who've seen this movie before?

We who say that remembering the Holocaust is essential.

Have we taken the path of least resistance too?

While borders close, while lifeboats disappear beneath the waves, while refugees by the millions flee for their lives while smugglers exploit human desperation for profit—and little regard for human life.

We've watched—and with precious few exceptions, little more.

“How can people do this?” People can do this when no one says,

“Stop doing it.” We'll talk about that more next week.

We may not be the perpetrators,

but that does not absolve us of responsibility.

It is our job to do what is right in God's eyes.

To take the challenging path, not the easy one.

To become a source of blessing, not to abet a curse.

As we learn in the Mishnah,

“It is not for us to complete the work,

but neither are we free to abstain from it.” (Avot 2: 21)

The Prophet Malachi saw us as

children of one Father, of the One God who created us all. (after Mal. 2: 10)

In this vision, none of us are “Others.”

We know we don't always see it that way.

But unless they are trying to kill us, that is the way to see it.

If we can take such teachings to heart

a little more each day, week, month and year

it may help keep resentment, hatred and fear, and all that they lead to, at a safer distance.

“How Can People Stop This?” That's another question.

But it begins with that understanding.

May we have the strength and courage

to make more of it our own in the year ahead.

We'll continue next week.

*L'shana Tovah.*