

# *Shmini*

## *Good, Evil, Combinations, and Distinctions*

**W**hy is it that otherwise kind, gentle, caring people can turn into monsters who are willing to kill innocent people for the sake of their ideas? What is it that can cause seemingly religious and ideologically committed people to become so filled with the righteousness of their cause that they can suppress all their feelings of humanity, pity, and compassion and do the most horrible acts? This is not something new. Since time immemorial, mankind has been plagued by people who, in order to further their ideals, have been willing to kill innocent people.

We see this often when different religions or ideologies clash. In the name of religion or ideology great horrors have been perpetrated on mankind. We have seen this even in our own generation, how kind, caring, committed people can, because of their strong ideological commitment, sacrifice millions of people for the sake of their ideology. Look at what the Communists did, all in the name of humanity. For the sake of Communism 20 million people were killed. Hitler, for the sake of his ideology, enlisted all the instruments of state in order to kill six million of our people. People who are committed to ideals, it seems, are very dangerous. It is very difficult to live life without ideals. Without ideals we are empty inside and easy prey for alcoholism and drug addiction, but it seems that when we are filled with ideals these ideals can cause us to become merciless killers.

America is founded on the premise that government and ideology must never mix, whether it is religious ideology or any other ideology, because if they do, then the government will eventually seek to cram this ideology down the people's throats and only hatred and bloodshed can ensue. The event which shaped the consciousness of this country most was the Thirty Years War in Europe between 1618 and 1648. During the Thirty Years War, which took place primarily in Germany between Protestants and Catholics, almost all the male population of Germany was killed. They were all killed in the name of G-d. The enlightened thinkers of Europe then decided that it was religion which was the cause of all war and they sought to limit the influence of religion throughout society. The twentieth century has proved that it is not religion which is the cause of all war but a

blind allegiance to any ideology, whether it is religious or not, which leads to war. World War I was not fought in the name of G-d. It was fought in the name of nationalism. There was actually no reason for World War I except for national pride. World War II was fought over Naziism, a terrible ideology which sought to murder our people and to divide humanity by races and sub-races. The Cold War was fought over Communism, which sought to make man the complete tool of the state. It seems that man cannot live with ideals and he cannot live without ideals. If he lives with ideals, he is liable to become a hard-hearted killer. If he lives without ideals, he is liable to become an alcoholic or drug addict who has no sense of family responsibilities or national responsibilities and whose pleasure seeking ethic will lead to many diseases and an early death. We seem to be caught on the horns of a dilemma. We are damned if we do and damned if we don't.

In America we have chosen basically to live without ideals. There are not set American national ideals. Our sole national ideal is the pursuit of happiness. We are afraid of ideologues in America. In American politics any time an ideologue and a crook run against each other, the crook will always win. We are not afraid of crooks. In some ways it is much better to have a crook as your political representative because, although he may bend the law here and there to his benefit, he will always serve you and try to get what you want done because he wants to get reelected. An ideologue, on the other hand, will try to cram his agenda down your throat and may pass laws which severely restrict which you want to do. This means, of course, that in America we really are not serious about solving the problems of alcohol, drugs, family abandonment, poverty stricken children, etc. We do not want to give the government the tools or the ideology to solve these problems because the government may use these tools to severely limit what we want to do. America's approach has always been to put up with crime and family breakups and random violence rather than to risk setting up or encouraging ideological groups who may come into conflict and who could even create civil war in this country. The only time that this country tried to impose an ideological commitment on all its people without a wide consensus, civil war broke out. The civil rights movement in our own day was successful because there was a wide consensus throughout the country, especially among the power elite in the south, that these

measures had to be taken.

In Judaism we believe that we can wed power and ideology. We believe that it is possible to be filled with ideals and still maintain our humanity. That is the purpose of Jewish learning. In Jewish learning we learn how to make distinctions, and it is crucial that we learn how to make distinctions. We learn that we must be devoted to our religion but that we cannot take the law into our own hands with very few exceptions, *i.e.*, unless we actually see a murderer pursuing someone to kill him and, even then, if we can wound him instead of kill him, we should. The laws of *kashruth*, which we learn in the *Torah* portion *Shimini*, especially speak to this issue. The laws of *kashruth* teach us many things on many levels. *Kashruth* teaches us, first of all, that what we eat counts. The foods we eat have an effect upon us. This is what modern medicine has taught us, too. Eating a high fat diet, *i.e.*, cheeseburgers, is not good for you. Eating animals high up in the food chain can cause you to ingest very dangerous chemicals. Keeping the laws of *kashruth* has also taught us, by and large, how to control our appetites. There have been very few Jews in the past who were alcoholics or drug addicts because since birth, they have been taught that they could not eat or imbibe anything they want to and, even those things that they could eat, they could only eat at certain times.

*Kashruth* also teaches us many other basic principles of life. One of the basic principles of *kashruth* is the prohibition against mixing milk and meat, which we learn in three different places in the *Torah*. The rabbis say that because we learn this prohibition three different places in the *Torah*, this means that we can have no benefit whatsoever from this mixture of milk and meat. We cannot sell it to a gentile or even give it away. We must destroy it. This law is a very strange law because it applies only to *kosher* meat and *kosher* milk. If the meat or milk is non-*kosher* we, of course, cannot eat it, but we could benefit from it.

This is indeed strange. However, if we think about it carefully, we will see that what Judaism is teaching here is something very important, that the highest form of treifkite is not the treifkite which comes from a non-*kosher* product, like from a pig or from a shellfish or from a non-*kosher* killed *kosher* animal, but the highest form of treifkite comes from

two *kosher* products which are used in the wrong way. Great evil comes into the world not from things that everyone recognizes as evil. We all know that alcoholism and drug taking are evil. We all know that robbing a bank is evil, that attacking people in order to rape them or steal from them is evil. The problem of recognizing evil comes when we take two good things which should not be combined but which we do combine. Then it is very hard to recognize that they can produce the greatest evil of all. When people combine religious principles or any ideological principle in the wrong way, they create the greatest evil possible. When the Germans combined the principle of supporting a democratically elected government, which Hitler's government was in the beginning, with the concept of what is good for Germany must be good for the world, they allowed Naziism to triumph in their country. When Baruch Goldstein combined the idea that the government of Israel was not protecting its citizens adequately in Hebron with the idea that if there is nobody to do the job then you must do it, he ended up by killing indiscriminately innocent people at prayer. He did a terrible deed, one which must be condemned in the strongest terms. He did it because he failed to make the correct distinctions. Israel has an army. If the Arabs would have started a pogrom, as he feared, in Hebron the army would have stepped in. What's more, if he were dissatisfied with the government's protection, he had all sorts of democratic means which he could have used to bring his case before the people. He did not make the correct distinctions. As we learn in the *Torah* portion *Shimini*, we have to learn *L'Havdeel*, to make correct distinctions between the pure and impure if we are to lead holy lives and not cause great evil to come into the world.

In the *Torah* portion *Shimini* we also learn about two other people who failed to make correct distinctions. These were the two eldest sons of Aaron who on the very day of the dedication of the Tabernacle brought strange fire to G-d. Nodov and Avihu took the law into their own hands, the rabbis say, and that was why they were struck down. The day of dedication had come. Moshe had taken his brother Aaron into the Tabernacle to show him that he was now the high priest. He had come out and blessed the people, but the fire from G-d did not come down to ignite the sacrifices. Moshe and Aaron went again into the Tabernacle. They came out

again and blessed the people. The fire of G-d still did not come down. Nodov and Avihu decided they had to take the law into their own hands and light the fire themselves. Perhaps G-d was not present among the Jewish people or perhaps G-d did not want to heed the sacrifices of Moshe and Aaron. They questioned Moshe and Aaron's leadership and, according to the rabbis, they said, "When will these old people die so that we can take over because we know best." The rabbis say that they felt that they had to step in and take over from G-d, too.

G-d has given us all certain responsibilities, but we must always work through our judicial system, as decreed by the *Torah*. No cause can be so just that we can kill innocent people. There is a G-d in the world, and He will take care of malefactors. We must work through our justice system, even though certain criminals may escape and certain terrorists' actions may not seem to be punished. Eventually, G-d will take care of the evil people. It is not our job to seek vengeance. G-d is the G-d of vengeance, not we. We must be very careful never to combine two good principles in a wrong way; otherwise, we will end up by creating horrible evil.

Let us all hope and pray that we will learn the lessons of our religion clearly and carefully. No rabbinic group has ever endorsed ideas such as "since other peoples do it, we must do it, too." We Jews know that we have to live by a higher standard. That's what our concept of the chosen people means. Let us all hope and pray that we will truly learn the lessons of our religion, lessons which are taught, not only from the pulpit, but which are also taught by the way we live. *Kashruth*, *Shabbos*, and our holidays all teach us the same thing. We have to learn how to make distinctions so that we will never combine two kosher ideas in such a way that will cause us to either have the will or the desire to commit evil deeds. It is important that we always examine our educational system to make sure that our students never feel that they can justify the deeds of a man like Baruch Goldstein. By all accounts, he was a wonderful doctor who treated Jews and Arabs alike. Unfortunately, something snapped in him, and he combined principles in such a way that he produced great evil and no good whatsoever. Let us all pray that this will happen no more. Amen.