

Erev Rosh HaShanah

September 20, 2017 – 1 Tishre 5778

This summer, I found myself mesmerized in the movie theater as I watched “Wonder Woman.” Truthfully, I found the movie very inspiring: it reflects the best that each and every one of us, as human beings, should aspire to be: fearless, compassionate, willing to see and understand “the other”, and yet also a warrior who demands justice for those who cannot help themselves.

At its core, it is a story about good versus evil.

As I watched the movie, I could not help but think to myself: I have to talk about this in one of my sermons for the High Holy Days. It compelled me to think about what it means to be good in the face of evil. Certainly, we can find some answers in Jewish tradition... and perhaps Wonder Woman – Diana – can teach us as well.

Perhaps a good place to begin would be – *B’reishit* – at the beginning. As Rosh HaShanah commemorates the creation of the world, it is fitting to turn to the book of *B’reishit* – Genesis, and as we do so, we find that Genesis begins with an account of the ordering of our world. It begins by describing reality as it is. Our myth of origins is not built upon a clean slate. Heaven, earth, darkness, deep – these are seen as primal elements by the ancient Biblical mind. And these are also reflected in other cultures of the ancient Near East – and echoes of these stories are found in other parts of our Bible, such as the book of Psalms, and Isaiah, and Job. In these other accounts, God battles personified forces of chaos and evil: the great fish Leviathan, the sea monsters, and perhaps even the

goddess of the chaotic waters whose name was Tiamat – which might even be connected to the Hebrew word *Tahom* – which means waters of the deep. What is notable about our Genesis story is what is missing – the story of creation through combat and the overcoming of real foes. Our story of creation is pristine – and a new way of presenting the origin of our orderly world. God merely speaks – and the orderly world comes to be.

What is very interesting is that the Bible juxtaposes two creation stories side by side. In Genesis 1, God creates quietly – speaking light into being, separating waters from the earth, setting the sun and the moon and the stars in their place in the heavens. There is no opposition, no real resistance. In Genesis 2-3, God, as it were, rolls up God’s sleeves, and forms Adam from the dust of the earth and breathes the breath of life into him. The first story is majestic... and the second is human-centered.

In her book: The Quest for God and the Good, author Diana Lobel sums it up this way:

“The first Creation story concludes with the declaration in Genesis 1:31 that God saw everything that He had made “and indeed it was good.” This verse gives us a key to the story as it tells us something about the goodness of the created order. Yes, we are aware of the frightening dimensions of our world, and at times it might seem like our world is descending into pure chaos. But the world as a whole is not simply a mass of anarchic forces. At the heart of reality is goodness.

“What is good about Creation? God looks over all that has been created and is pleased; all is in place. The world is orderly and intelligible. Light and darkness, day and night, heaven and earth, sea and dry land – these distinctions

give comfort and intelligibility to the world we know. Anthropologists note that this is also the function of human ritual. Humans are uneasy with perceived chaos and disorder; ritual allays that discomfort, echoing and reinforcing our sense of balance in the world...”

Thus, the Bible is asserting that there is a fundamental relationship between order, harmony, goodness, and God.

You might have noticed that the word “evil” does not occur in the first chapter of Genesis. The word first occurs in chapter 3 in the context of the “Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil”. In chapter 1, we find darkness on the face of the deep and chaotic waters, but no evil. Everything in the world that God has created is seen as good.

The second creation story demonstrates that relationship is a primary feature in our world: relationship and personality are just as natural to our world as the domains of earth, sky, and water.

While the first creation story portrays a transcendent God Who creates by the power of the spoken word, thereby shaping elements that are already present into the order that we know now, the second creation story gives us a God inextricably connected with humanity, and informing the human and moral dimension of our order. Both stories are concerned with the realities of life: darkness and light, pain in childbirth, the difficult toil by which we sustain ourselves on this earth.

Let’s return to the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil... It is possible that the phrase “good and evil” is a merism – a statement that includes not just a pair

of opposites, but everything in between. Thus, “good and evil” can mean knowing all things: the good and the evil – and everything in between... Or the phrase can mean moral knowledge, as in “knowing good from bad” – moral discernment. Eating from the tree is not in itself a moral evil. However, once the humans – Adam and Eve – exercised their free will and ate from the tree – they found out that actions have consequences.

We consider things evil because we judge them from a moral perspective. And morality enters with free will and human responsibility. It is our gift to use as we might. The Rabbis taught that we can raise ourselves to the height of angels or lower ourselves to the level of beasts. Our human world is a realm in which we can learn and grow, one which offers the joys and the pains of a fully engaged life.

But, what happens when we lower ourselves to the level of beasts? Enter Wonder Woman...

As Sheerly Avni wrote this past summer in the Forward:

“You all know the score: Diana [raised on a beautiful hidden island] safely protected from all the violence in the world, saves Steve Trevor from drowning and discovers that out there in the world of man, the War to End All Wars has been raging for years. The deaths and horrors of World War 1 clearly must mark the return of the Greek war god Ares, and so Diana sets out to save mankind...”

In a scene reminiscent of King Arthur, just as the young Arthur drew out the special sword that was set in a stone to take his place as king and head of the knights of the Round Table, so too, Diana breaks into the heavily guarded armory

to steal the sword known as the “God Killer” and easily extracts it, before she goes to Europe to help save humanity from the incoming threat...

Before leaving on her mission, Diana is told that if she goes forward with what she plans, she may never be accepted or find her way back. Her response, “Who will I be if I stay?” The famous teaching of Hillel echoes in this statement: If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But, if I am only for myself, what am I? And... if not now, when?

Who will I be if I stay? On my island, everything is in perfect order. Out in the larger world, there is disorder and I feel that I must help to make a difference and bring everything back into order.

... Diana believes that all she needs to end the war is to find Ares and kill him so he can stop corrupting the hearts of men, who would be good and kind without his malevolent influence... Diana is torn between her mission to promote peace and her own warrior upbringing, she fights evil while hoping to unlock the potential of a humanity that seems to have a desire to destroy itself...

... The film’s most moving final confrontation is actually not between Diana and Ares, who does finally reveal himself, but rather between Diana and Dr. Maru – the movie’s least developed but most interesting villain. Dr. Maru is a ruthless German chemist whose face is half covered by a mask, and twisted into a pained grimace. (Elena Ayala, the Spanish actress who plays her, is in real life a dark-eyed beauty who not coincidentally looks quite a bit like the actress who plays Diana – Gal Gadot – herself... and doesn’t this just cry out for us to reflect on our own selves – how we can make good choices... and bad ones...?)

Like Diana, Dr. Maru was born beautiful and brilliant, but somewhere along the way her spirit and face were disfigured. We first see the human scars behind the monster mask at the same time as Diana... Dr. Maru is a twisted, mangled genius, and Diana won't really become Wonder Woman until she looks Maru in the eye and sees her, too, as worthy of mercy. In a world that is filled with disorder and chaos, her ability to give Dr. Maru the opportunity for *teshuvah* – to atone for what she has done – takes your breath away. Diana chooses to allow for the good, literally, in the face of evil.

Wonder Woman may have a Greek name but she learns a very Jewish lesson: humanity was born good, with a terrible capacity for evil. The fight is to free that which is good, while curbing that which is evil. It is not a simple task.

I would love to be able to stand before you this evening and celebrate the order and goodness in our world. Truly, there is much to celebrate.

And, truly, there is so much disorder. And choices made that have not been for the good. Choices that do not reflect the importance of our relationships with each other.

As we stand together this Erev Rosh HaShanah evening at the beginning of the new year, may we find the Wonder Woman in each us.

May we, too, strive to be fearless, compassionate, willing to see and understand “the other”, and yet also a warrior who demands justice for those who cannot help themselves... doing our part to bring out the order and goodness in our world.

L'Shanah Tovah U'Metukha – Wishes to you all for a good and sweet year.

