

YOM KIPPUR DAY
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INTRODUCTION

Many years ago, when I was a congregational rabbi in Miami, I had as a congregant a fascinating man. His name was Dr. Brian Weiss, and he is a psychiatrist. He came to visit me in my study during the first days of my rabbinate there, and we remained friends during my tenure there and afterwards.

Brian was a frequent guest on daytime television talk shows as a result of a book that he wrote. It was called *Many Lives, Many Masters*. Perhaps some of you have heard of it, or even read it.

The premise of the book is that each of us has had many incarnations before this life, and many of our problems in this life go back far beyond our birth and the influence of our parents, or any other factors that we may have experienced.

In our first conversation, he was suspected that I would be skeptical, so he brought me evidence from Jewish sources, some from the Kabbalah, to show me that he had not fallen off an intellectual cliff.

My skepticism never left me, even though our friendship continued.

Once I invited him to speak to the congregation in an Adult Education program on death and dying on a Sunday morning. We had a large attendance, which remained rapt through the

entire talk. After the talk, he answered the many questions of those attending.

One woman, whom I knew, and at the funeral of her husband I had officiated. She related the following experience. She said that after her husband's death, she had re-arranged a group of knick-knacks on the mantle piece in their living room. And every morning, they returned to the original places when her husband was alive. She told Dr. Weiss that this recurred many times. Could Dr. Weiss offer an explanation?

"Yes," he said. "The spirit of your husband is still in the house, and you need to tell him that it is time to leave."

Frankly, I could not believe my ears. I was absolutely stunned. And then I began to do some reading. At the intellectual bastion of the Hebrew Union College, where rationalism reigned supreme, I had never heard or read anything about the ideas of demonology that pervaded Jewish thinking in the Talmudic Age and in the Middle Ages.

Demons, especially Evil Demons were central of Jewish – and Christian – life during these times.

The presence of Evil was a great concern to our ancestors, and they built an entire subculture on their desire to rid the world of Evil influences.

I. WHAT OUR ANCESTORS BELIEVED

Our Jewish teachers in every age were eager to understand the world. They lived in a pre-scientific age. They did not have the tools that we have today.

They tried to understand the origins of the world. They had never heard of the Big Bang theory, nor did they know anything about evolution.

In their quest to understand who we got on this earth, they invented stories of creation, which sought to explain the origins of our species, why there are men and women, how children are born, how the heavens and the stars and the oceans came to be.

Their tales were insightful and quite clever. Based on the information that was available to them, they were wonderful.

They were very eager to understand the presence of Evil in the world. What could explain terrible things that happened to people? What caused bad things to happen to innocent and essentially good people? And how could they contain the evil, or at least cancel out its presence?

They – and their Christian neighbors – invented an entire system of demons, who resided everywhere. The evil demons resided in homes, dark forests and in other unexpected places.

For example, Jews and Christians were eager to understand why new born children would die. They came to believe that Lilith was at fault.

Who was Lilith? According to legend, Lilith was Adam's first wife. She left him after a quarrel. The angels attempted to make her return to Adam, but she refused. She said: "I was created to weaken boys during their first eight days, and girls till their twentieth day."

All sorts of incantations were developed to keep Lilith at bay, and to reduce her influence.

Our ancestors were very conscious of the presence of the Evil Eye. The Evil Eye needed to be destroyed. A child going to school for the first time needed to be protected by a cloak. Prayers and blessings needed to be recited in a certain prescribed way to make certain that no opening for given for the *Ayin Hara*, the Evil Eye, from entering

Evil was an omnipresent danger. Religious rites needed to be performed in an exact manner. Demons were always present, and would enter our world given the least opportunity.

II. DEMONS LIVE IN OUR WORLD

The Chinese custom of Fung Shui is a concept of positioning our homes in such a way that the good spirits might enter it, and the evil spirits kept out.

How many sophisticated men and women of our time use Fung Shui when building a new home, or redecorating? Hey, what's wrong with this? It may even work!! They might say.

Magical ways of dealing with evil are more present in our lives that we might, at first blush think.

In Medieval times the Teutonic goddess of fertility was worshiped by women. One of the ways that women prayed for her positive influence, was to offer her their braided hair. A result of this concept is the braided challah, which we use at our Shabbat dinners.

Evil was kept at bay. Good demons were encouraged to prevail in our homes on the Sabbath.

Diana and I live in a very large apartment building with hundreds of apartments. Many of the entry doors to these apartments are decorated by a mezuzah. The mezuzah is nothing more or less than an ancient amulet, designed to keep Evil away from our homes. Do we think of mezuzahs as a protection from Evil, or perhaps merely a way of identifying ourselves as Jews.

And certain *mezuzot* hung around people's necks, or stars of David or "*Chais*" are all throwbacks to the ancient notions that we must be protected from the regular presence of Evil demons that exist all around.

I don't think that any of us, sitting here this morning would easily accept the notion that *mezuzot*, or even *tefillin* (certainly another ancient amulet) would save us from evil influences in the world.

I think that all of us would agree that it is our personal and human responsibility to protect ourselves and our children from evil influences. I think that all of us, at one time or another in our lives, as acted – sometimes reluctantly – to see that our children or other members of our family are shielded from bad influences.

Indeed the Jewish tradition tells us that we are obligated to make the choice between good and evil. This is the core message of the High Holy Days. The core message is about individual responsibility.

Don't count on amulets, incantations or good thoughts. It's all about your behavior and mine in this world. We make the choices. It's up to us!

III. IF YOU WERE JOE PATERNO

One of the most egregious examples of giving in to evil took place not very far from here at Penn State University. When lots of people had choices to do what was right, they allowed evil to prevail. And there were no amulets to save them.

I don't know if Jerry Sandusky is Jewish or not. I presume he was not. But that has nothing to do with the issue.

Jerry Sandusky, for the young boys that he sexually assaulted over the years, was the personification of evil. He was as guilty as the Catholic priests who engaged in similar behavior through the decades.

While Sandusky certainly behaved badly, and he deserves to be punished, the real moral and ethical story here is about Joe Paterno.

Joe Paterno was a towering figure on the Penn State campus. Not only was he a winning football coach, but he was a major donor to the humanities programs at Penn State. His longevity is legend. He had every right to be known by the sobriquet "Pappa Joe."

All this makes the story worse.

Joe Paterno and his fellow administrators at Penn State knew for some time about what Jerry Sandusky was doing in the shower rooms at the Gym. They had many witnesses to his abuse of young boys. Time and again, they chose to turn the other way.

Were they afraid of bad publicity for the University? Were they embarrassed by Sandusky's behavior? They should have been.

But they had to choice to choose between good and evil. And they chose evil. They forgot their responsibility to the children who were abused.

The net result was Paterno's good name was tarnished for ever. The University, a fine academic institution, was blackened in the face of public opinion. All of the good that Paterno did – and it was very great – has been lost.

I understand that some students could not understand why "Papa Joe's" statue needed to be removed. Someone needs to explain to them that his monument was a monument to the triumph of evil over good.

Joe Paterno, by himself, and with his administration colleagues needed to help Sandusky, to stop child abuse in its tracks, and save the reputation of Penn State.

They failed. Evil prevailed, and they had the choice.

No amulet or good spirits can save them now.

CONCLUSION

My friend Brian Weiss helped many people to understand their own problems. Some were inherited from their parents; some were inherited from incarnations past.

But more than anything, we are free agents. Yes, bound by the past, but we have free will to choose between good and evil.

Yes, the situations in our lives will not be as earth shaking as those faced by Joe Paterno.

But we have the choice to do good, even in the face of great pressure.

Perhaps one of the most significant things we can learn from the Penn State case is that what could have been treated as a sad and piteous situation, had they acted in a timely and responsible manner, ultimately became a national horror.

In the end, the good that Joe Paterno did, could have lived after him. Alas, that is not the case.

May we learn and do.