

## The Swallower of People—Mattot 5782

July 29, 2022

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Last weekend, I took my daughter, Lindsay, to see *Dear Evan Hansen* on Broadway. At dinner afterward, we talked about the questionable morality of the main character, Evan Hansen.

Here's the moral question in a nutshell, in case you haven't seen it:

Evan Hansen is a socially anxious high school kid who doesn't have any friends.

When one of the boys in school, a troubled teen named Connor Murphy, commits suicide, Connor's parents come to believe that Evan was their son's best friend—and they press him to tell them something—*anything*—he can about him.

Although Evan had never been friends with Connor, he's overwhelmed by the parents' grief. So, he starts making up stories about what a great friend Connor was and all the fun things they did together.

Eventually, Evan's little white lie spirals out of control until he's constructed a completely fabricated version of Connor that captivates the world and transforms Evan into an international celebrity.

Lindsay told me that she did not like Evan Hansen at all. She thought he was a bad person.

After all, he made things up that weren't true, and he didn't come clean until he was caught. He caused a lot of harm to a lot of people, she said, and we shouldn't have any sympathy for him.

But Evan Hansen is obviously a complicated character. It's clear that he didn't start off *wanting* to deceive people or harm them. But eventually he found himself doing just that.

Why? Because he wanted friends; he wanted to be noticed; he wanted to feel part of a family; he wanted the girl. So, he *let* himself be carried away by it all. He could've stopped it, but he didn't *want* to.

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And then I read the story this week about the CFO at the Jewish day school Schechter School of Long Island: how he is charged with stealing more than \$8 million from the school and using the money to buy fancy homes and pay his daughter's college tuition.

And it makes me wonder: How do people *get* to that point?

- Was this man born evil? Did he wake up one day and decide, "I want to defraud the Jewish community out of millions of dollars?"
- Or was it more like Evan Hansen? Did it start in a less diabolical way and then spin out of control, with one small lie or misdeed demanding more and more and more just to cover his tracks?
- Did the wealth and the homes and the power intoxicate him so strongly that he lost his moral compass and just couldn't stop himself? Or was he just rotten to the core from the beginning?

In the end, of course, the crimes he is accused of are inexcusable.

If he's guilty, he not only broke the law; he violated the trust of the parents and children and countless others. He shattered the credibility of the institution and brought shame upon the Jewish community.

But how did he *get* to that point? How do any of these people—like Bernie Madoff, and Andy Fastow at Enron, and others like them—*get* to that point?

Our daily liturgy says "*Elohai n'shamah she-natata bi, t'hora hi*—My God, the soul you have given me is pure." And I believe that.

I believe that we are all born with a pure soul. I do not subscribe to the doctrine of original sin.

So, how do some people fall so far?

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In Parashat Mattot, our reading for this week, Moses goes off on the Israelites for an egregious sin they committed a couple of *parshiyot* back: the sin of Ba'al Pe'or.

Without going into details, their sin was a particularly grotesque form idolatry—an idolatry of extreme self-indulgence, whose outcome is outright debasement and humiliation. (See [Sanhedrin 64a](#).)

And it's not like the person who engages in this kind of idolatry doesn't *know* that it's self-indulgent and twisted, or that humiliation is the inevitable outcome. On some level, they *know*, but in the heat of the moment they can't *see* it.

Or they just don't care—and they jump into the abyss anyway.

It's like they've been captivated by something beyond their ability to control.

The Torah says the Israelites committed the sin of Ba'al Pe'or "because of the prodding of Bil'am" (Num. 31:16). Remember Bil'am—the mercenary prophet with the talking donkey? That guy.

Bil'am made them do it!

Really? I thought we Jews don't believe in that kind of thing.

We don't. But our sages *do* say we are all created with two inclinations: an inclination to good (the *yetzer tov*) and an inclination to evil (the *yetzer ha-ra*).

Actually, that's a misnomer: The *yetzer ha-ra* isn't *inherently* evil; in fact, the sages say it's actually "very good." But only if it's channeled in the right direction.

See, the *yetzer ha-ra* might be better understood as "drive." It's what pushes us forward and propels us to make things happen. It's our competitive instinct; it's what causes us to aspire and to achieve.

I think of it as *lifeforce*. The metaphor I use to describe it is *water*:

Water, of course, is essential. When it's channeled through canals and locks and dams, it gives life to the earth and to humanity. In fact, you can't have life without it.

But when there are no channels or canals, when there's nothing to direct or contain it, or when it becomes so overpowering like Hurricane Katrina and overtops the levees, water is utterly destructive. It floods everything and causes immense damage.

The *yetzer ha-ra* is the same. It's essential to life, but it has to be directed properly.

The commandments and principles and ethics of the Torah form the canals and boundaries that channel our drive toward good things.

But without sufficient boundaries and moral safeguards, the *yetzer ha-ra* will be uncontrolled and destroy everything in its path.

It's no wonder, then, that Moses says "Bil'am made the people sin!"

Bil'am's name literally means "the swallower of people." Symbolically, he's the *yetzer ha-ra* gone wild—drive, unleashed and uncontained; a force that, at a point, has become almost unstoppable.

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And that, to my mind, is what explains people like the CFO of Schechter.

It's not that the "devil made them do it."

It's that they started off small—maybe with a little white lie with the intention to help themselves or even help someone else, like Evan Hansen; or maybe something they *knew* was wrong, but they did it to save the stock price or get out of debt or satisfy the itch of greed "just this one time."

But as our sages say, "*aveirah goreret aveirah*"—one bad deed, no matter how seemingly small, leads to another, and then another, and then another. (Avot 4:2)

And at some point—maybe it's different for everyone—it spirals beyond what they ever imagined.

The *yetzer ha-ra* gains so much strength that it becomes Bil'am—a brutal and almost uncontrollable force that overtops the levees and overtakes the person, swallowing them up and everything they touch.

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The *yetzer ha-ra* is running wild in our world today.

And it's not just Schechter CFO David Ostrove.

- It's running wild in the mass shootings, wars, crimes against humanity, scams, frauds, opioids and fentanyl, human trafficking rings, public corruption, and so many other maladies.
- And, it's running wild in the venomous hatred we spew against our fellow human beings, in the discrimination against people who are different, in cyber bullying and social exclusion, in antisemitism and racism.
- Idolatries of self-indulgence, greed, lust, and degradation of other human beings for the sake of our own gratification.

In two weeks, we will observe Tisha B'Av, a day of mourning for the destruction of Jerusalem and the brokenness in our world.

The Talmud says Jerusalem was destroyed because of rampant idolatry, baseless hatred, abandonment of schoolchildren, neglect of social responsibility, the total absence of integrity and a complete lack of shame until their sins were found out. (Shabbat 119b)

The words of the prophet Jeremiah in this week's haftarah ring true today as they did back then: "Is this not caused to you by your forsaking Adonai your God at the time God leads you by the way?" (Jer. 2:17)

As it has been said by sages and philosophers across the centuries, we have exiled God from our lives. We have discounted the importance of Torah and ridiculed its teachings.

We have elevated self-indulgence and self-gratification above everything else.

For some, like David Ostrove, the impacts of this have been draconian; for others, they are more benign.

But collectively, it is wreaking havoc in our world.

The only way to rein in the *yetzer ha-ra* is to return to the ethics and moral principles and spiritual guidelines for living that we learn in the Torah and in other traditions that elevate our animal instincts toward the holy.

Nothing is inevitable or completely unstoppable, but the longer it goes unchecked the harder it becomes to change course.

It is within our power to redirect the *yetzer ha-ra*—both in our own individual lives and in our society generally.

And it's time to get to it, lest we wake up one day and find that all we hold dear has been swallowed whole.

Shabbat Shalom.