The Death of Sinwar and the Meaning of Evil
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Shabbat Sukkot 5785 / October 18, 2024

What are we to make of the news yesterday that the IDF has killed Yahya Sinwar, the Hamas leader and mastermind of the October 7 massacre?

Should we be happy about it? Yes.

Should we celebrate his demise?

Well, I've seen a number of posts on Facebook saying we Jews are not supposed to celebrate anyone's death, even our enemy's, because he was a human being, and we do not delight in the loss of any human life. So, instead, we're supposed to say "*yimach sh'mo*—may his name be erased."

I think that's fair enough. Every human being is an image of God in the world, so when any person dies, it represents a destruction of God's image, at least in some mysterious way.

And yet, while that sounds good in theory, just how comfortable are we with the idea that Yahya Sinwar reflected the image of God?

Yes, he was an innocent little baby once. He was someone's son and brother.

But does that make him a reflection of the divine image? I don't know; it feels a little too trite and simplistic to me.

I'd like to take the question a little more seriously. In order to do that, I think we need to talk about two issues—one: the nature of God; and two: the meaning of evil.

Now, these are obviously two of the biggest questions theology has occupied itself with for millennia, and not just in Judaism. I can't get too deep into them here, but there are a couple things I think I can say.

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So, first: the nature of God.

Speaking through the prophet Isaiah, God says, "*Yotzer or u'vorei choshech, oseh shalom u'vorei ra*—I form light and create darkness / I make peace and create evil." (*Isaiah* 45:7)

This statement suggests that God is the cause of *everything*—light and peace, as well as darkness and evil.

The 20th-century Italian Rabbi Umberto Cassuto says this points to what he calls the "general harmony of the world."[1] By this, I think he means that good and evil are both parts of Creation—just like tress, water, mountains, wind, earthquakes, and tsunamis—that, taken all together, exist in balance with each other.

On this view, the world couldn't exist with only light and peace. Darkness and evil are also necessary parts of the design.

This dualistic, balancing-out dynamic of theology shows up differently in different religious traditions: In Christianity, there's God and the devil. In ancient Gnosticism, they believed in a hidden god who was good, while the material world was run by a god who was evil. Ancient Iranian Zoroastrianism similarly believed in a cosmic struggle between good and evil.

The Hebrew prophets like Isaiah were the first to advocate a radical monotheism in which the one God is the source of everything, including both good and evil.

But that presented a major theological problem: Is God good or evil, or both, or neutral?

And if we humans are created in God's image, what does that mean for us? Does it mean that bad people like Yahya Sinwar are just as much reflections of the image of God as are good people like Mother Teresa?

After all, we do read a prayer each morning that says, "*Elohai n'shamah she-nata bi t'horah hee*—God, the soul you have given me is pure"—the implication being that every human being is innately good.

That's beautiful in theory, but if God is truly good and creates us with a pure soul, how do we account for people like Sinwar?

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This takes us to the second question: What is the meaning of evil?

The 19th-century Eastern European scholar Malbim explains that evil is the absence of goodness, just as darkness is the absence of light.

In other words, in contrast to the Christian idea of a good God and an evil devil battling each other, there is no independent cosmic force called "evil" that battles against the cosmic force of "good." God is inherently good—and God's goodness is either present or it's not present in given situations, times, places, even people.

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One of the readings in our Sukkot morning service yesterday was a verse from the prophet Amos: "Hate evil and love good." (*Amos* 5:15)

Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra, one of the classic commentators of the Middle Ages, says Amos is telling us here not just to hate evil in the abstract, but actually to hate "evil people."[2] That's jarring.

Rabbi Megan, Stephanie, and I were talking about this at lunch yesterday. It seems uncomfortably out of character for our prayer book to say we should "hate" anything, let alone a human being made in the image of God.

So, how do we resolve this? Well, I'm not sure we can, fully. But we can try by putting some of these ideas together.

Let's start with Isaiah's monotheistic idea: There is only one God, and that God is the source of all that exists.

God is fundamentally good, and God created a world that is fundamentally good in its design.

Part of that design, though, includes the potential for goodness to be absent sometimes and in some people.

How does that happen?

Well, as Cassuto explains it, God gave human beings free will to choose good or evil.[3] To choose evil, which is possible, is not the same thing as being *created* evil, which is not possible.

To choose evil, rather, means to banish goodness from your life—maybe not in every respect, but in the preponderance of your actions.

Thus, we might say that Yahya Sinwar was created with a pure soul like everyone else, but he used his free will to banish the goodness from his life. His actions reflected not godliness or God's image, but rather a void of God.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel put it this way in 1943:

"The symbol of God [in the world] is *man, every man*. God created man in His image, in His likeness. …

But "The mark of Cain in the face of man has come to overshadow the likeness of God. There has never been so much guilt and distress, agony, and terror. At no time has the earth been so soaked with blood."[4]

Though Heschel wrote these words as the Nazis were murdering Jews in the Shoah, the same could be said of what Sinwar and Hamas have wrought in our own time.

God created Yahya Sinwar like everyone else: pure and with the potential for goodness. But, by ordering the murder and kidnapping and rape and torture of thousands of Israelis and Palestinians; by terrorizing and oppressing the people he was charged to protect; by zealously sacrificing men, women, and children to a nihilistic and genocidal cause—Sinwar banished God from his personality, desecrated the divine image in others, and obscured God's presence in clouds of darkness.

As such, he made himself into an "*adam ra*—an evil man."

His death is a benefit to the world. We should celebrate the fact that he is no longer here to wreak these horrors on humanity anymore.

At the same time, we should mourn the fact that a human being, created in God's image, chose to destroy that image in himself and in so many others.

Now that he has passed from the scene, it is my prayer that the One who forms light and makes peace will prevail.

1 Cassuto to *Gen.* 6:5, commenting on God's statement at the conclusion of the Creation that "it was very good," and the contrast with the statement at *Gen.* 6:5 that God saw "every plan devised by the human mind was nothing but evil all the time."
2 Ibn Ezra comment to *Amos* 5:15. Ibn Ezra states the verse refers to "*adam ra*—an evil man."
3 See Cassuto, *Gen.* 6:5
4 Heschel, *Man's Quest for God*