

The Complicity Trap

Rabbi Sid Schwarz
Adat Shalom Reconstructionist Congregation, Bethesda, MD
Kol Nidre 2019

Because it is Kol Nidre, it seems appropriate to start with a confession. But my confession will be made much easier based on an informal poll of the room: How many of you read Superman comic books when you were growing up? My confession: At the age of 10, I avoided books like the plague and virtually all I read were Superman comic books.

Now in Superman's universe there is a planet called Bizzaro in which everything is the reverse of how it should be. Beauty is hated; ugliness is revered; it is a crime to make anything perfect. The planet itself is not round, but a cube. And everyone's behavior, at least by earthly standards, seems to be insane.

Now my parents thought that I was totally wasting my time reading Superman comic books. Imagine the joy I now feel that I can tap that experience to find a word that describes America in the year 2019. Bizzaro. A world in which tax policy is used to expand the gap between the rich and the poor; the Environmental Protection Agency bans the use of scientific evidence that suggests that our climate is in crisis; homeland security is advanced by separating immigrant children from their parents; and energy policy is being driven a commitment to increase the market share of the oil and gas industry when the rest of the world is trying to promote renewable energy. Welcome to Bizzaro world, USA.

One thing that seems to mystify even conservative leaning columnists is that so few prominent Americans are willing to challenge even the most absurd statements and actions of Donald Trump. This "Hear no evil; see no evil; speak no evil" phenomenon seems to afflict leading Republican office holders; business leaders; high profile clergy and more.

I now imagine a road sign that says: "Danger: Self-Righteousness Ahead". It is easy to start finger-pointing at all the "bad guys" on the other side of the aisle.

But before we get too smug and self-righteous about criticizing those with whom we may disagree, let's be clear. The behavior that I am describing here knows no political boundaries. It afflicts all of us. It is called complicity and we all fall into the complicity trap. "Complicity" is the association with or participation in a wrongful or unethical act. It comes from the same French word, *complicite*, as in the word "accomplice" but it is far more subtle. If you were an accomplice to a bank robbery, you would be breaking the law and subject to a legal penalty, likely jail time. Complicity is not illegal primarily because, using the language of our High Holyday liturgy, it is not an act of commission; it most often is an act of omission or inattention. **But I want to suggest during this season of repentance, that some of the greatest injustices of our time exist because of complicity. For every overt immoral or unethical action by an individual, the net result of that action is made worse by thousands of acts of complicity. Here, I would suggest, that none of us escapes culpability.**

Let's look at two examples, gender bias and the climate crisis.

I. The abuse of and ongoing gender bias affecting women

There are so many ways that our consciousness has been raised by the MeToo Movement about the abuse of women and ongoing gender bias in our society. In the high-profile cases, like Harvey Weinstein and Jeffrey Epstein, we know that hundreds of people were well aware of their behavior. Some were enablers but many more were simply silent in the face of men with money and power. Such complicity allowed the sexual abuse of women and underage girls to take place. But to highlight such cases takes us off the hook too easily.

A good 50 years after the feminist movement gave voice to the ways that women faced discrimination in so many facets of life, we still find many forms of gender bias in the workplace and beyond. In a recent study of over 7000 corporate executives appearing in the *Harvard Business Review*, it was found that women outscored men on 12 of 16 criteria determined to be critical to being successful leaders in the private and public sector. And yet, men continue to claim over 80% of CEO positions, women are consistently paid less than men for the same work, and women continue to face all kinds of gender bias and harassment in the workplace. Such inequities persist only because too many of us choose to remain silent, and thus complicit, in the perpetuation of the old boys' club that runs so much of our society.

Some 20 years ago I was responsible for organizing a panel of three speakers at a convention. My third invitation went to a man, the third man I was inviting. That man asked me who else was on the panel. When it turned out to be two other men, he refused the invitation. He challenged me to find a suitable woman to take his place, feeling that it was unethical to suggest, even if only by implication, that men were the only experts on the panel's topic. It was a lesson that I have taken to heart ever since. But what made the biggest impression on me was the integrity represented by that individual who refused to be complicit in perpetuating a system that continually puts men in the spotlight and consigns women to the shadows.

When I ask myself the question: Have I shown similar principle and courage to avoid being complicit in systems that perpetuate injustices not only towards women, but towards people of color, LGBTQ identified individuals or people who are differently abled? ... I fear that I come up way short. **I, myself, slide into the complicity trap, despite my best intentions.**

II. The Climate Crisis

A second example of how complicity works is the climate crisis. Even as evidence of global warming becomes more obvious by the day, we are moving backwards on constructive action to address the crisis. The US pulling out of the Paris Climate Accords signed in 2015 by 195 countries is but one of many examples.

On this day of reckoning, we are challenged to take some ownership of our own complicity on the climate crisis we are facing. Rabbi Fred has been a great teacher and role model for us on this issue, as recently as his sermon of last week, "Being Good Ancestors". Take note: Americans

are only 5% of the world population but we consume 24% of the world's energy. The lifestyles that we choose contribute to that number big time. Here are three concrete things every one in this room can act on:

- 1) Every utility company now offers options for consumers to acquire power from renewable sources. Make that choice for your own home even if it might cost a few more dollars a month.
- 2) Reduce the amount of meat and dairy in your diet and try to eat locally grown produce. The food industry is rapidly changing because of the changing eating habits of consumers. This will make a huge difference on our climate.
- 3) Even as the Trump Administration weakens fuel efficiency standards for the auto industry, you can choose to buy fuel efficient vehicles or electric cars.

On a macro level, the climate crisis needs to become one of the top three issues on which you vote for candidates for public office. When Al Gore ran for president in the year 2000, despite his record as a climate activist, he was convinced by his advisors not to make the environment a central feature of his campaign because the polling showed that it was not that important to voters. That has to change because public policy can change the climate habits of entire societies. Consider just three examples that put the US to shame:

- In Sweden, 99% of solid waste is recycled or turned into biogas;
- Germany has committed to become totally carbon neutral by the year 2050 and is passing legislation to reach that impressive goal;
- In Denmark, high taxes on cars has resulted in 60% of people commuting to work by bicycles.

This summer I stood on the spot in Stockholm where one, Greta Thunberg, began her weekly Friday protests in front of the Swedish Parliament for more direct action on climate change. She was only 15 years old when she started doing this in August 2018. In March of 2019, inspired by Greta's example, 1.4 million high school students from 112 countries left their schools to demand more action on the climate crisis. Thunberg was also one of the speakers at last month's UN Climate Summit. As an act of principle, she decided to travel to NY on a zero emissions boat instead of flying. Now, in what is being described as the Thunberg Effect, thousands of Europeans are forgoing air travel for trains to reduce their carbon footprint on the planet.

Greta Thunberg, age 16, proves that with enough commitment and social conscience, one can **avoid falling into the complicity trap.**

III. The Price of Complicity

Jews, more than most, should know the price of complicity because we have paid that price in the not too distant past. Hitler's final solution could not have succeeded to the extent that it

did without massive complicity all around the world. There is considerable documentation of the complicity of the Poles aiding and abetting the Nazis in the roundup, deportation and killing of Jews. The Vatican was also complicit with the Nazis, making it extremely difficult for clergy of conscience to provide safe haven for Jews during the war. Even President Roosevelt faced accusations of complicity for refusing to authorize the bombing of train tracks to Auschwitz and putting harsh limitations on the admission of Jewish refugees to the United States. **No one can even quantify the number of Jewish lives that were lost as a result of these three examples of complicity.**

But just as with my examples of gender bias and climate change, in a sea of complicity there are always examples of courage and conviction. My summer travels put me in two places where such examples are celebrated today. In Stockholm there are two prominent monuments dedicated to Raoul Wallenberg. One is outside of the Great Synagogue and the other is in front of the Swedish Foreign Ministry. Wallenberg volunteered for the assignment to go to Budapest where he began to issue Swedish passports to Jews, helping them avoid deportation to Auschwitz. He also got funding to rent 32 buildings in Budapest which he declared Swedish territory and thus, exempt from Nazi edicts. All told, Wallenberg was reported to have saved the lives of some 10,000 Hungarian Jews. At the end of the war, Wallenberg disappeared, apparently captured and killed by the Soviet Army because they suspected that he was working with the CIA.

A similar story of courage and conviction is told in Denmark. The rescue of Danish Jewry is a remarkable story and is often held up as an example of what can happen when people stand up against tyranny. In 1943, a German diplomat in Copenhagen learned of plans by Berlin to deport the 7800 Jews of Denmark to concentration camps. He shared the information with the head of the Social Democratic party who then shared it with Rabbi Marcus Melchior, the chief rabbi of the Danish Jewish community. On the day before Rosh haShana, Rabbi Melchior told the community not to come to synagogue the next day but, instead, to leave their homes and go into hiding. Within 48 hours, most of Danish Jewry were being hidden by friends and neighbors. When the Nazis started their roundup, they found empty houses. Over the next several weeks, Sweden agreed to accept all Danish Jews to their shores and all kinds of boats were organized to ferry Jews from Danish fishing villages to Swedish territory. 7300 out of 7800 Danish Jews were rescued this way. Consider the contrast: Over 3 million Polish Jews perished during the Holocaust, abetted by the complicity of deeply anti-Semitic Poles. Yet only 102 Danish Jews were killed during the war. **This is the stark price that Jews paid for complicity.**

IV. The Jewish Moral Imperative

Few of us are faced with the life and death choices that confronted a Raoul Wallenberg or the Danish citizens who risked their lives to hide Jews. Yet we all know that our actions have consequences. Less obvious, is how our inactions have consequences as well.

Numerous Jewish texts instruct us to avoid the complicity trap that so often ensnares even the most well-intentioned people. Here are three:

1. In Deuteronomy ch. 22 the Israelites are commanded: *lo tuchal lehitalem*, “one is prohibited to turn away”. The original context is about the obligation to return lost property that one finds but the rabbis extended the law to an obligation to be responsive to any moral challenge. The rabbis were aware that human nature is pre-disposed to “look away” when faced with a difficult situation. They thus commanded: “Looking away is not an option.”
2. In Leviticus ch. 19 Jews are commanded: *lo taamod al dam reacha*, “you may not stand idly by while the blood of your neighbor is being shed”. This commandment speaks directly to the obligation to intervene when others are in danger. For Jews who have been involved in human rights work all around the world, this verse has been a clarion call.
3. Perhaps my favorite saying in this activist genre of Judaic teaching comes from Pirke Avot, the *Ethics of our Ancestors* (2:5). *B'makom shayn anashim, tishtadel lehiyot ish*, “In a place where there are no men, strive to be a man.” Of course, the literal, gendered translation is not only harsh on the ears but not fully expressive of the spirit of the Mishna. As many of you know, for more than 20 years I ran an organization called PANIM that was committed to teach Jewish youth about social activism through the prism of Jewish values. We put a far more accurate translation of this Mishna on the back of PANIM T-shirts that we gave to each participant. It reads: “In a place where there is no one of moral courage, strive to be courageous.” (hold up T-shirt).

V. The Eternal Dissent

Religions, not unlike nations, are at their best when they are able to influence their adherents to a certain ethos that then becomes an aspirational way to be in the world.

Kenya's national motto is “Harambee”, Swahili for “we all pull together”. Liberia, a country settled by former Negro slaves from America, has a motto that says: “Love of liberty brought us here”. In contrast, and this will be most meaningful to Star Trek fans, the motto of the evil Klingon nation is: “Capture and oppress as many people and planets as possible”. **Choose your motto!**

In graduate school I read a book by prominent Reform Rabbi, David Polish called *The Eternal Dissent*. He makes the case that the national ethos of the Jewish people is to be a dissenting people, asking the hardest questions of God, of each other, and of the nations in which they would reside. David Polish would suggest that the motto of the Jewish people is: “In matters of conscience, do not shrink from dissent.” This tendency, well documented in Jewish history, did not always make the Jews popular. Quite the contrary in fact. **But it did create in us a healthy resistance to the complicity trap. This dissenting nature is part of our Jewish legacy. Let's own it!**

The 18th century English philosopher, Edmund Burke said famously, “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good people to do nothing.”. Closer to our own tradition, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said: “Some are guilty; all are responsible”.

* *

My friends. We live in a time when much of what we cherish about this country is at risk. Democracy itself is being threatened. There are many who, fearful of the future and goaded by a strong, authoritarian leader, will dutifully conform and comply.

But Jews must take the road less travelled. It is the road of courage and conviction. We must have the moral tenacity to ask the hardest questions, to dissent and act on it when necessary and to resist the human tendency to fall into the complicity trap.

As we fully embrace the spirit of Yom Kippur, this day of atonement, reflection and resolve, may we have the strength to do what must be done. Let us take upon ourselves an 11th commandment: “Thou shall not be complicit.” To be a Jew at this moment in history calls upon us to speak truth to power. May we, in the year ahead, summon the courage to do just that.