

Sin: Deal with It!

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Flip Wilson, a trailblazing comedian in the 1970s, was best known for his oft-repeated punch line, “The devil made me do it.” Whatever his hilarious, wicked misadventure, Wilson would blame “the devil”

Judaism disagrees. No, we don’t have a “devil” in Judaism, but the reason that “the devil” didn’t cause us to sin is more profound and surprising: God endowed the world with sin.

God explains in the Book of Isaiah: “I am Adonai; and there is none else. I form the light and create darkness. I make peace and create evil. I am Adonai, who does all these things.”ⁱ The words are logical: If God is Creator, and creation includes evil, then God made evil, which includes sin. Still, we may indignantly ask, “Why would God create what God detests? Why would God cause us to suffer, and to inflict suffering on others?”

Could God prefer a world that includes sin? To consider that question, let’s look at our prayers for repentance.

When ancient Israelites worship the Golden Calf, Talmud envisions God “showing Moses the order of prayer, saying: ‘Whenever Israelites sin, let them recite this prayer and I will forgive them.’”ⁱⁱ That prayer is one that we often repeat during these High Holy Days: “Adonai, Adonai, a God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness...”ⁱⁱⁱ

That prayer begins with the Name of God, Adonai, not just once, but twice. For the sages, Torah cannot be redundant: Each repetition of the Divine Name must have a distinct meaning. The Talmud explains that the first usage of God’s Name describes God before we sin; the second, afterwards.^{iv}

Rabbi Ezra Bick explains: Adonai first intended to create a perfect world, which endured “until twilight on that first Shabbat [in the Garden of Eden] when Adam [and Eve] partook of the forbidden tree.” The second utterance of “Adonai” comes after sin enters the world. God must decide whether the creation should continue. Rabbi Bick writes: “After sin, [humanity] must be created anew, with God sustaining this new existence, which is now an existence with sin.” In the end, Bick concludes, “God wants the existence of sin, or, to put it more mildly, [God] wills the existence of a world in which sin is one of its components.”^v

Tal Becker, scholar and diplomat, taught these texts at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem this summer. He emphasized we do not reside in the world that ought to exist; we live in the real world.

A starting place for living in the real world is an acknowledgement that we will sin sometimes. Regrettably, we are compelled to sin from time to time, because the alternative is worse. Those choices are morally complex, and Judaism demands that we live by a moral code: We must confess and repent of our sins, even when obligated to commit them. And some acts are so evil that we must avoid them, literally at all cost.

Reexamining the Golden Calf is instructive. The Children of Israel accost Aaron the Priest, Moses's brother. Moses has been up on the mountain longer than they expected, and they fear that he won't return. Without Moses, the people have lost their link with God, so they demand that Aaron craft a molten image for them. Aaron's options aren't good. In keeping with ancient rabbinic teaching,^{vi} Becker imagines that Aaron makes a painful decision. With a rebellious bunch in front of him, Aaron chooses to live to fight another day. Better to build them a golden calf than let them kill him and build it themselves. By staying alive, he and Moses could raise them back to faithfulness at a later date. And they do.

Aaron chooses to sin because the cost of not doing so is too great.

We aren't left alone in the desert to contemplate an ineffable God or a golden calf. Real people in the 21st Century do, however, face vexing dilemmas.

A guest at our dinner table makes a racist remark. Do we sin by remaining silent in the face of racism, or do we sin by shaming a guest in our home?

You witness sexual harassment at work: Your boss imposes himself on a subordinate, implying that submission is part of the job description. You know that reporting is the right thing, but your job is at stake and you have reason to believe that your workplace doesn't have a safe reporting process. Do you sin against your coworker by declining to report? Or do you sin against your family by risking your job?

Tal Becker described some contemporary Eastern European governments that are ironically anti-Semitic and pro-Israel at the same time. Does the Israeli government work with the anti-Semites to move their embassies to Jerusalem, or does it cut off ties with a regime that denies the Holocaust? The decision is as easy for Prime Minister Netanyahu as it is for me, but we reach opposite

conclusions. For Becker, it's a tough choice, sinning against the Jewish State or against the Jewish people.

Sin is unavoidable in this all-too-real world. That's why we have Yom Kippur.

Thank God for Yom Kippur. No, this day isn't fun. Painfully, we repeat litanies of sin, fasting while we torture ourselves in contemplation of the pain we've caused over the last year. If we do Yom Kippur right, though, it can be liberating. Particularly when we've had to choose between one sin and another, we may find comfort in atonement's availability.

Some sins, though, are beyond the pale, even when the alternative is another sin.

At bleak moments in Jewish history, our sages faced real live "Sophie's choices" of sin. Maimonides laid down the law: "Should a gentile arise and force a Jew to violate one of the Torah's commandments at the pain of death, one should violate the commandment rather than be killed."^{vii} The issue was not theoretical for Maimonides or his contemporaries. Still, he made exceptions: One should face death rather than transgress the prohibitions against idolatry, murder, and incest.^{viii}

Tal Becker employs these three exceptions to define sins that we should not permit to ourselves, no matter what the circumstances.

Idolatry may be understood in our day to be the moment when we stop struggling with moral compromise. When we view our own needs as so predominant that we don't even strive to do what is right, we have put ourselves in God's place. That is idolatry.

Murder, of course, is murder. Figuratively and morally, we also commit murder when we stop considering the humanity of other people. When we reduce immigrants to "animals" or Trump supporters to "a basket of deplorables," we have stolen other people's humanity, a sin akin to murder.

Actual incest, like murder, continues to plague our world in the 21st Century. The Hebrew term for incest – or, more broadly, prohibited sexual encounters – is *gilui arayot*, literally, "exposing nakedness." Every human being is clothed in the Divine image. Shedding that blessed garment, debasing ourselves to the point that we are no longer human, we expose ourselves as sinfully naked.

Becker's example: Thuggish Jewish youths who taunted a Palestinian family after their child was burned alive by Jewish terrorists.

This Yom Kippur, let us come to terms with the harsh reality that sin is part of this world as God created it. We all sin from time to time. Rarely, we sin because the only alternative is a greater sin. Yom Kippur is our opportunity to "deal with it." Let us confront the reality of sin by setting and adhering to limits beyond which we will never transgress. Let us acknowledge that life's complexity means that some sins can be avoided only by committing others. And then, let us be grateful, for our tradition has set aside this painful day, an annual invitation to free ourselves.

Amen.

ⁱ Isaiah 4:6-7.

ⁱⁱ Babylonian Talmud, Rosh Hashanah 17b.

ⁱⁱⁱ Exodus 34:6.

^{iv} Babylonian Talmud, Rosh Hashanah 17b.

^v Rabbi Ezra Bick, *In His Mercy: Understanding the Thirteen Midot*, Jerusalem: Maggid Books and Yeshivat Har Etzion, 2011. Excerpt provided by Tal Becker, Rabbinic Torah Seminar, Shalom Hartman Institute, Jerusalem, July 7, 2018.

^{vi} See, for example, Chizkuni, Exodus 32:2:1 and Daat Zkenim on Exodus 32:2:1.

^{vii} Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Foundations of Torah 5:1.

^{viii} *Ibid.*, 5:2.