



The Banality of Good and Evil

In this week, against the backdrop of the news of our time and the opening of the Book of Exodus, I've been reflecting on David Blumenthal's *The Banality of Good and Evil*, a book which would make it onto my desert island shortlist.

Blumenthal's book is an enquiry into how NOT everyone folded into the superficially attractive genocidal horror of Nazism. It's steeped in sociological and psychological investigations of the heroes of that bleak time – the righteous among the nations, the subjects of the Oliners' *The Altruistic Personality* and the like.

In this time, as we are being drawn, banally and otherwise, into accepting things that should call us to action in fierce opposition, Blumenthal's lessons are worth restating.

The central idea that emerges from Blumenthal's research is that heroes, bystanders and even villains don't emerge ready-formed. They are shaped by their experience, or lack thereof, of prosocial and antisocial values. This seems as true today as it was in the run-up to the Holocaust and – on this week in which we read of Pharaonic genocide and brave resisting midwives – in the time of the Exodus.

Blumenthal's call is that we – religious leaders, teachers, parents, humans of all kinds – teach and model what he identifies in powerful and moving lists as 'prosocial' actions and values. We need to discuss terms such as "inclusiveness, goodness, kindness, justice, fairness, law, integrity, virtue, uprightness, caring, protest, resistance, humanness, and humanity. And the complements: exclusiveness, isolationism, ethnic superiority, injustice, oppression, prejudice, unfairness..."

We – all of us – need to be sensitive to the way that the language we use forms who we are and who we become. When we speak with "compassion, concern, affection, love, [and] care" we create one set of ripples that impacts on ourselves and those around us – we are drawn towards the prosocial. The reverse is also true.

We – Blumenthal counsels – must discuss the nature of social processes and provide proper instruction about social hierarchies; "Discuss the terms: authority, obedience, disobedience, resistance, autonomy, ingroup-outgroup, conflict management win-win,"

We must teach critical thinking and empathy. We must encourage and model the identification of our own, and others' feelings and emotions – are we feeling proud or brave or scared or tired.

Perhaps most of all we need to share the central idea that human beings are built towards doing good. We have, as humans, banally allowed awful things, but we have

also stood firm, resisted and thrived by being social, co-operating, celebrating difference. We can again. We must again.

These lists contain so many deeply Jewish ideas, values and concepts; Blumenthal aside from his philosophical and sociological academic efforts is also a Rabbi. Nowhere, in our sacred texts, are these ideas more powerfully modelled and articulated than in this week's Torah reading and in the weeks to come. This is important. These teachings can, and have, changed the world. These teaching are needed again, this time around. The challenges of the banality of how humans can be accustomed towards evil are not new. The solutions are not new either. We just need to pay attention and believe.

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi Jeremy