



Parshat Ha'azinu—Shabbat Shuvah
September 7, 2013—3 Tishri 5773
The Challenge of Complexity:
Reconsidering FDR and the Jews
by Rabbi Wesley Gardenswartz
Temple Emanuel, Newton, MA

Rabbi Sharon Brous tells the story of Paul Farmer, the Harvard doctor who was doing work in Haiti treating people who were suffering from AIDS and tuberculosis. Farmer relates that many of his patients believed that their illness was caused by magic spells cast by enemies. They therefore resisted taking his medicine. One woman, initially reluctant to take the antibiotics, finally consented. She was cured. Now that she saw the medicine work, Farmer asked her whether she still believed in sorcery? Absolutely, she said. I know who sent me my illness, I'm going to get her back! Well in that case, Farmer asked, why did you take the medicine? The woman paused, smiled, and then said: "Honey, are you incapable of complexity?"

Honey, are you incapable of complexity? This is a question I have been wrestling with as I think about one man in particular, FDR, President Franklin Roosevelt.

For much of my adult life, I have hated FDR, and for good reason. FDR knew the Holocaust was happening; saving the Jews was not something he particularly cared about; he did not bomb the tracks leading to the camps. He certainly could have done more.

Consider the events of October 6, 1943. The Shoah was then well under way. October the 6th that year was erev Yom Kippur, and a group of 500 rabbis marched on Washington to seek a meeting with the President. Here is what happened as related in the website of the David S. Wyman Institute for Holocaust Studies:

Two of the leaders of the march read aloud the group's petition to the president,

in Hebrew and English. “Children, infants, and elderly men and women, are crying to us, ‘Help!’” they read. “Millions have already fallen dead, sentenced to fire and sword, and tens of thousands have died of starvation...And we, how can we stand up to pray on the holy day of Yom Kippur, knowing that we haven’t fulfilled our responsibility? So we have come, brokenhearted, on the eve of our holiest day, to ask you, our honorable President Franklin Roosevelt...to form a special agency to rescue the remainder of the Jewish nation in Europe.”

The protesters proceeded to the Lincoln Memorial, where they offered prayers for the welfare of the president, America’s soldiers abroad, and the Jews in Hitler’s Europe, and then sang the national anthem. Then they marched to the gates of the White House, where they had expected a small delegation would be granted a meeting with President Roosevelt. Instead, to their surprise and disappointment, they were met by presidential secretary Marvin McIntyre, who told them the president was unavailable “because of the pressure of other business.”

In fact, the president’s schedule was remarkably open that afternoon. His daily calendar listed nothing in between a 1:00 lunch with the Secretary of State and a 4:00 departure for a ceremony at an airfield outside Washington.

FDR’s not meeting with the rabbis was consistent with his general lack of concern about the Shoah. Throughout the 30s, FDR said almost nothing about Hitler’s persecution of Germany’s Jews. He rejected taking any diplomatic or economic steps to pressure Germany on the Jewish issue. When the murder of Jews became official German policy, FDR said nothing.

FDR would not make America available as a sanctuary for the Jews of Europe. Jews could not get in.

It is also clear that FDR, and his circle, did not like Jews. In his book In the Garden of Beasts, Eric Larson quotes FDR telling his new ambassador to Germany, William Dodd, in 1933: “The German authorities are treating the Jews shamefully and the Jews in this country are greatly excited. But this is ...not a governmental affair. We can do nothing except for American citizens who happen to be made victims.” (p. 32) In other words, official US policy about Nazi persecution of Jews was: do nothing.

The feelings of FDR and his administration for Jews ranged from mild distaste to a deep antipathy; there *was* the sense that the Jews were getting what was coming to them. FDR appointed as undersecretary of state William Phillips, who wrote in his diary when visiting Atlantic City: “The place is infested with Jews.” (p. 30) This antipathy towards the Jews translated among certain of FDR’s influential advisors into sympathy for Hitler’s persecution of Jews. One of FDR’s advisors was Colonel Edward House, who put it this way to Dodd: “the Jews should not be allowed to dominate economic or intellectual life in Berlin as they have done for a long time.”

FDR’s rebuff of 500 rabbis on the eve of Yom Kippur did not happen by accident.

And yet, I now realize that my own thinking on FDR has not been commensurate to his complexity. It is true so far as it goes, but it is not the whole picture, and the part that I was missing is urgent and needs to be factored in to have a more thoughtful view of the matter.

I am indebted here to my friend and fellow Temple Emanuel member, Roger Lowenstein, who recently wrote a review in the WSJ of an 897 page book, [A Call to Arms](#), by Maury Klein. Here is the core of it. In 1940, America was totally unprepared to go to war. We did not have nearly enough soldiers. We did not have nearly enough arms. We did not have nearly enough airplanes. Roger puts it this way:

In 1940, American industry had a peak capacity of 15,000 airplanes a year. President Roosevelt demanded an increase to 50,000. And at a time when Nazi Germany had roughly five million men in arms, the U.S. Army numbered a pitiable 280,000...poorly trained, ill-equipped and, in the words of the dismayed commander in chief, “soft.”

Add to our military unreadiness a strong tendency towards isolationism, a resistance towards entering the battlefields of Europe.

How did America go from unprepared to prepared? Roger's review of the Klein book locates the answer in three letters: FDR.

FDR urged, cajoled, legislated and directed American industry to get on a war footing well before Pearl Harbor. Roosevelt is often, and justly, criticized for failing to do more for European Jews; it should also be said that no one in America did so much, and so early, to defeat the Nazis. (emphasis added)

Defeating the Nazis was something that Shira and I confronted in a deeper way two summers ago when we went to Normandy, the scene of the heroic battle of D-day, June 6, 1944. If you have not been to Normandy, put it on your bucket list. It is one of the most poignant, heavy, evocative, inspiring places we have ever been to. If you saw Steven Spielberg's film "Saving Private Ryan," the initial scenes show this cemetery. You stand there, and as far as the eye can see, there are simple and dignified burial plots, marked mostly by crosses, but also by some Jewish stars, and all accompanied by simple and small American flags. These are the American soldiers who gave their lives to stop Hitler. They would not have waged this heroic battle but for the leadership of FDR who also literally gave his life, running for a fourth term, even though he knew his own health was failing, because he was bound and determined to see the war through. His mission, he lived for it, he died for it, was: to defeat Hitler.

So now we have a conundrum.

On the one hand, FDR did not save the Jews from Hitler. That is true.

On the other hand, FDR did save the world from Hitler. That is also true.

On the one hand, FDR did not stop the Holocaust. True.

On the other hand, FDR made the world safe for democracy. Also true.

Understanding FDR is important for its own sake. But it strikes me that there is a larger issue at stake here. It goes beyond FDR. He embodies in an extreme form, in a hyper-

exaggerated form, the challenge of complexity and texture. How do we understand and relate to human complexity?

Sometimes instinctive tribal loyalties get in the way. Jonathan Haidt, a professor of psychology at the University of Virginia, has written a book called The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion. He came up with a word I had not seen elsewhere, the word “*groupish*.” He writes:

[P]eople are *groupish*. We love to join teams, clubs, leagues, and fraternities. We take on group identities and work shoulder to shoulder with strangers toward common goals so enthusiastically that it seems as if our minds were designed for teamwork. I don't think we can understand morality, politics, or religion until we have a good picture of human groupishness and its origins...

Groups compete with groups, and that competition favors groups composed of true team players... pages 190-192.

Haidt is onto something, and it explains the general rancorous tenor of so much public conversation.

Namely, we see ourselves as part of a group. My group is Jewish. When things impinge on my group, in some primal way it triggers a deep and visceral response: FDR did not make saving Jews his priority? I hate him!

But I, and those who think in exclamation points, need to do *teshuvah*, because while it may seem satisfying to vent, to give expression to deep-seated emotion, the problem is, it is not accurate. We're not getting it right. We're missing out on important nuance.

Our tradition tells us how to do this *teshuvah*. There is a beautiful rabbinic value called *midah k'neged midah*, measure for measure. *Relate to people in a measured way*. Resist our groupish impulse to think in exclamation points, in favor of seeing all the complexities. FDR did not save the Jews from Hitler. But FDR did save the world from Hitler. Less venting. More getting it right.

FDR deserves to be judged in the fullness of his humanity, and so do we.

Every human human being is a universe of complexity. May we take it all in. Shabbat shalom.