



## RABBI WAYNE ALLEN: JEWISH THINKING ABOUT GOOD AND EVIL

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Joshua Holo: Welcome to The College Commons podcast, passionate perspectives from Judaism leading thinkers, brought to you by the Hebrew Union College, Jewish Institute of Religion, America's first Jewish institution of higher learning. My name is Joshua Holo, dean of HUC's Jack H. Skirball campus in Los Angeles, and your host.

JH: Welcome to this episode of the College Commons podcast, where I look forward to a conversation with Rabbi Wayne Allen. Rabbi Allen served as a congregational rabbi for 35 years in New York City, Los Angeles, and Toronto. And he went on to earn a Doctorate in Philosophy from York University in Toronto. He has taught Jews and non-Jews of all ages in formal and informal settings. And authority on Jewish law. Rabbi Allen has focused particularly on the application of Jewish legal principles in a modern context. Among his many books, we're going to discuss his most recent titled, Thinking About Good and Evil, Jewish Views from Antiquity to Modernity, which came out this year in 2021, from the Jewish Publication Society. In it Allen traces the most salient Jewish ideas about why innocent people seem to suffer, why evil individuals seem to prosper and God's rule in such matters of justice and injustice from antiquity to the present. Rabbi Wayne Allen thank you for joining us on the Commons podcast.

Wayne Allen: My pleasure to be here.

JH: I'd like to begin by asking you to share with us to the degree you're willing to trace an arc, to trace that arc of the change, the major changes in Jewish thinking about good and evil.

WA: If I were to look at it as a progression, I would do a disservice to the entire concept, because it is not something where we can say that the matter has evolved in certain ways, but we see recurring themes. So, what I would suggest is that you have a particular grouping or sets of themes that go back to Biblical times, in which the biblical authors were quite certain that there were evil people in the world, but you needn't worry too much about them because in the end they're going to get it. So, it's only a question of holding out long enough. Now, of course, I am simplifying. There are statements that we do find in biblical text in which there is a real worry whether this will ever come about. But there seems to be a constant reassurance that the threat

to a belief in a fair and just God in the world that we see is only temporary and eventually it's going to be resolved. And that's one set of themes, the medieval authors return to the biblical themes.

WA: And they pick up on this idea and they express it in terms that were familiar to medieval thinkers. The rabbis on the other hand, period that we'll find in between, offered a wide variety of alternative explanations that did not have to do with wait... Because things will turn out well, but instead offering substitute ideas such as, that it was always intended this way, or that there was an aspect of the universe that's operating according to a different plan that what we would otherwise hear or see. And then you have the modern thinkers who go back to the Rabbinic themes and they're offering a alternative mindset and attitude towards good and evil. So, we see them as kinds of groups of ideas that seem to become recurrent.

JH: The entire way you've laid this out, pre-supposes that God's ultimate goodness is something we're invested in. As a result there develops a need, an emotional need, a religious need to explain God's goodness when it's not self-evident. And there is this idea of theodicy, of making sense of God, of justifying God's goodness, such as we think we understand it, which is imposed upon us by virtue of the way we choose to understand God. So, can you tell us what theodicy is, and more importantly, how it under guards your entire project?

WA: Theodicy is the justification of God's actions in a world which we perceive to be contrary to the ideal. We operate under the assumption that God is perfect and the world that he creates must reflect his perfection. When we see injustice in the world, of course, it strikes us as being impossible, and here are the premises. If God is all good, then he shouldn't create a world in which evil is possible. Unless he's not powerful enough to prevent it, but we say that God is all powerful. So how can you have a God that is omnipotent, all powerful, and at the same time see real evil in the world and claim that God is still just and fair? Of course, there are some other refinements that thinkers will make, such as that God is omniscient, you have to also assume that God knows that there is evil in the world, and also that he has the ability to make a difference. So if you put those things together how can God be all powerful, all good, all knowing, and yet see evil as real, unlike the Eastern religions that take a different view and still look at the world that we have.

WA: So, the purpose of the theodicy is to try to find the answer or offer a satisfactory response to the evil that we see in the world. There are some who want to take the view is that it's not really evil, don't trust your eyes, trust your feelings. And what you see is evil is only the iceberg, you see the top part, but you don't realize the bottom or you see the immediate presentation of it but you don't see the consequence. You don't see what's going to happen down the road, and were you aware of that then you would notice that this isn't evil at all. So, there's a repudiation of evil or a repudiation of our senses, but if you want to believe as most of us might, that we should trust our senses because after all, the same God that created the universe is the one who imbued us with the senses by which we make sense of the world. So, how can we say that you shouldn't trust your senses? It would be the equivalent of saying, don't trust God who made you.

WA: So, we're left with these dilemmas, and we're not the only people who are faced with this predicament, but what you alluded to is central. Other religions that are not monotheistic have an easy solution, the non-monotheistic or what we would call the polytheistic or the dualistic solution is to simply say, "There's an evil God, there is a good God." And the world is divided in such a way that there is a conflict between the two, and depending upon which God seems to emerge victorious at a certain point, that's what you are observing. If you're Jewish however, we repudiate that, and therefore we can't tolerate that as an answer, and then we're left with alternative solutions.

JH: We're gonna talk about some of those solutions over the course of our conversation. For now though, I'd like to ask you a favor. You will not be surprised to know that close to the hearts of many of our listeners, by no means all, but certainly those of us at the Hebrew Union College are the theologies of the reform movement. And one of our greatest thinkers and our contemporary who died relatively recently, a professor of the Hebrew Union College, Eugene Borowitz. So, I'd like to ask you to take a second and mull a little bit over Eugene Borowitz's contribution to the question that you've investigated.

WA: Borowitz was quite a controversial figure. There are some who believe that he inadequately addressed issues that came up as a result of the Shoah, that he didn't give it a sufficient treatment. There are others who did not like the fact that he was traditional in his outlook and believe that you could be a full-fledged committed reform Jew and yet give particular honor and credence to tradition, and he believed that a fair reading of the text would suggest that. And yet the same time, he believed that a new theology was necessary and important particularly for moderns, and so he took these different aspects of what he believed to be essential, a critical but an honest reading of the text, kind of response to the modern predicament and put them together in a number of books.

WA: The one that I would most recommend is *A New Jewish Theology in The Making*. Borowitz takes a perspective that as much as we need God in the world, we need each other. And a Jewish theology that would address the problem with evil, would address it through our response to evil, more than our belief in God. How we deal with the inefficiencies and equalities, how we deal with the challenges that we face in life is an indication of not a failed God or a powerless God, but a less committed people. And I would say that Eugene Borowitz did Yeoman's work in trying to convince people, he's among a group of philosophers that did this, that the fact that evil exists is not the biggest problem that we face, it's what are we going to do about it.

JH: Before we return to the podcast, we wanna let you know about digital learning on the College Commons platform. Beyond this podcast, which is available to the public at large, check out the online courses at [collegecommons.huc.edu](http://collegecommons.huc.edu) for in-depth learning, digital syllabi, assignments, inspiration for teaching, and one of our most influential courses called *Making Prayer Real*. Subscribe with your synagogue for all this and more. Just click, sign up at [collegecommons.huc.edu](http://collegecommons.huc.edu). And one more thing, help us out and rate us on iTunes but whatever you do, do not give us five stars unless we deserve it. Now, back to our podcast.

JH: You raise in the context of Borowitz, the special problem as it were of the Holocaust. And indeed, you spill a great deal of ink on the Holocaust because it's more than just special, it looms large in all of our consciousness to this day for its being so recent and its magnitude. It is in many ways a game changer for our Jewish understanding of good and evil. So, I'd like to ask you to set up the problem for us of good and evil in the shadow of the Holocaust, and then I'd like to ask you to follow up with your thoughts about the group of the so-called defectors.

WA: Clearly you're referring to some of the definitions that I have articulated in the book. Your listeners may not be familiar with it. So, let me put it this way. First, leaving aside the name Holocaust which is controversial in and of itself, the problem that we have with the Holocaust is not the fact that it is unique in terms that Jews have never been persecuted before. Of course, we know that it isn't so, sadly. But it's a question of the scope and magnitude of the Shoah that sets it up as unique. The problem that we have with the Shoah is that unlike other periods where there was great persecution and many, many deaths, some might even argue that at other points in Jewish history, the proportion of deaths compared to the total Jewish population were greater than during the Shoah. But what marks the Shoah as different is the intentionality of the act, the Nazis and to use Goldhagen's familiar terms, their willing collaborators, their intent was to divert the resources to completely annihilate, to commit a genocide just because of the fact that they wanted to eliminate all Jews.

WA: Romans killed many Jews, Cossacks killed many Jews, the intention, however, was not to eliminate an entire demography or a race of people, as they call it, as it was racial. It is quite different, this is un-experienced before in Jewish history so it's not the numbers, and 6 million is not sacrosanct and I don't pretend to be able to give an accurate accounting of all of those numbers, and I'm not going to be troubled by this pedantic counting as to whether there were six million or not. What I am however interested in is how at a time in which there was this massive mobilization of effort to eliminate Jews and all Jews everywhere, it wasn't that Hitler was happy with Poland, it was if he could get to Britain or he would get further to the United States, no Jew would have been spared. In fact, I don't mention this in the book, but it's important to note that Hitler even had plans to develop a museum for a destroyed people. It was his intent to eliminate to all Jews and keep Jews around only as a reminder of all of the terrible things that Jews had done to undermine civilization.

JH: That makes the Holocaust unique. Now, what do we make of this? Now, there were some, and I'm talking about Jews, and I'm talking about Jews who were thoughtful Jews, who wanted to say that there is a traditional answer that satisfies completely what we observed during and after the Shoah. And they rely on the Talmudic statement that says, "There's no death without sin, there's no suffering without sin." So, whoever died of Jews during the Shoah, it was on account of our own sin. What that sin was, there are divergent opinions, whether it was the sin of Zionism, whether it was the sin of assimilation, whether it was modernity, but we committed a grave sin, and what would you expect? This is exactly the way God treats it.

JH: Can I interrupt, I just wanna point out the way you described that theology, whereby the Holocaust and not the Holocaust alone, mind you, but I would say the thick trunk of mainstream Jewish thought since the rabbis to the Holocaust probably favored that perception of suffering, that it was as a result of one's sins... For our sins, we suffered these things including exile, etcetera.

WA: That's certainly what we say in our literature.

JH: Yeah, yeah, but it's also widely written in the sources and widely ascribed to God and to us. And I just wanna point out if we leave the discussion there and don't dive into that a little bit more, I think it might leave a bitter taste in the mouths of our listeners, because to moderns, that is what we might call in shorthand, victim blaming, and that is hard for us to swallow. And I wanna point out that there is an aspect of wisdom and spiritual depth in this otherwise traditional way of approaching, understanding our suffering as a result of our sins, and it is the following. It is a form of solace, legitimate form of solace in two ways, as I see it; it makes God not capricious, and it does solve some of the problems posed by your book. However, for the Jews in particular, in so far as our breed, our covenant has carrots and sticks, has built into it, in Torah a promise of reward for good behavior and a promise of punishment for bad behavior. When we attribute punishment to our bad behavior, we are affirming this covenant itself, and in affirming the covenant itself, that provides a layer of solace on its own to Jews to reaffirm the fact that the punishment promises rather than undermines our fundamental connection to God.

WA: Well, I think I make that point in the book as well, but thank you for raising it now. I would also point out that I glossed over earlier the Rabbinic perspectives on evil, and among the rabbis in the Talmud, there are also views that say, we cannot attribute punishment or suffering to the evil that we have committed. That it is a result of other forces, it could be the influence of the planets, it could be an unknown factor, there are some rabbis who would say that we cannot understand or attribute it to... The rabbis were sophisticated, and they were just as troubled as moderns, and I don't want your listeners to think that we have a monopoly on this sense of feeling that this can't be right. The rabbis were very smart guys, they surely would have had the same kind of reaction as you do, but the way they address it is not going to be the same. If we go back to the central question, these were the traditionalist.

WA: And then we have the group who were the radical revisionists as I call them. This was the group that said, The problem with the Shoah is so severe that we have to give up all prior notions of good and bad, and right and wrong, and we either have to radically change Judaism to come up with an entirely new conception of what our connection with God is, or we have to deny the existence of a good God. That's quite, quite, quite radical. The area that you raised is, there is another group, and I refer to this group as the deflectors. These are those who understand the seriousness of the problem, are not prepared to take on a radical or a revisionist strategy, and they come up with other solutions. And among the other solutions, well I'll just cite one in particular, also from the Reform Movement, an ordained Reform rabbi, Emil Fackenheim, who said, not exactly the way that people have cited him, because he never said this exactly,

"Thou shalt not grant Hitler a posthumous victory", but it's sometimes referred to as the 614th commandment.

WA: Now, your listeners will probably be perceptive enough to know that there's 613 mitzvot in the Torah, we're not supposed to add or subtract. So this concept of a 614th mitzvot is a fiction, but it means that if there were to be an additional commandment in the Torah, this is what it should be, and it is that if you say that because of the Shoah, I can no longer in good conscience practice as a Jew, and you resign as it were from the Jewish people, you would in effect be doing exactly what Hitler wanted. So that means by your denial of Judaism, by your rejection of Jewish theology and Jewish living, you are in effect doing exactly what Hitler wanted, and that's an impossibility. That's worse than living with the unanswered question of how could this happen to so many innocents. So the defectors want to take the point of view that, "I can't explain why this happened and I can't justify it", but I must say that that's not the central question. The real question is not, "Why did God allow this to happen?" Because God didn't put anyone in the gas chamber, Germans did that.

WA: Will Herberg, who I don't mention in the book, but I will now, once said, "It's not so much the fact that we are angry with God, we're angry at other people who didn't rescue Jews when they had the opportunity, and it is with them that we have an argument." And so the defectors want to say, "We can't put the blame on God. We have to put the blame squarely on Hitler, we have to put the blame on Nazis, and we have to ensure that this doesn't happen again." Does this answer the question of why the Shoah happened? It does not, but it raises a different kind of question in its place, and that's why I refer to this as a deflection.

JH: Deflector... Would you rate any of the rabbinic approaches that you outlined in your book as *mutatis mutandis* deflections?

WA: If we're thinking about earlier periods, I'm not sure that they were deflections. I don't think Maimonides, for example, was in any way deflecting. Maimonides was trying to offer a minimization, which I suppose one could call in a sense a deflection, Maimonides's approach was to say, "Evil can be classified." Maimonides, following Aristotle, was very big into classification, so he considers personal evil, moral evil, natural evil, the way we would divide up evil, and what he ends up saying is that personal evil, you can't blame God for, that's the evil you do to yourself. Using some examples, if you are a drug abuser, if you overeat, if you abuse your body physically in some way, you can't say, "God, why did you do this to me?" Moral evil is, "Why did this fellow mug me or rob me?" That's terrible and it's true, but the real question we're asking is not, "Where was God?" but, "Why didn't this person behave properly?" So that rightfully is not, again, not attributable to God.

WA: Natural evil on the other hand is, earthquakes, birth defects, and so forth, and Maimonides ends up saying, "But when you look at those things, a very small number are actually victimized by that now, of course. We're here in Southern California, and we know that in Southern California, we can have mud slides, we can have wild fires, earthquakes. We say, "Well, isn't that a substantial number of victims?" Maimonides would say, "Yes, but why did you build your house on the fault, and why did you put a house on stilts on the hillside?" So it's not quite a

natural evil, human beings are complicit in that. So that's a way of Maimonides saying, "I can't explain the entirety of the problem, but I can minimize it to the point it's no longer the major issue." So if we wanna consider that as a kind of deflection, I would say, "Yeah".

JH: Within our tradition, or within the really complete scope of the Jewish tradition that you analyzed, which is the most satisfying to you, explanation of good and evil, and what is the least satisfying? And then I wanna ask you your own personal theodicy.

WA: As I was writing this book and even before when I was researching it, what I am told, I haven't gone to medical school, but I'm told that I feel like medical students who as they were in of different diseases and they were in the symptoms, they say, well, I have that. I think that every time I encounter the philosophy with which I had even the modicum of association, I said, oh, that's the one, I like that one. And then as I would go and think of it more and one of the things readers will note in my book is at the end of each chapter I give a kind of summation and also identify some of the critical problems with each of the different views that I discuss. So I haven't found a single view that does not have some inherent fault in it. And when I say fault, I don't mean that it is a failing, I mean that there is an area that is not entirely compelling or convincing. There's an issue that's still left over, so no one gets home free.

WA: So I haven't found the one that I can relate to and I say that seals the deal, there is nothing that is more compelling than this answer, so I haven't found one. So, in a way, I am deflecting [chuckle] from your question because I haven't found a least favorite or a least compelling or most compelling and I actually can say that I vary. There are some things that I hear that go on and I say, oh, this would be an excellent response to that, or this view seems to resonate for me hearing this now. So, I haven't gotten there yet. My own personal theodicy, let me start off by saying, I have a profound, deep, unhesitating, unqualified belief in God. I think that if there is an answer that I find that is necessary and one that is lacking, I think the fault is mine and not Gods. So, I find that I have a personal commitment to look for an answer rather than come to a conclusion and say, there is no answer and therefore my faith in God is undermined.

WA: Shakespeare said, the fault, dear Brutus, is not in the stars but in us. And I think that's an excellent observation. The fault is not with God. If I fail to see legitimately an answer to a theological problem, the fault is with me. So, I am still on that journey, I don't believe that anything that I have written has suggested that there is a final answer for which there is no response, I'm still looking for that one. I'm not sure whether I'll find it, but I'm glad that I'm on the journey.

JH: Your description of your own ever seeking to understand God is evocative of how we open the conversation when one of the ways the rabbis attend to the problem is to recognize their own limitations and perception and comprehension. And it seems to be a little bit of what you were talking about as well with respect to yourself, that the fault to Brutus is with us. So, for the pleasure of your conversation, and your incredibly thoughtful engagement with this topic I wanna thank you for the time and I look forward to future conversations.

WA: Thank you for having me.

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