

Crow's Caw

by Crow Cohen



Evil and Compassion

The night before Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement, I was compelled to rent a video about the Nuremberg Trials. Don't ask me why. I could have chosen something lighter to relax to before my day of fasting, but I had an intuition it would somehow help me cope with the infamous September 11th attack. Lately, it seems that when anyone asks me how I'm doing, I say, "Fine, considering what's going on in the world." It is as if I owe the world an apology for continuing on with my daily routine. I probably have a touch of survivor's guilt. Somehow it helped to choose to spend three hours absorbed in an historic precedent for dealing with evil.

This particular video was originally a TV mini-series that I hadn't seen before. It had a touch of primetime romance as a sub-theme (the married prosecuting attorney fell in love with his wide-eyed secretary), but for TV it packed quite a punch. For one thing, as part of the evidence in the trial, they showed original film footage of the allied forces liberating the concentration camps. I have seen film clips like those before, but they get me every time. Those were my people – both as a Jew and a Lesbian – dumped in mass graves. Those walking skeletons chanted the same Hebrew prayers on Yom Kippur (if they could muster the strength) as I have chanted since I was a kid. I remember in 1956, when I was thirteen, I happened to be home alone on a Saturday morning when they showed the French documentary *Night and Fog* on TV. I was deeply affected by those thousands of dead bodies flopping down chutes as if they were on some factory conveyor belt. I vowed I would give back something to the Jews for all they have suffered. That was the first time I remember being exposed in a graphic way to the Holocaust.

... Evil people are human beings like the rest of us.

In my experience the Holocaust wasn't mentioned in those days in order to "protect the kids." For me, the two most fascinating characters in this video were Himmler (second in command from Hitler) and the U.S. Army psychologist who was assigned to the cellblock where the high officers of the German armed forces were being held. They were being tried as "war criminals," the first time that concept was introduced to the world. It was the job of the psychologist to encourage his "subjects" to talk about their feelings for the purposes of gathering information for the trial. As a psychologist, he knew he had to build a modicum of trust and did so by seeing that the prisoners were treated decently. This gave them a chance to confide in the psychologist. It was ironic that the psychologist was a Jew who didn't believe in capital punishment. He turned out to be a great humanitarian, because he had the courage to engage in personal conversations with men responsible for torturing the psychologist's own people beyond belief. Some prisoners chose to confide in him. Others didn't. Most importantly, he did manage to develop a relationship with Himmler.

At one point the psychologist asked Himmler how he could possibly justify treating the Jews as sub-human. Himmler pointed the finger back at him: "You would have never dropped the bomb in Hiroshima if those weren't Japanese people you killed. Your Black people were once enslaved and are now still treated like sub-humans. Don't tell me you don't understand how that can happen."

I found myself saying, "Right on, brother!" Was I saying this to Himmler? How did I manage to slip into that sentiment?

The point is that evil people are human beings like the rest of us. I'm not excusing the deaths of the innocent civilians that terrorists wiped out in the wake of their fanaticism, but it doesn't help for me to completely separate myself from those who hate me and, therefore, relegate them to something other than human beings. It doesn't do me any good as a Jewish lesbian to categorically hate Germans, although it took me a long time to learn this. I believe that some people end up following their evil inclinations (which, by the way, are inside all of us) to a horrendous extent and need to be contained, but if we learn to treat even our enemies as people, instead of blindly retaliating with murderous rage on civilian populations, than maybe wars won't be necessary to resolve conflict.

In a way, it is up to us to take the first step, since we are the ones sitting on all the world's resources. The opposite of terrorism is compassion, in this case compassion toward the shrouded women of Afghanistan whose fundamental rights have been stripped by their government, towards the children of Afghanistan who have been starving for years, and towards the men in Afghanistan who could lose their lives if they spoke up against the totalitarian regime. To react compassionately even in the face of fear and paranoia would truly bring about a lasting revolution.

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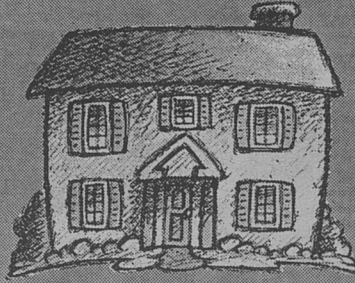
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