



**Hag Sameach and Shabbat Shalom
from Rabbi Michael Gold**

Candle Lighting Time

Wednesday Erev Shmini Atzeret 6:27 pm

Thursday Erev Simchat Torah 7:19 pm (from pre-existing flame)

Friday Erev Shabbat 6:25 pm (from pre-existing flame)

Services

**Wednesday Oct. 23 6 pm (followed by festival dinner for those with
reservations.)**

**Thursdays Oct. 24 9:30 am Shmini Atzeret, Yizkor, Geshem
6 pm Erev Simchat Torah Celebration**

Friday Oct. 25 9:30 am Simchat Torah

Hatan Torah – Mark Kotok, Kallat Bereishit – Rina Kotok

Saturday Oct. 19 9:30 am Shabbat Services

With the celebration of Shmini Atzeret – Simchat Torah, it is now a year on the Jewish calendar since the horrendous terror attack on Israel by Hamas. We will make some modifications to our festival services to recognize the sadness of this day. We must mourn but we must also dance. And we pray that peace with finally come to Israel.

**PARSHAT BEREISHIT
MORAL JUSTIFICATION**

“The Lord said to Cain, ‘Where is your brother Abel?’ And he said, ‘I do not know. Am I my brother’s keeper?’” (Genesis 4:9)

I have always loved teaching the Cain and Abel story. Here is the story of the first murder in history, and the murderer who refuses to take responsibility. Cain tries to justify his actions. In fact, in one of my Yom Kippur sermons I shared a Midrash (Rabbinic tale) of how Cain blamed God. Cain compares his action to a thief stealing from a warehouse. Confronted by the watchman, the thief says, "I am a thief. I was doing my job. You are a watchman. Why were you not doing your job?"

We humans love to avoid taking blame for our actions. When I teach college ethics, I dedicate an entire class to what I call Moral Justification. What are the excuses people use for wrong behavior? I always begin with Cassius's words to Brutus in Shakespeare's play *Julius Ceasar*, "The fault dear Brutus is not in our stars but in ourselves." Cassius is referring to those who blame the stars (astrology) rather than taking responsibility for their behavior. I cannot share everything I teach in that class in this brief message. But let me share three of the ways we humans justify our bad behavior:

"I was only following orders." - In 1961, Israel kidnapped Adolph Eichmann, the mastermind of the Holocaust who was hiding out in Argentina. He was put on trial for his crimes against humanity. His defense was that he was only following orders. Philosopher Hannah Arendt, covering the trial in Jerusalem, coined the phrase to describe Eichmann "the banality of evil." He did not look like the devil incarnate, but like a meek bureaucrat. Eichmann was found guilty and hanged for his crimes, the only time capital punishment has been used in Israel.

It is not just Nazis who use the excuse that they are only following orders. That same year Professor Stanley Milgram did an experiment with students at Yale University. Would students inflict pain on fellow students if told so by an authority figure? Most students gave electric shocks to fellow students, turning up the voltage, when given orders by people wearing lab coats. The entire procedure was an act; the electric shocks were not real. But students at one of our most prestigious universities lost their moral compass because they were following orders.

"I was caught up in the moment." - Another experiment with college students was conducted by Philip Zimbardo at Stanford University in 1971. This is often known as the Stanford Prison Experiment. Students were divided into prisoners and guards. They were given appropriate

uniforms as prisoners or guards. Within a very short time the student guards became extremely abusive towards the student prisoners. Zimbardo was forced to shut down the experiment early.

Often people get caught up in a moment and lose their sense of right and wrong. During the 1992 Rodney King riots in Los Angeles, a group of rioters pulled an innocent truck driver Reginald Denny from a truck, beat him, and left him with permanent injuries. Arrested, the perpetrators admitted that they knew their actions were wrong, but they were caught up in the moment. I believe something similar happened in the Capital riot of January 6, 2021. I am sure many people arrived for an innocent demonstration about the election results. But when the leadership decided to storm the Capitol, demonstrators became caught up in the moment. Today many of these individuals are serving jail terms.

My favorite: "The devil made me do it." - I have met people who blame Satan for their wrongdoing. They see a world divided into two cosmological forces, one of good and one of evil. There is God and Satan. Or if you are a *Star Wars* fan, there is the force and the dark side. Cosmological dualism has roots at the beginning of the first millennium.

In Jewish tradition, Satan is simply *HaSatan*, one of God's angels who takes the role as prosecutor. (See the book of Job.) The idea of a fallen angel, of Lucifer, of the devil, developed much later. But there are not two cosmological forces, one of good and one of evil. There is simply the one God, who created a world that is good. Good and evil are not in the hands of a cosmic malevolent figure. Good and evil are in our hands.

