

The Better Angels: Countering Violence in our World
Erev Rosh Hashanah, 5773

On this birthday of the world's beginning,
As we celebrate the inauguration of 5773,
Another New Year filled with promise and hope,
We cannot help but shake our heads, looking back & wondering:
"What is this world coming to?"
For contemplating the craziness of this past year,
From movie theatres to city sidewalks
to schoolyards to supermarkets, even to U.S. Embassies;
with all of the violence, the killing that has filled
its most recent months and days,
we might well be thinking: "Good riddance!"
And if that seems to be your general sentiment
Then you are probably being just a bit presumptuous.
For our current day and age,
With all the abuses and assaults, indeed,
with what seems a very hefty dose of daily deadly killing,
this time and place in our planet's trajectory
is what appears to be the most peaceful era in our species existence.
Dubbed the 'New Peace,' it is marked by historic trends that attest to
a quantitative decline in war, genocide, terrorism and a virtual
hundred-fold drop in homicide rates over the course of the last few
centuries alone. [[The Better Angels of Our Nature](#), Pinker, pg 361]
So with all the stats pointing to peace,
Why does our world, more often than not, still feel so unsafe?
Why does bloodshed and brutality still seem to fill our daily news?
Why do acts of violence confront us everywhere we turn?
And, if this New Peace is for real, how do we actualize it,
to deal with the hostility we continue to confront,
in order to transcend it?...

No one has taken a more comprehensive and current look at the
historic sweep of human violence, and the keys to its decline,
than prolific author, Harvard Prof of Psychology, Steven Pinker.
In his master-work of this past year,

The Better Angels of Our Nature, Pinker does not merely document “what led people to stop sacrificing children, stabbing each other at the dinner table, and disemboweling criminals as forms of popular entertainment,” [Better Angels, Preface]

But – identifying 5 inner demons and 4 Better Angels, Through the scientific lens of the psychology of violence, Pinker compels us to reconsider, with a decline of violence on all counts, how we can be part of maintaining a more peaceful world.

For starters, let’s admit:

with the overwhelming acts of hostility of the past decade alone, still so heartbreaking, its hard to believe that ours is an age of unprecedented peaceful human co-existence...

One reason, of course, is that we tend to romanticize the past.

There were those “knights in shining armor....”

Or the Minutemen standing ready to Paul Revere’s cry

“one of by land, two if by sea...” Every era, a Camelot...

But a history of forgotten violence has always preceded us.

Take a quick tour with me of the last few millennia,

to understand why, despite relative peace, our present is so precarious.

In surveying the historic landscape,

The common link across cultures and continents is

“a backdrop of violence that was not alone endured,
but often embraced.

Consider the foundational cultures of human civilization;

Take Ancient Greece...the birthplace of literary & philosophic greats.

Homer’s Iliad, The Odyssey, narratives grounded in violence.

War, an endless battle against an ever-grappling enemy,
was an inescapable fact of life, as hero Odysseus reflects:

“We are men to whom Zeus has given the fate of winding
down our lives in painful wars, from youth until we perish,
each of us!”

Human conflict is the fate gifted by the gods...

And it makes little difference whether it’s a Pantheon

Or a solo Divine Operator...For our Hebrew Bible,

Many would say, moral foundation of Western Civilization

Is replete with as much hostility as it is with holiness.

The first family takes little time – but one generation,
To turn to violence, and with Abel's death,
The homicide rate is 25%!
Next thing we know, Noah's sinful age is wiped out by the flood,
A purging of evil that brings the rainbow's promise:
The skies will never rain endless waters again.
Note: No one said anything about devouring fires!
So after Sodom and Gomorrah are gone,
Abraham – defender of humankind,
carries the new Covenant of Faith, "to do what is just and right."
That is, until he heeds God's command to nearly sacrifice his son
On the altar of religious zeal...
From the rape of Dinah to the slaughter of thousands of idolators
to the incineration of Aaron's 2 sons before his eyes,
The great code of morality is likewise
"staggering in its savagery." [Better Angels, pg 10]
Matthew White, a self-described atrocitologist, estimates 1.2
million deaths from massacres and mass killings enumerated in
the Bible. [If you throw in the Flood, the tide rises to 20 million.]
And if you want to play the "Old vs. New" game,
Just consider the collective takeaway
from a theology framed by the Crucifixion...
Not that barbarity must unite the world to stand up
To unjust political powers, but that unthinkable murder
Was a gift of divine mercy; a route to eternal salvation.
So much so that tales of martyrdom – Christian and Jewish
Filled the hearts of the faithful over the centuries.
What's this all mean?
It is not that Jews and Christians, advocate pain and persecution;
yet because violent means were so prominent a part of our past,
the pathway they paved left an impact we still feel.
It matters little the day and age:
From King Arthur's Court to the Feudal Lords of Medieval
Europe – from the Golden Age of Spain to the Ming Dynasty
to the British Monarchy – violence [literally] reigned.
Young schoolkids in the Commonwealth
would learn this sweet rhyming couplet:

“King Henry the 8th, to 6 wives he was wedded;
1 died, 1 survived, 2 divorced, 2 beheaded.”
Just consider the great literary lights of early modern Europe
still shining so brightly in American life today.
Could there be more brutal stories for kids than the tales created in
1815 by Jacob & Wilhelm Grimm?
From Hansel & Gretel to Cinderella,
Filled with everything from infanticide to cannibalism
to the most gruesome murders.
I saw the film remake this summer of one Grimm classic,
Snow White & the Huntsman.
It was rated PG-17 due to excess violence,
much closer to the original than Disney would ever dare go.
Or take your favorite Bard...
From frequent suicides – Brutus, Cleopatra, Lady MacBeth
To the manifold murders of Desdemona,
smothered by her husband, to Claudius to Lavinia,
killed by her own father to spare her further shame from being
raped, from one masterpiece to the next: brutal, if not lethal.

Of course, making it to America, looking out on our 20th century,
It appears to be the bloodiest age ever...
From Holocaust to devastating World Wars;
From technological warfare and the continued threat of terror,
How can this moment possibly be “The New Peace”...?
Steven Pinker offers two ways to quantify the conundrum.
First... The rates of violent death – the chances that a person may die
at the hands of another – have steadily declined.
In pre-state societies, maybe 5,000 years ago, death rates from
homicides and war ran between 20-30%...
Comparatively, if you take the two most violent generations
of the modern period, Europe in the 17th century
and America in mid 20th, the combined death rate is just over 2%.
Not one to devalue human life, I wondered,
what about all the recent, ongoing conflicts...
Surely this past decade of war has made the rates rise?...
So comes the 2nd quantifiable factor:

The Statistical Abstract of the U.S. records 2.45 million deaths in 2005,
A year that was one of the worst for American war death.
Even if you add to those numbers all domestic homicides,
The current violent death rate is 8/10 of 1%!
So if, as Pinker posits, at the height of WWII,
the violent death rate was approximately 100 per 100,000;
and in the worst years of 1970's rebellion, the US rate rose to almost
10 per 100,000, today in America it is under 3. In Europe, just over 1.
Global trends and tallies all point downward...
So Why do we wake up ever day still feeling threatened by violence?
Maybe, because we're supposed to.

Identifying 6 Phases in the Transformation of Human Civilization,

1 – from hunter-gatherer to the establishment of organized states;
the Pacification Process to

2 – the consolidation of Feudal society into centralized kingdoms;
the Civilizing Process to

3 – the Age of Reason giving rise to the Enlightenment;
the Humanitarian Revolution to

4 – Post WWII's world powers all agreeing to try and get along;
The Long Peace to

5 – Post Cold War opening of borders/economies, autocracy's decline
the New Peace to

6 – affirmation of humane values, from civil rights to women's rights
to gay rights to animal rights to children's rights, the Rights Revolution

...after 500+ pages of tracing the process, Pinker shares a telling realization:

“Perhaps the main cause of the illusion of ever-present violence springs from
one of the central forces that drove down violence in the first place.

The decline in violent behavior has been paralleled by a decline in
attitudes that tolerate or glorify violence – and often, attitudes are in the lead.”

If we are stunned when a movie theatre's midnight premiere
turns murderous, a lone madman's mass shooting, killing 12, wounding 58,
We are supposed to be...

If we are shocked when, in the midst of the morning rush,
Right in midtown, disgruntled but dressed to kill,

A man in his customary suit & tie puts 2 bullets into the head of a co-worker
The police returning fire, killing him, wounding nine bystanders,
beyond innocent, we should be...

If we are dismayed at the 750 civilians killed by Damascus infighting,
Just last month, an impossible Syrian state of incivility...
If we're disbelieving when a young man on a motorbike
Stops at a Jewish school, a sunny morning in Toulouse,
Killing a teacher and three children...
If we're distraught at the thought
Of a gunman, fueled by white supremacist hate,
entering a Sikh Temple, [in Oak Creek, Wisc.] preparing a communal feast,
Killing 6 in cold blood...We MUST be!
Because such deadly violence is less prevalent,
Its impact is far more pronounced.
And in an age of instant access; with the latest breaking news on our I-Pads
Or phones, posted 3 minutes ago, when that horrible headline breaks,
Its in our face.
YET if all we do is shake our heads, thinking: "How awful!"
We are missing not merely an opportunity, but the reason we are here.
HOW should we respond?...
Prof. Pinker responds as scientist/academic, a self-admitted Jewish atheist
who equates too much faith in tomorrow with a touch of arrogance:
 "Though I am confident that human sacrifice, chattel slavery and wars
 between democracies will not make a comeback anytime soon,
 to predict the current lower levels of war and terrorism will endure
 is to sally into territory where angels fear to tread...Declines of violence
 are a product of social, cultural and material condition, and if the
 conditions persist, violence will remain low. If they don't, it won't."
This may be a fine conclusion scientifically speaking,
but covenantally, it just doesn't cut it.
On this Day of Awe, when we're as close to angel-status as we ever get,
The reduction of brutality and bloodshed must persist.
Far from arrogantly optimistic, but with faith-driven hope I dare say:
The future is up to us.
SO...What must we do to pave the way to a planet
where violence continues to decrease?
How can we make our world feel more safe?

Consider 2 courses of life-action;
Ways to vanquish the violence,

inspired by today's Torah: the ultimate tale of human hostility:
Akedat Yitschak...The Binding of Isaac.

Vanquish the Violence 1. **Choosing LIFE**

From Midrash Tanchuma...

"Take your son, your only one, whom you love, Isaac, and offer him up.
So early the next morning, Abraham rose..."

The archangel Satan met him early in the morning, dressed as an old man.

"Where are you going?"

Abraham replied: "To pray."

"So why the wood and the rope and the knife?" the old man questioned.

"We may be gone a day or two out on the road; we'll need to cook."

Now Satan, blowing his cover:

"Was I not present when the Holy One called to you: Take your son..."

Abraham, are you out of your mind, taking the son you were gifted with at 100 years to slaughter him?

Abraham replied softly: "Just for this."

"And tomorrow," the archangel lashed back, "God will call you a murderer!"

So Abraham continues on, knife in hand,

Fully believing he is keeping God's command.

But what did God ask? That Isaac be taken up as an "Olah."

Could that mean – to be an actual sacrifice?

Maybe Abraham is to dedicate Isaac's life to *living* God's word,

Not to *dying* because of it?...

Sometimes, armed with faith in one hand and a knife or a sword or a musket in the other, hearing gets distorted by zeal.

When Congress made the Constitutional provision for:

"a well-regulated militia, being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of a people to keep and bear arms..."

Alexander Hamilton clarified with concern:

"A tolerable expertise in military movements requires time and practice ...so as to entitle them to the character of a well-regulated militia."

The concern back then is the same as it is now:

Guns belong in the hands of a trained military, or security force, not in the hands of its overzealous/overbearing citizens.

When, in the wake of the worst mass shooting in America's history

At the Aurora, Co movie theatre,

Jason Alexander [yes, George from Seinfeld]

Posted a call to ban the kind of assault weapons used by the gunman, the responses he received were worrisome, if not *meshuganeh*.

From Brooklynavi: Guns should only be banned if violent crimes committed with tomatoes means we should ban tomatoes...OR

From nysportsguy1: Drunk drivers kill. Should we ban fast cars?

Alexander responds:

"I believe tomatoes & cars have purposes other than killing.

What purpose does an AR-15 serve to a sportsman that a more Standard hunting rifle does not?...Basically, the purpose of assault weapons is to kill more stuff, more fully, faster...to achieve max lethality

Hardly the primary purpose of tomatoes and sportscars...I have been

Reading as advocates of such weapons make excuses like:

Guns don't kill, people do."

Well, if that's correct, then I go with *Brooklynavi*:

Let them kill with tomatoes."

This is not a political referendum; it's a human responsibility.

Embracing the decline of violence statistically

means having the courage to sustain it societally.

In the weekend following the Aurora shooting, gun license application submissions in Colorado quadrupled.

A wild, wild West [or East] where everyone is armed

is not what we need...Life is not a Clint Eastwood movie.

We cannot prevent every tragedy;

We cannot stop every madman.

But we can try and keep weapons of destruction out of the human hands in which they do not belong.

Abraham heard a Voice, let's say God's,

the one who beckons us to "Choose Life!"

So Maybe Abraham was supposed to respond:

"Sorry, I don't carry a sacrificial knife."

Vanquish the Violence 2. **Choosing LOVE...**

Rabbi Elliot Cosgrove makes a key comparison.

The command comes to Abraham at the outset, as Isaac is identified

By three telling traits:

"Take your son, your favored one, whom you love, Isaac..."

Yet, towards the end of the ordeal, when Abraham's hand is stayed

By the angel's call, the Patriarch is praised by God:

*"For now I know you fear God, since you have not withheld
your son, your favored one, from Me."*

The omission is striking: WHERE is the LOVE?

Sadly, it seems, never speaking a word to his son again in Torah,

Severing any semblance of relationship,

Abraham sacrificed it atop the mountain.

"We live in an age of empathy." [Better Angels, pg 571]

So claims primatologist Frans De Waal.

And though Prof Pinker includes it among the key factors,

the 'better angels' that steer us away from violence,

he views it as questionable, at best. Why?

*"Empathy – in the morally relevant sense of sympathetic concern,
is not an automatic reflex of our mirror neurons. It can be turned on/off,
and even inverted into counter-empathy. The problem with building a better
world through empathy is that it cannot be counted on...It all depends
upon how beholders perceive their relationships..."*[Pinker, 577]

When we see our world in terms of us & them...

When my God-given right diminishes your humanity...

When competition is king and revenge is sweet...

When conquest seems more viable than cooperation...

We must hear a voice asking: Where is the love?

Not love as romance – but responsibility.....

Commenting once on the bystanders,

those who watched as Jews were carted away to the camps,
and did nothing, Elie Wiesel explained: "

"The opposite of love is not hate; it is indifference."

How often do we fail to feel the pain of another,

because we are so caught up in our own concerns?

How readily do we temper our compassion with counters like:

I don't even know him...I'm sure someone else will help

After all, what can I really do?...

Sympathetic concern – true empathy is ours to extend or deny.

It means making the world not alone less violent,

but more caring, more connected – more loving,
by “never standing idly by while your neighbor bleeds...” [Lev 19:17]
I have but one model of menshlich compassion by which I judge
The rightness of my actions, and others; the most empathetic person I know.

Deciding to spend this, our 31st wedding anniversary

Where we'd hoped, but could not spend our 30th,

Susan and I spent a wonderful week in Paris.

[Why it took us 30+ years to travel there for the first time,

I'll never know...]

It was the third or fourth evening, and, walking to the Latin Quarter

For dinner, with street musicians and crowds of people

Filling the cafes and pedestrian mall, Susan sat in one corner

While I went across the alley to stand in line for ice cream.

I remember hearing a baby's cry for a few seconds,

but then it blended into the cacophony of the crowd.

Returning 7-8 minutes later, her ice-cream cone in hand,

I looked at my wife, whose eyes and heart were riveted,

Across the alleyway... One look was all it took.

“Go ahead,” I said. “Help them...”

I watched as Susan approached the young couple, not English speakers,

With their newborn – maybe a few weeks, who'd been crying now

for a good 15 minutes. The Mommy was beside herself.

The Gramma had tried to help, but to no avail.

The father stood by helpless. And my wife, a total stranger,

Sticks out her arms, smiles sweetly and says:

“Give me the baby...”

And as the Mommy hands the screaming 3 week old over to Susan,

Sitting and resituating the infant, patting his back gently,

Within seconds, he stops crying...

Breathing easy, peaceful in my wife's arms,

the couple watches in wonder...

The Mommy: tears of joy streaming down her face;

The Daddy could only say, smiling wide: Magic.

Susan then motioned the Mommy to sit and, handing her baby back,

Showed her what to do to bring comfort, instructing:

“Don't panic and don't be nervous; the baby knows when you are.

Just love him...”

