

The K.F. Stone Weekly

(Formerly "Beating the Bushes")



September 08, 2013

THE ABSURDITY OF LIFE

Ages and ages ago, the great Rabbi/physician/philosopher Moshe ben Maimon, better known as Maimonides, or the Rambam, author of *moreh n'vukhim* -- "The Guide For the Perplexed" -- wrote something to the effect that, "When a Jew prays, it is more than words of love, devotion or supplication. It is also in the nature of a philosophical dialogue."



And so, we begin with a classic conundrum from the philosopher's playbook:

(Please note that "Co" is a pronoun I made up to use for God; it means "he/she")

Is it possible for God to create a boulder that is so massive, so heavy, that God cannot lift it?"

For argument's sake, let us say that your response is: "Of course not; God is all-powerful; there is nothing that God cannot do. And thus, it is, by definition impossible for God to create a boulder that Co could not lift up."

"Very well," we respond. "But if God cannot create a boulder that is so massive, so heavy that Co cannot pick it up, then, by definition, there is at least one thing which

God *cannot* do. And that, by definition, would disqualify God from being God, for, by definition, Co is all powerful . . . there is virtually nothing beyond God."

Talk about a philosophical conundrum! At first – and second – glance, it would appear to be a first-class head-scratcher . . . a situation without a solution. Actually, Maimonides did provide his students with an answer; one which has virtually nothing to do with the problem's parameters. Maimonides' response has nothing to do with questions of God, boulders or the possible limits on God's omnipotence. Before giving you Maimonides' answer, I will tell you that it is both deeply profound and profoundly modern – despite being more than 800 years old. The answer reduces to one of three Hebrew expressions -- מגחך לגמרי or שטויות הגיוני לא, pronounced *sh'tuyot, lo heg'yoni* and *m'gukhach l'gamray* -- which will be translated further down the page.

Make no mistake about it: we live in a world that is increasingly divided and absurd. Many are fascinated by what the future may bring in terms of technological progress; just as many fear it and long for a return to what they believe was a simpler, more sensible time. The challenges and birthpangs of post-modernity are a tonic for some, just plain toxic for others. And just as the older we get, the more quickly time seems to fly. So too with progress and technology. I remember going to Disneyland -- the original one in Anaheim, California -- for the first time back in the summer of 1955 -- about a month after its official opening. At the time, a book of tickets cost \$4.00; parking was free. Back in those days rides and attractions were labeled "A" through "E," with the "E" tickets getting you into (or on to) the best, most popular rides and attractions. In 1955, THE attraction that everyone wanted to go on -- the one with the longest line -- was "Mr. Toad's Wild Ride." The one attraction which fascinated me the most was "The House of Tomorrow," located at the entrance to "Tomorrowland," in a garden area that looked out on "Sleeping Beauty Castle." The House, which was built by a consortium made up of Monsanto, Walt Disney and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, included, a rudimentary microwave, a hands-free push-button phone, electric toothbrushes and a typewriter that responded to human speech. At the time, it all seemed so "Jules Verne" -- so impossibly futuristic. And yet, unbelievably, the House of Tomorrow lasted barely a decade; by late 1967, it was torn down because it was no longer "tomorrow." The period of gestation -- between first dream and marketing of product -- was less than a decade. Compare that to such technological marvels as the airplane, submarine and telephone, which were dreamed of centuries before their invention.



As we say in Hebrew, רץ זמן, "time flies." The world today is both complex and absurd -

- and not just because of the speed of technological upgrading. Its very absurdity causes people to be increasingly angry, argumentative, insecure, impatient and dissatisfied. We contact more and communicate less. Much of what we have to say to others must be said in 140 keystrokes or less. We text while driving, eating or watching a ballgame; I've actually watched high school and college-age people text friends they were sitting next to at Starbucks! We are frustrated if our smart phone isn't the latest; most have lost the ability to add a simple column of figures without an electronic device; we expect every glitch to be rectified within the hour. Most of us have the capacity to record, videotape or email regardless of where we are, and feel cheated if today's speed isn't exponentially greater than yesterday's. As a result of all the perpetual upgrading, we have lost patience for the many focal human endeavors which are not susceptible to electronic gadgetry: such things as resolving a dispute, reaching a compromise or mending a broken heart.

Dear old Dad used to say that a gentleman should discuss neither religion nor politics in public. Considering the number of testy public disputes the two issues cause nowadays, perhaps he was correct. Increasingly, people who hold opposing points of view cannot get along -- witness the strident nastiness coming out of Washington, D.C., Tallahassee, Albany and a hundred-and-one other locations where politics take place. One side refuses to work with -- let alone be civil towards -- the other. Compromise has become both a four-letter word and a sign of weakness. More often than not both political parties believe that their position on any given issue is a Platonic absolute; something handed down from Mt. Sinai, so to speak.

As one who has written a weekly syndicated political column for more than a decade, and been involved in the hurley-burley of partisan politics for nearly a half-century, I can tell you that many who disagree with what I have to say are downright cruel and hateful. While I gladly accept that they hold a different opinion or point of view, they are certain that I am wrong and they are right. Ah the absurdity of it all!

For Jews the world over, Rosh Hashana is the time, par excellence to measure and balance the absurdities and perils of modern life with the eternal truths which actually were handed down from Mt. Sinai. In modern terms, Rosh Hashana is kind of like entering a school-zone; a place bounded by flashing lights which commands us to slow down and exercise maximal vigilance. At Rosh Hashana we are meant to humble ourselves, to recognize that we are not masters, but rather partners; that true wealth is measured in values, not valuables. And by values, we refer not to the ones which we give lip service, but rather to the ones which actually guide and shape our daily lives. At Rosh Hashana and throughout עשרת ימי תשובה – the Ten Days of Repentance -- we are supposed to be asking forgiveness from both God and humankind; to humble and debase ourselves; to lay our souls upon an altar of contrition and understand that though the world be a whirling mass of absurdity, it is the creation of a beneficent God

who wishes nothing more than that we get along with one another; that we help one another, that we recognize that disagreement need not lead to rancor or hostility, and that we recognize that we are all in this life together.

In the rabbinic work פרקי אבות -- the "Ethics of the Rabbis," we find a statement from Hillel which, to my way of thinking is perhaps the most fundamental truth ever expressed. For Hillel taught: במקום, בו שאין אנשים להיות השתדל איש -- namely, "In a place where people are acting like base idiots, you strive to be a mentsch -- a good human being."

So now we return to Maimonides' philosophical conundrum: How does he solve the riddle? If we say that God cannot create a rock or boulder that is too heavy for Co to pick up, then we are imputing to God an inability. Then again, if we then say that God *can* indeed create a rock or boulder that is too heavy for Co to pick up, we have done precisely the same thing . . . impute to God a shortcoming. So what is Maimonides answer? Precisely this: that the problem is with the very question itself, which is מגחך -- "utterly absurd" -- לא הגיוני -- "illogical" and/or שטויות -- roughly, "crapola." And, he teaches, we can expect all things from God save one . . . to be either absurd or illogical.

And so, at Rosh Hashana, living as we do in an absurd world, a world which whirls and spins and changes at the speed of life, we must look upon this day as a school zone -- a place and a time where we slow down, exercise maximal vigilance, and prepare ourselves for the year ahead.

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September 17, 2013

WHEN IS A TERRORIST ATTACK NOT A TERRORIST ATTACK?

Oh the humanity.

Once again, a deranged citizen has gone on a killing spree, this time targeting civilian employees at the [Washington Navy Yard](#). Armed with a sawed-off shotgun, a handgun and an AR-15 (as of this morning, officials believe he took the latter two from people he shot), 34-year old Aaron Alexis went on a two-hour shooting rampage, killing a dozen people before being shot and killed by authorities. If past experience teaches us



anything, the nation's on-again-off-again debate over gun control will heat up, only to cool down. The name Aaron Alexis will be broadcast so many times over the next week or two that virtually everyone in the country will know who he was, where he lived, how he spent the last several days before going on his deadly spree, and perhaps even something of the demons that residing inside his head.

And then, Aaron Alexis will be conjoined to a growing [list of mass-murderers](#) whose ranks include such infamous creatures as:

- **Adam Lanza**, who gunned down 20 children and 6 adults in Newtown, Connecticut on December 14, 2012.
- **Wade Michael Page**, who murdered 6 Sikh temple members in Oak Creek, Wisconsin on August 5, 2012.

- **James Holmes**, the Aurora gunman who killed 12 and wounded 58 during a midnight screening of "The Dark Knight Rises" on July 20, 2012
- **Jared Loughner** who opened fire at a Safeway market in Tucson, killing 6 and wounding many, including then-U.S. Representative Gabrielle Giffords on January 8, 2011.
- **Nidal Malik Hasan**, who killed 13 and wounded 29 others at the Fort Hood army base in Texas on November 5, 2009.
- **Seung-Hui Choi** who gunned down 56 students -- 32 of whom died -- at Virginia Tech on April 16, 2007.
- **Eric Harris and Dylan Kiebold**, who shot up Columbine High School in Colorado, killing 13 and wounding 21 others on April 20, 1999.

From what little has yet to emerge about the late Mr. Alexis, it would appear that he was mentally unstable, had a prior arrest record, suffered from "anger management issues," was subject to bouts of hallucination for which he was being treated by doctors at the Veterans' Administration. This information was obviously not difficult to ascertain, it being made public within hours of the massacre. It seems to me that had there been even the most basic background check on the books, he likely would not have been able to purchase the shotgun with which he began his deadly spree. Yes, I know: a "mere" background check might not have stopped him . . . and then there are obviously many unanswered questions at this early juncture, such as how he got onto the grounds of the Washington Navy Yard with a shotgun in the first place. Nonetheless, faced with yet another bout of horrific gun violence, how can one sit still and do nothing but mourn?

As of this morning, the National Rifle Association (NRA) has, unsurprisingly, been rather mute. One can fully expect their public face, Wayne LaPierre to issue a statement sharing in the sorrow, and calling for a period of mournful silence. Within a week, he will likely issue another statement informing the public that background checks would never have stopped Mr. Alexis, and that the only way to deter gun violence is for citizens to be more fully armed.

The chilling irony of this latest massacre is that it comes within the same week that Colorado voters ousted two state legislators who were instrumental in passing legislation which stiffened state gun laws. The two, Colorado Senate President John Morse and Pueblo-area Representative Angela Giron, were responsible for enacting a law -- signed by Democratic Governor John Hickenlooper -- which limited gun magazines to 15 rounds and required universal background checks, to be paid for by the gun purchaser, among other restrictions. As mild as these measures might seem, the two were handily replaced by Republicans who opposed the new restrictions. (It should be noted that the original legislation passed without a single Republican vote). The recall vote -- the first one to succeed in Colorado state history -- was well funded by both the NRA on the Republican side and New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg and his

"Mayors Against Illegal Guns" organization on the Democratic side of the aisle. Opponents of the legislation are hoping to qualify a ballot initiative in 2014 that would repeal some of the provisions. A group of sheriffs has also filed suit to overturn the legislation.

And so, these Colorado voters were convinced that something as benign as background checks or limiting gun magazines to 15 rounds was an infringement on their Constitutional right to bear arms. One wonders if they are equally as vigilant when it comes to the various and sundry measures enacted in what has come to be known as the "War Against Terror." Ever since 9/11 Congress and the president have "done whatever it takes" to protect the nation from future terrorist attacks. Some of these measures -- warrantless wiretaps, secret renditions and data mining -- are of questionable legality. Nonetheless, the measures are ongoing; anything to save the country from a repeat of September 11, 2001. But isn't yesterday's massacre an act of terror as well? Is there anything on the books -- or in the dictionary -- which defines or limits a terrorist attack only to those actions taken by foreigners fueled by apocalyptic ideologies? By definition, a "terrorist" is "a person who terrorizes or frightens others." By definition then, Aaron Alexis -- like Adam Lanza, Jared Loughner, Dzhokhar Tsarnaev (the Boston Marathon bomber) and Richard Reid (the so-called "Shoe Bomber") is a terrorist who perpetrated a terrorist attack on American citizens living on American soil. It seems to me only consistent that those who support the "whatever it takes" approach to foreign acts of terror should be equally vigilant when the terrorists are home-grown and home-sown. For regardless of whatever the nationality, ideology or pathology of a terrorist may be, the outcome is the same: death and destruction.

When is a terrorist attack *not* a terrorist attack . . . ?

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September 23, 2013

IT WAS THE BEST OF WEEKS, IT WAS THE WORST OF WEEKS

To paraphrase Boz, "*It was the best of weeks, it was the worst of weeks, it was a week of foolishness, it was a week belief . . . it was the summer of hope, it was the fall of despair. .*



. ." Yes indeed, this past week has had its fill of "foolishness and belief," of "hope and despair."

And the truly sad fact that is that as a society, we have become so accustomed to bad news and bumptious stupidity that we are all but incapable of finding warmth in a ray of sunlight or relief in a calming sea. There once was a time when America was suffused with giddy optimism; a sense that tomorrow would be even better than today. Now, more often than not, we parse the positive in search of negativity, treating hope as if it were nothing more than a four-letter chimera. To come to such a pass is sad -- truly sad. For what is human worth without hope? [About \\$160](#) . . .

First, the week's foolishness:

- On Friday, the House of Representatives went on record as being irrevocably against the law of the land -- the Affordable Care Act, aka Obamacare. The only difference in this, their 41st or 42nd vote against it is that now, they are going to tie the defunding of Obamacare (which will never happen) to keeping the federal government up and running. To me, it is unbelievable that so many Republicans can be so incredibly against a program that hasn't yet gone into effect. One member of Congress

- warned, " . . . we cannot stand idly by now, as the Nation is urged to embark on an ill-conceived adventure in government medicine." Another chimed in "We are going on the assumption that this is not socialized medicine. Let me tell you here and now it is socialized medicine." A third said "It is socialism. It moves the country in a direction which is not good for anyone, whether they be young or old. It charts a course from which there will be no turning back." And yet a fourth bellowed "I am not exaggerating the folly of this legislation. The saving it forces on our workers is a cruel hoax." (Oops! Turns out these quotes are from: 1) Rep. Durward Hall (R-MO), 08/1965; 2) Rep. James Utt (R-CA), 08/1965; 3) Sen. Carl Curtis (R-NE) 01/1966; 4) Kansas Governor Alf Landon, Oct. 15, 1936. [The first 3](#) were speaking about the dangers of Medicare, and [Governor Landon](#) about Social Security.)
- On Thursday, the Republican-led House voted 217-210 to cut \$39 billion in funds over the next decade for food stamp programs. The nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office estimated that if the bill also passes the Senate, up to 3.8 million people will lose food stamp benefits next year. Republicans stressed that the bill is needed to stop runaway spending in the food stamp program, which has roughly doubled under the Obama administration. They also said the bill is focused on reducing payments to able-bodied adults and focusing payments on more needy populations. "There's no denying that SNAP provides important support for many Americans who are struggling," said House Agriculture Committee Chairman Frank Lucas (R-Okla.). "It serves a noble purpose to help you when you hit bottom. But it's not meant to keep you at the bottom."

Now for some hope:

- As of yesterday, it would appear that the American/Russian diplomatic effort to pressure Syria into getting rid of its chemical weapons is working. The [Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons](#), the watchdog group known as the O.P.C.W. that oversees the international agreement banning poison gas, said on Friday that Syria had provided "an initial declaration" of its chemical weapons program. The submission met the first deadline for Syrian compliance that was set down by the framework agreement that the United States and Russia concluded in Geneva last weekend. (Needless to say, there are those who claim that joining the Russians in this diplomatic -- rather than military -- effort, only goes to show that President Obama is "weak," "rudderless," and "has no foreign policy.")
- Over the past week, there have been several goodwill gestures and hints of diplomatic flexibility coming from Iran's ruling establishment. In a near staccato burst of pronouncements, statements and speeches by the

new president, Hassan Rouhani; his foreign minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif; and even the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the leadership sent [Rosh Hasnahah greetings to Jews worldwide via Twitter](#), released political prisoners, exchanged letters with President Obama, praised “flexibility” in negotiations and transferred responsibility for nuclear negotiations from the conservatives in the military to the Foreign Ministry. And, in a little-reported move, Iranian Internet users woke up to find that they can now access Facebook and Twitter without having to evade the government's firewall, which had blocked direct access to the sites for years. Whether or not these moves are due solely to the fact that the Western embargo is working or that President Rouhani is really, truly seeking accommodation is at this juncture an unknown. Nonetheless, it is a welcome change from the rhetorical excesses of Rouhani's predecessor, the bellicose Achmadinejad.

- In a wide-ranging interview the other day, Pope Francis affirmed his support for gays and lesbians, spoke candidly about his mistakes and doubts, and made clear that the Vatican, in his estimation, has fixated for far too long on a narrow set of controversial issues and “small-minded rules.” *“The church's pastoral ministry cannot be obsessed with the transmission of a disjointed multitude of doctrines to be imposed insistently,”* he said. *“We have to find a new balance; otherwise even the moral edifice of the church is likely to fall like a house of cards.”* In describing that new balance, the pope's language was suffused with ambiguity, uncertainty and doubt -- in other words, the language of reality. And perhaps most strikingly, he showed himself to be comfortable with change.
- In Saudi Arabia, Members of the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice in Saudi Arabia have been told not to arrest women driving cars. “There is no law or specific text that allows the Commission members to do it,” a source at the religious organisation said, the London-based Saudi daily *Al Hayat* reported. “The arrest of women driving cars is within the powers and jurisdiction of the security authorities. The Commission for the promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice applies the rules of the state and cannot go beyond them.” The Commission members have been told not to interpret cases or commit offenses related to the prosecution of women on charges of driving, the source said. For a country in which, until recently, women were even forbidden to ride bicycles, this is a move in the right direction.

Have the stars realigned? Has a sane breeze begun wafting over an otherwise psychotic planet? Only God knows. But for me, I will take momentary delight not in the worst of last week, but in its best -- in what Boz called “. . . the season of light . . . the spring of hope.”

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September 29, 2013

A MEMO TO SPEAKER JOHN BOEHNER

TO: Speaker John Boehner

FROM: K. F. Stone

RE: Growing a Pair

I can imagine you, walking about your palatial suite of offices asking yourself "What in the Hell am I doing?" As you walk the hallways from office to office (there are more than a dozen of 'em spread out over four floors) you see the portraits of your sixty predecessors -- all the way back to the first Speaker, Frederick Muhlenberg, who wielded the gavel in both the 1st and 3rd Congress. As you continue your trek, looking at the gazing at images of the famous -- Henry Clay, James Knox Polk, Nicholas Longworth and Sam Rayburn -- you must wonder if it has been worth it -- bringing the federal government to the very brink of disaster. Believe me, Mr. Speaker, if the



government shuts down beginning October 1, that's all history will ever remember you for. You'll be your generation's Newt Gingrich who, as most sentient beings realize, is, was, and always shall be, an amoral narcissist.

Ever since you first took the Speaker's gavel you have caved in to your right -- read "Tea Party" -- flank. You have acted like a man who's more fearful of his colleagues' opprobrium than of leading the country to wreck and ruin. Unless I'm grossly wrong, you have put your party's -- and personal -- political agenda far, far ahead of the nation's needs. You have permitted your party's tin-hat brigade to dictate policy, thereby making you seem both politically weak and morally tone-deaf.

Curiously, for one whose title is "Speaker," you have spent the lion's share of time in that vaunted position being precisely the opposite: you have been silent. This is especially true when it comes to the Affordable Care Act -- Obamacare. The crazier and more detached from reality your über conservative colleagues have become, the more silent *you* have become; as if to question for even a nano-second the veracity of their "facts" would lead to the certain death of your Speakership.

When [Eric Cantor](#), your party's Majority Leader claimed that under Obamacare, "The IRS will have access to the American people's protected healthcare information" [patently false and absurd], you said NOTHING.

When Florida [Senator Marco Rubio](#) flatly stated that under Obamacare "75% of all small businesses now say they are going to be forced to either fire workers or cut their hours" [not even remotely true], you said NOTHING.

When Minnesota Representative [Michelle Bachmann](#) falsely claimed that the IRS is going to be "in charge" of a "huge national database" on health care that will include Americans' "personal, intimate, most close-to-the-vest-secrets" [abject nonsense], you said NOTHING.



When Texas Senator Ted Cruz told the Conservative Political Action Conference that the Democrats warned the Catholic Church that they'll use federal powers to shut down church charities and hospitals if the church doesn't change its beliefs [Say what?], you said NOTHING.

When former Alaska Governor [Sarah Palin](#) claimed -- back in August 2009, that seniors and the disabled "will have to stand in front of Obama's 'death panel' so his bureaucrats can decide, based on a subjective judgment of their 'level of productivity in society,' whether they are worthy of health care" [about as off-the-wall as you can get], you said NOTHING. And lastly,

When [a chain letter](#) made its way around the Internet claiming that the word "Dhimmitude" is on page 107 of the health care law and means "Muslims are specifically exempted from the government mandate to purchase insurance" [an easily demonstrable falsehood] you said NOTHING.

Clearly, the Tea Party flank's obsession with Obamacare has scared the living daylight out of you. I guess you fear that if even once you were to say something like "*Ah come*

off it . . . it's the law of the land, passed by Congress and approved by the Supreme Court . . . get over it and let's move on to far more important issues . . ." that you would lose your Speakership. So let me ask you, Mr. Speaker: is it worth it? If you have to keep on caving in to the four dozen or so of the most manic members in your caucus -- of holding vote after vote after vote on defunding Obamacare [despite knowing that it will never happen], of holding the full faith and credit of the American government [and thereby the economic stability of the entire planet] up for ransom unless they get their way . . . is being Speaker of the House truly worth it? Hey, you're not going to be defeated for reelection. Ohio's Eighth District is the second-most heavily Republican in the state; you've been easily reelected ever since 1990; in 2012 you were even unopposed. And while it is true that you've been a "conservative's conservative" for the better part of a quarter century, you used to know how to reach across the aisle in order to get things done. You may have been staunch, but you were never nuts. Up until recently, you had little problem forming partnerships in order to pass bipartisan legislation on issues ranging from special education funding to the safeguarding of airline industry workers' pension funds. You use to recognize that sometimes you have to pass legislation which, although you may personally oppose it, is in the best interest of the nation -- as when you delivered Republican votes for the \$700 billion rescue of the financial-services industry despite characterizing it as a "[crap sandwich](#)."

Hey, maybe I'm giving you too much credit; maybe I'm ascribing far more decency, common sense and love of country than you deserve. I hope not. But please, Mr. Speaker, know that you are supposed to be a leader, not a follower. You are supposed to take your marching orders from the people whose portraits adorn your walls; not from the petulant children who truly believe that government is the problem and that anyone who compromises with Democrats should be condemned to the lowest depths of hell. I really, truly doubt whether you, who sits in the same office once occupied by such giants as William Bankhead (that's Tallulah's daddy), "Uncle Joe" Cannon, and Tip O'Neill got to the top of the greasy pole merely by having a great smile and ready handshake. There must have been something more . . . something which of late has been missing.

In Italian, they call that missing ingredient *i coglioni*; in Spanish, its *cojones*; in Yiddish, we call 'em ביצים (pronounced *BAY-tzem*). I urge you to grow a pair Mr. Speaker; goodness knows, the future of the nation could depend on it . . .

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