



JEWISH COMMENTARY

Tucker Screwtape

MEIR Y. SOLOVEICHIK

IN 1942, with the world at war, an Oxford tutor wrote a book about traditional faith unlike any other ever published. It consists of missives from a senior devil in a demonic bureaucracy who is guiding a junior devil tasked with tempting one specific soul to achieve that man's damnation. The senior devil is named Screwtape, and his letters are addressed to his nephew, Wormwood. C.S. Lewis's brilliant conceit is that every one of Screwtape's letters serves as a sort of mirror in which all moral categories are inverted. Thus Screwtape refers to God as "our Enemy above," and to Satan as "our father below." For this bureaucratic demon, Hell is a source of admiration, Heaven an object of horror. Damnation is desired, and eternal life with God is disdained. By experiencing an instinctive horror at these moral reversals, the reader is to intuit the right and the good.

Many decades later, in September 2024, America was treated to a Screwtape Letter of its own. Tucker Carlson, one of the most popular podcasters in America, hosted a "historian" on his show whose description of World War II involved a reversal of all obvious moral categories and historical facts. In this vile revisionist retelling of the war, Winston Churchill was cast as

the "chief villain" of the episode and a "psychopath," while Hitler was portrayed as a reasonable statesman who sought peace and understanding with England. Carlson's interlocutor attributed the death of countless multitudes in German camps to an unfortunate lack of preparation on the part of Germany, and an overpopulation of POWs. Carlson, in turn, enthusiastically agreed with his guest's characterization of Churchill and said his intention was to ensure that the guest would come to be seen as "the most important historian in the United States." Unlike Lewis's satire, this was done in all seriousness: Evil was really good, the heroes of history were actually villains, and the Holocaust, we are informed, never happened.

Screwtape lives.

The entire episode was horrifying. But it is worth noting, in this context, what the very inspiration for *The Screwtape Letters* might have been. According to some accounts, C.S. Lewis got the idea by listening to a boring sermon and apparently began to wonder what it would be like to hear a speech advocating evil. He wrote the following to his brother:

Before the service was over—one cd. wish these things came more seasonably—I was struck by an idea for a book wh. I think might be both useful and entertaining. It wd. be called *As one Devil to Another* and would consist of letters from an elderly retired devil to a young devil

MEIR Y. SOLOVEICHIK *is the rabbi of Congregation Shearith Israel in New York City and the director of the Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought at Yeshiva University.*

who has just started work on his first “patient.” The idea wd. be to give all the psychology of temptation from the other point of view.

But there was another possible source of inspiration, and that was hearing Hitler himself, and the evil, execrable, and eloquent way in which the chancellor made the case for his cause. A blog known as A Pilgrim in Narnia by a dedicated Lewis fan named Brenton Dickieson points to an earlier passage in that same letter: “I don’t know if I’m weaker than other people: but it is a positive revelation to me how while [Hitler’s] speech lasts it is impossible not to waver just a little. I should be useless as a schoolmaster or a policeman. Statements which I know to be untrue all but convince me, at any rate for the moment, if only the man says them unflinchingly.”

Lewis began to ponder how Hitler utilized his rhetorical gifts to frame the most horrific position imaginable as something entirely reasonable. Dickieson found the speech by Hitler to which Lewis was referring. It was delivered on July 19, 1940, and was called “My Last Appeal to Great Britain: A Great Empire Will Be Destroyed.” Dickieson writes: “The entire speech is an exercise in turning the conversation on its head. England is the aggressor; Germany the victim. England is dictatorial; Germany is democratic. The British are weak; the Germans and Italians are strong. Churchill is a madman without reason; Hitler and Mussolini are reasoned men of the world. The logic is, to me, very much like Screwtape’s.”

For those who have watched the course of Carlson’s career, the recent showcasing of a Nazi defender and Holocaust denier is not a surprise, but it is, unquestionably, a new low. And it is a reminder that one does not need to adopt the Christian approach to Satan, and to *Paradise Lost*, to understand that today, in the United States, genuine demons walk, and pod-

cast, amongst us. They may use microphones instead of missives to advance their morally inverted cause, but what they still seek is to sway souls to embrace evil.

Some years ago, I visited, with a Jewish group, the infamous villa at Wannsee. It was there that the Nazi leadership had gathered to plan the destruction of millions of Jews—the murdered multitudes whose

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memories Carlson and his guest so desecrated. Before we entered the villa, I sought words to capture the terrible fact that this great crime was planned in this placid setting. And so I turned to this very Jewish assembly and quoted Lewis, a Christian author, and his description of why he had chosen to depict devils not as pitchfork-wielding creatures but as bureaucratic letter-writers:

I live in the Managerial Age, in a world of “Admin.” The greatest evil is not now done in those sordid “dens of crime” that Dickens loved to paint. It is not done even in concentration camps and labour camps. In those we see its final result. But it is conceived and ordered (moved, seconded, carried, and minuted) in clean, carpeted, warmed and well-lighted of-

fices, by quiet men with white collars and cut fingernails and smooth-shaven cheeks who do not need to raise their voices.

Evil is furthered by many, including those who foster hatred and lies without raising their voices and by those who claim to be “just asking questions.” These are some of the demons of our time. It was Churchill who, in describing his hatred for his foe, quipped that “if Hitler invaded hell I would at least make a favorable reference to the devil in the house of commons.” But the devil amongst us has made things simple by embracing Hitler himself; all we need do is recognize it, and, in response to the Screwtapes of our age, continue to call evil by its name. 