

Daily Meditation 10-12-2026

Neiman on Evil, continued

Good morning.

In this morning's essay, we meditate on the book by Susan Neiman, *Call It Evil: Understanding the Trump Era*. And last Wednesday, I also meditated on this book with you, emphasizing the first seven or eight pages of the book's introduction. And this morning is really mostly reflecting on her last pages, where she holds Einstein up as a marvelous example of a courageous person who stood for justice at so many levels.

This is from the last chapter, chapter seven, which is called "Socialism Reconsidered," and she begins it with a quote from George Orwell, who says,

Socialists have never made it sufficiently clear that the essential aims of socialism are justice and liberty. With their eyes glued to economic facts, they have proceeded on the assumption that man has no soul. And explicitly or implicitly, they have set up the goal of a materialistic utopia. Materialistic utopia. As a result, fascism has been able to play on every instinct that votes against hedonism and a cheap conception of progress.

I think that's an amazing observation by George Orwell that socialism has not spoken out about its goals of justice and liberty, as spoken with what I would call within the modern context of materialism, materialistic utopia, and this opens the door to fascism. And maybe one reason so much fascism is in fact generated in the name of religion, and obviously that is not healthy. Sometimes I've requested that some pope should write an encyclical about how you cannot be both a fascist and a Christian.

Now, I'd like to take you through some other chapters of hers. The chapter preceding that one, chapter six, is called "What Woke got Wrong." What woke got wrong. So she's beginning with the assumption that some of the criticism of wokeness, which the right wing in America today has made a very big no-no. Some of it is qualified, is appropriate: That too much of a woke consciousness is easy to criticize because it's all about identity politics. And she points out this fact:

Vicious politicians (this is on page 174) know how to take advantage of liberal failures. Wokeness clearly played a role in the second election of Donald Trump.

And she throws out these statistics: *Trump, as you may remember, ran in 2024 anti-trans ads and broadcast them before the election. And under that tsunami of ads, all about trans, as if this was the issue in 2024, Kamala Harris's numbers shifted in Trump's favor by 2.7%.*

For those who saw them, they did a study of this. And Harris lost the popular vote by 1.7%. So those ads, which of course were paid for by Elon Musk and other billionaires, who've taken advantage of the Supreme Court's invitation that billionaires and corporations spend as much as they want, essentially on elections. So, again, Harris lost by 1.7 points.

The sentiment against Harris increased by 2.7% following the tsunami of ads about trans people. Anti-trans ads. She says, Rights can be defended only by political majorities, and these cannot be won by focusing on problems that affect less than 1% of the world's population, or disregarding the trouble of the rest.

So it's not that she's saying that people should be anti-trans. But that political sphere, this can be manipulated very readily, and it literally cost Harris the election.

67% of 2024 voters said Democrats are too focused on identity politics. But she says, To be more accurate, it's really about tribal representation. Vote for me, and your tribe will prosper. Diversity is a good thing, but it isn't the only one. The only good thing. So there are ways to do the politics and all this much more appropriately.

So let us turn now to another chapter. This one is on "Why Gaza Matters." Now Susan Neiman is herself Jewish, but she's extremely critical, as many rabbis and Jews that I know are, of what's been going on in Gaza. She says,

Sheer numbers (page 135) don't explain why so much of the world finally concluded that the war in Gaza was evil, in ways that other wars are not. She talks about the young people, about the protesters all around the world, and certainly protesters on the university campuses.

Anti-Semitism is a problem I've known since I was a child in Atlanta, she says. But by 2022, Netanyahu's government included self-described fascists. And one Jewish writer at the University of Tel Aviv wrote this: "All democracies are flawed. Israel as a country's operating system is fundamentally at odds with the values that define the Western democracies with which it so energetically affiliates itself.

Anyone who has followed Israel and Palestine, says Susan, for the last few decades, knew that Israel's response to the October 7th atrocity would be out of proportion. Hamas knew it too, provoking a massive response from Israel's far-right government, which in turn would provoke international outrage at Israel, was the whole point. This is why Joe Biden advised Netanyahu, they should not make the mistakes America made after 9/11, but his warning was ignored.

The rules-based world order has been buried in the rubble of Gaza, she says. In protecting Netanyahu, it gave future permission for anyone -- "it" being the American government -- to disdain international law, ignore the few laws of war still in force, bomb hospitals, and kill journalists with impunity. If the direction Israel is on with Gaza continues, it will take its place as a brutalist nation's interests in sheer greed. International law will be replaced with nothing but brutalist nationalist interests and sheer greed.

So she has this entire chapter dedicated to Gaza. And she sees it as the epitome of destruction of a common moral conscience. Speaking of moral conscience, her book begins with an amazing statement from Madison, one of the founders of our country:

Is there no virtue among us? If there be not, we are in a wretched situation. No theoretical checks, no form of government, can render us secure. To suppose that any form of government will secure liberty or happiness without any virtue in the people, is a chimerical idea that our government presumes that there must be virtue among the people, and certainly in leaders.

She has a whole chapter dedicated to ideology, and what she considers Trump's brand. She's citing Klein:

As a candidate, Trump figured out how to profit from the rage and despair left behind in communities that used to do the kind of well-paid manufacturing that companies like his long ago abandoned. It's quite a con." So she endorses that statement from Klein. And she says that there's a baleful fascination he exerts over many who loathe him. Is what he is doing and standing for, universally true? A world in which the model was truly universal would be a world in which everyone behaved like Donald Trump. Is this what we want?

So I highly recommend this book by Susan Neiman.

Thank you. We'll see you next week.