

# Experimenter

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

I recommend a recent film called *Experimenter*, a dramatization of the work of the American Jewish psychologist Stanley Milgram (1933-1984), released this past October by Magnolia Pictures. It stars Peter Sarsgaard and Winona Ryder, along with other stars.

The series of experiments conducted by Milgram at Yale University concerned the way people respond to and obey figures of authority. They measured the willingness of participants to obey an authority figure who instructed them to perform acts even when they conflicted with their personal consciences. The participants drew slips of paper to divide into “teachers” and “learners”. But some of the participants were, in fact, confederates—actors who would always be designated as the “learners”, unbeknownst to the actual participants, who would always be the “teachers”.

Sitting in separate rooms connected only by speakers, the teacher asked a series of questions. If the learner got the answers wrong, he was given an electric shock, rising each time in intensity. In fact, the learner was not being shocked, but the teacher would hear cries of pain and then pleas to stop as the current got stronger, since actors were playing the parts of the victims.

The experiments began in July 1961, three months after the start of the trial of German Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem. Milgram devised his psychological study to answer the question at that time as to how Eichmann and his accomplices in the Holocaust were morally able to just follow orders. Milgram first described his research in 1963 in an article published in the *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* and later discussed his findings in greater depth in his 1974 book, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View*. However, as the film shows, the experiments were highly controversial.

In 2014 a paper in the British Journal of Social Psychology by researchers Professor Alex Haslam (University of Queensland), Professor Stephen Reicher (University of St Andrews), Professor Kathryn Millard (Macquarie University), and Professor Rachel McDonald (University of Kansas) argued that the meaning of the experiment has been misunderstood. They analyzed the feedback that 659 of the 800 volunteers provided at the end of the experiment, after the set-up had been revealed.

Most volunteers said they were very happy to have participated. Because they did not think they had done anything wrong. They were convinced that they had made an important contribution to science. This tends to confirm the idea that perpetrators are generally motivated not by a desire to do evil, but by a sense that what they are doing is worthy and noble.

Of course when we apply such ideas to Hitler’s Germany, one can see how the German tendency towards accepting authority, combined with its quasi-

religious worship of Hitler and his regime, might have led so many of its citizens to really believe that murdering Jews was a noble cause. Hannah Arendt argued that it was simply the "banality of evil". I cannot help but see this as an apologetic, whether conscious or not, for her love for and rehabilitation of the Nazi philosopher Heidegger. But that really ignores the issue of what leads or causes such human betrayal of good. Professor Reicher and his colleagues' critique is only concerned with the morality of the experiment of course, not the issues it originally sought to address.

"Shock Room," was a film by Professor Kathryn Millard that explored how people make the choice to obey or disobey authority, which challenges the Milgram "Obedience to Authority" paradigm and reevaluates its conclusions. Instead of a latent capacity for evil, we just want to feel good about ourselves. So it was not a willingness to inflict pain on other humans, but rather a desire to please.

Another controversial experiment was a study of the psychological effects of becoming a prisoner or a prison guard, conducted at Stanford University in 1971 by psychologist Philip Zimbardo and his team. The participants adapted to their roles beyond expectations. The guards enforced authoritarian measures beyond their original brief and with unexpected gusto. The experiments were terminated prematurely because of it.

Zimbardo argued that that the situation, rather than their individual personalities, caused the participants' behavior and that results are compatible with the results of the Milgram experiment. Nevertheless several outstanding psychologists disagreed including Erich Fromm and Peter Gray finding faults with Zimbardo's experiment.

When acts of prisoner torture and abuse at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq were publicized in March 2004, Zimbardo was dismayed by official military and government representatives' shifting the blame for the torture and abuses onto "a few bad apples", rather than acknowledging it as possibly systemic problems of a formally established military incarceration system.

This is what disturbs me about our current intellectual world. We have a built-in, I would say intellectually conditioned, tendency to look for THE answer, as if there were only one. The Theory, The Explanation, when there are usually several that may even sometimes conflict. There is no doubt in my mind that amongst those who murdered Jews (throughout Europe, I might add) were some sadistic sub-humans, some who were ideologically and religiously educated to think of Jews as vermin that needed to be destroyed, others were eager to do their duty and please their superiors. On the other side, there were a number of exceptions who retained a moral compass despite everything the world around them and their own evil impulses might have been pressurizing them to do.

Single, simplistic theories are always suspect. Conditioning, pressure, human nature, prejudice, dehumanization—they all played a part. But above all, it was and is a human problem. We require strong disciplinary structures and standards. This is precisely what we lack now in Europe where anti-Jewish sentiment is increasing and being tolerated by more and more people living in

supposedly civilized societies. Whole groups all around the world are being vilified—whether it is Israelis, Jews, Muslims, or blacks. We are no longer looking at individuals, but at generalizations. Social and educational conditioning create an atmosphere in which certain types of violent reactions are encouraged. And there are political consequences when such group pressure affects parties too eager for power at any cost. Let us not deny that there is some of this in our own ranks. But not everyone in such environments responds violently or inhumanely. We need to look to our own souls as well as the state of the society we live in. An effective spiritual religious education needs to emphasize both.

May we have a happy and peaceful 2016. But happiness and peace need to be consciously and positively worked for. They do not happen by chance.