

Meet a Congregant: Abigail Martin

By Gail Snyder

With her petite frame and big brown eyes, Abigail Martin does not look the part of someone who is an authority on evil. Yet this congregant, a philosophy professor emeritus, has the bona fides.

As those who attended her Adult Education talk at the temple last month are aware, Martin's most recent book is *A Good Look at Evil*. The new edition, published in 2018 by Wipf & Stock, was written under her professional name: Abigail L. Rosenthal, and is a redo of a title published by Temple University Press in 1987.

Why redo a 32-year-old book? Martin has a simple answer: "Nothing in the field [of philosophy] seems quite as new or cutting edge as what I published in 1987. It still seems true."

Nonetheless, she added two new chapters to the original. "God and the Care of One's Story"—one of the new additions—now closes the book and was the chapter Martin concentrated on during her April talk at the temple.

Three weeks before Martin gave that talk, she sat down with this reporter for a conversation about evil, life stories, the Bible and God's presence in ordinary lives. At her side during the kitchen table discussion was her husband Jerry, a fellow author and philosopher and most likely her biggest fan.

Here are some of the observations Martin made that day:

Why evil interests us: "People get interested in evil for cheap thrills and because they are attracted to the lurid or the sensational or they are bored and they want to look at zombies, vampires, creepy things. They want the shock, they want the gore. But evil doesn't become a problem that besets an ordinary life unless one is trying to live a good life."

Torah study is important: "The reason I take the Bible seriously is that I think real life is still like that. [The Bible contains] very strong hints of what it is like to live. ... I don't think anybody is quite creative enough to have written these [stories] as fiction. They are based on human experience but what particular experiences and how closely the original matched the record that has come down to us in the *Tanakh* ... that's for experts to try to measure."

"The Jewish people have a covenant with God and it occurs in real time, in real culture and real circumstances. What is unique about biblical stories is the characters are flawed and recognizable as human yet they are doing something odd: trying to live in connection to God. A God who is somehow witnessing their lives and their human story. It seems exceptional. I don't know of other religions that have sacred tests that unfold quite that way."

Evil is cunning: "Evil is often portrayed as instinctive as what we are made of if you peel off the civilized layers so that the Unabomber or predators of that kind who create social mayhem are



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really more natural than civilized people and so there's a fascination with their amoral, lawlessness ... People think it is instinctive behavior but it is not. It is cunning, it's intelligent, it can be highly civilized and well-thought out. We are by nature aware and thoughtful creatures and so is the evil-doer."

Discerning between divine intervention and coincidence: In her book, Martin writes about two incidents

in which she believes God or Jewish angels intervened in her life. For example, the time that she put all of her energies into finishing her dying father's book instead of burnishing her own publishing credentials. Toward the end of his life, her father (yes, another philosophy professor) had been trying to finish a book on the Jewish-Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza. Considering the completion of the book a type of death-bed promise, Martin ignored well-meaning colleagues and friends who warned her that she should let the project go. And by ignoring these naysayers she ended up saving the day and getting a promotion after the prestigious speaker who was to deliver a talk on Spinoza was a no-show at a big event with a room full of people waiting for him to speak. In desperation, the university provost asked if anyone in the philosophy department could fill in for the British speaker who had written the date down incorrectly and had expected to give his talk the next day.

Martin thought carefully before agreeing to fill in. As she explains, "In philosophy we prepare before we say anything. Philosophy is a boxing match and you don't talk until you are aware of who the competitors are and what the field is like; we don't just get up there and schmooze." Nevertheless, she overcame her reluctance to speak off the cuff and wowed the audience with her knowledge of Spinoza gained in large part from working on her father's book. Was this a coincidence, one of those random events in the universe that somehow works out well for people? Not in Martin's view.

"It was a miracle. One of those Jewish miracles that don't require supernatural intervention. God is present in the world partnering with you. You can't count on it ... it is unpredictable. It might or might not happen. But if you interpret it as a miracle, as divine intervention, then working on my father's manuscript becomes not something of a career buster but essential to the way the story [of my life] unfolds."

Copies of *A Good Look at Evil* are available at the temple gift shop at a discount.