

Rosh Ha'shanah 2021

“Yetzer”

When the world was created, two tremendous powers were planted within each and every one of us. All our thoughts and actions, everything we are and do, are driven by these two powers: My friends - let me introduce to you.....

Yetzer ha-ra- the evil inclination, and Yetzer ha-tov - the good inclination.



Believe it or not, this idea of two voices, one angelic and one devilish, is not a Hollywood innovation but rather a 3000 year old Rabbinic idea, and one of our most important Jewish doctrines.

We were all created with these two inclinations - each and every one of us.

The Yetzer ha-tov which demands us to deepen that which is good within us, to be selfless and loving, caring and compassionate.

And the Yetzer ha-ra which appeals to our physical urges, our materialistic needs, our tendency to gravitate towards selfish gratification.

And we must wonder - why would God plant within us with this evil inclination -wouldn't we and our world be better off without having an evil inclination altogether?

The answer is surprising- our sages teach that life without the Yetzer ha-ra is impossible. Yes, impossible.

While our Yetzer ha-ra has the potential to cause harm, it is in fact the "evil inclination" which provides human life with its driving motivation.

It's the power that feeds our curiosity, it's the energy that makes us envy what others have, so that we can dream about our own success.

It helps us get us out of bed in the morning, pushing us to achieve our goals.

The sages reached this conclusion by reading the story of Creation - you see...

On every one of the days of creation, when God looked at his work we are told "And behold, God said, it was good", but after man was created, we read "And behold, God said, it was VERY good".

So, in the Talmud we find this discussion: “Rabbi Nahman said in Rabbi Samuel's name: 'Behold, it was good' refers to the good inclination; ‘And behold, it was very good' refers to the evil inclination. How is an evil inclination very good? That would be extraordinary! But without the evil inclination, no man would build a house, take a wife and beget children.”

I love our ancient rabbis, they were not living in an ivory tower, disconnected from reality, they were not trying to pretend to be self-righteous - to claim it is possible to live without this Yetzer ha-ra - **au contraire** - our rabbinic tradition even preserves this magical story: “Our sages once caught the Yetzer ha-ra –the bad inclination and bound it up with gold chains. At first, they were very pleased with themselves. Thievery stopped; murder ceased. People were suddenly friendly and loving towards one another. There was no jealousy and in all the land no arguments occurred.

Then, slowly, our sages came to a strange realization. People were so satisfied and content that they did not bother to toil. There was no competition, so people quit striving. No new houses were built. People no longer married nor wanted to have children. No babies were born.

Even chickens stopped laying eggs. Finally, even the sages themselves became lazy and put off their study of Torah. In this way, our sages learned how important the evil inclination is to the world. They broke the golden chains and set the Yetzer ha-ra free”

This story teaches us that we must accept the evil inclination as an integral part of us - and thus we must live our lives in this delicate balance between these two forces - everything we do - has the power to turn from good to bad if the Yetzer ha-ra takes over, if it becomes too powerful.

Take for example one’s ego - if managed properly, it yields a necessary level of confidence to feel worthy of one’s success.

However, when our egos are left to run rampant, we start craving respect and recognition and become arrogant and self-centered.

Or love - we all want to love and to be loved - but wanting it too much can become an obsessive, even abusive relationship. At times a passionate love can turn to lust, which can lead to horrible things.

Having money to provide for our needs, and for the needs of our loved ones is noble- but how quickly can our Yetzer ha-ra turn that need into greed.

Enjoying food becomes gluttony.

Friendly non harmful sharing of “news” about a common acquaintance can turn, with the help of Yetzer ha-ra into vile, destructive gossip.

Healthy anger becomes rage. Excellence becomes over achievement - often at a high personal and family price.

Fear that galvanizes us may become a paralyzing force, trying to avoid conflict too often can cause us to turn a blind eye to injustice.

And while Jewish wisdom recognizes how critical controlling our own evil inclination is, it recognizes how difficult it is.

In our American culture we have different ideas and images of what it means to be hero - from the fictional Superman and Wonder Women, to the more earthly real firefighters, police and armed forces, doctors and nurses, teachers and so many more.

However - The Jewish idea of what it means to be a hero is very different.

In Pirkei Avot - ethics of our sages - the rabbis ask: who is a hero - *Mihu Gibor?* The answer is astonishing - *Mihu Gibor? Ha'kovesh et yitzro* - the one who can conquer his or her evil inclination.

The rabbis teach what we know to be true - our biggest personal enemy is not lurking outside, but rather is within each and every one of us. We have the power to be our own, most dangerous enemy. An enemy that if given the opportunity can and will destroy us.

While we can be courageous and fearless when it comes to battling threats around us, it is this voice- with in us - which for so many of us is the hardest to silence.

Rosh Hashanah and the ten days of awe leading to Yom Kippur provide us with yet another opportunity to look deep inside, check in with our evil inclination - and see if, and where, it is out of control.

This fight begins with a simple question, the one that God asks Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden after they surrender to their Yetzer ha-ra - disobeying his instructions not to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge, it's the question Cain had to face, when after allowing his Yetzer ha-ra to flood him with such envy that he kills his own brother - that haunting question **Ayeka?**

Ayeka – where are you right now? Not physically - but spiritually, morally? Where is your Yetzer ha-ra – is it under control?

Ayeka - where are you when it comes to humility - is your Yetzer ha-ra causing you to think you are a bit better than everyone else around you, a bit or a lot smarter? More successful? Are you looking down at people who are different from you? Are you too judgmental of others? Is your Yetzer ha-ra telling you that YOU - YOU don't need to be humble? That you are truly a success story and let those less successful be humble?

Ayeka - when it comes to generosity? Is your Yetzer ha-ra telling you that you don't have to give so much? That what you give is more than enough? That it's not your responsibility to support (*fill in the blank here with an organization or cause that is important to you.*) That you yourself don't have enough and that those who have more than you should give more?

Ayeka - when it comes to forgiveness? Is your Yetzer ha-ra telling you that it's the other person's fault and it's on them to apologize to you, is it telling you to wait until they make the next move? That there is no other possible way you could have done anything different?

Ayeka - when it comes to loving and pursuing justice? Is your Yetzer ha-ra telling you to look the other way, convincing you that "they",

whoever they are, brought it upon themselves? That it's not your problem. Is it weakening your faith that the problem can be fixed and that it is your responsibility to help fix this?

Although we may not like to admit it, the Yetzer ha-ra is in each of us, it is there by God's design, and it is what makes life so hard, because we usually don't have to make decisions between right or wrong, black or white, most of life is lived between shades of gray, with two powerful forces pushing us in opposite ways.

Rosh Hashanah provides us with yet another opportunity to see ourselves as heroes - fighting that inclination, moving closer towards being our best selves.

The next ten days are the days of awe - and I believe one reason they are called so is because it is truly scary to listen to that Yetzer ha-ra that is within each and every one of us.

At this moment - your Yetzer ha-ra who is feeling the awe of these days is fighting hard, it knows you came here today because your Yetzer ha-tov feeds your belief in the idea of Teshuva, in our ability as humans to change, to give and get a second chance, to repent - your Yetzer ha-ra knows it's in a battle against his brother - the Yetzer ha-

tov, and I know it's trying to tell you, I can almost hear it saying “You don't have to listen to this rabbi, you can't really change, you can't really beat me, why bother? You tried before and failed, what makes you think you will be successful now?”

And your Yetzer ha-ra is not that wrong, it looks for moments of weakness, moments when we may not have the strength or resolve to overpower it. Don't underestimate your Yetzer ha-ra, your Yetzer ha-ra is a **MIGHTY** contestant. The Talmud cautions us “The Yetzer ha-ra is crafty. At first, it gains a foothold by asking us to do a small thing... Soon it requires us to do something more serious. The Yetzer ha-ra may say to us, “Just do this thing one time—it cannot hurt anyone if you only do it one time.” Then soon it requires us to do evil all the time... At first, says the Talmud, the Yetzer ha-ra is like a passerby, later it is like a guest, and finally it becomes the master of the house. There is a story about a grandfather who says to his grandson, “Boy, a fight is going on inside me. It is a terrible fight between two wolves. One is evil. He is anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, lies, false pride, superiority and ego.”

He continued. “The other wolf is good. He is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith. The same fight is going on inside you — and inside every other person too.”

The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked the grandfather, “Which wolf will win?”

The grandfather simply replied, “The one you feed.”

This story made me think that maybe a good reason to fast on Yom Kippur is to represent our determination to starve our Yetzer ha’ra.

Conquering the Yetzer ha-ra is a lifelong task, it's a battle we can never truly bring to an end, the moment we think we have conquered our Yetzer ha-ra is the moment it reawakens.

And our sole goal is to control it - there is no expectation to kill our Yetzer ha-ra, nor to eliminate it, we already realized that we need it - but there are ways to harness it, even to shape it. It's no coincidence that the word to shape in Hebrew comes from the same verb as inclination -YETZER - we have the power to shape the form of people we want to be by shaping, controlling, conquering our Yetzer ha-ra.

And this time of the year serves as our annual refresher course in how to achieve this difficult yet goal.

This crash course - can be summarized in the words of the Netane Tokef "*U'Teshuvah, U'Tefilah, U'Tzedakah*" - with repentance, prayer, and tzedakah we shall be our best selves.

Teshuvah - often defined as repentance - truly means return. This time allows us to return to our true soul, our best self. I pray that we use this time to honestly reflect, take accountability, and seek forgiveness for where we have fallen short. May we commit to a course of taming our inclination to do evil and repent for the times our Yetzer ha-ra caused us to hurt others or ourselves.

Tzedakah - May we strive to live a life of selflessness, generosity, and sharing our many blessings with others, let us use this time of year and what we have and can share - to bring more light and goodness into the lives of others. The only way to beat hate is with love. The only way to quiet evil, the Yetzer ha-ra, is by doing good, giving Tzedakah and acting in a loving kind way.

Tefilah - prayer. May we recognize that we cannot go this road alone - that we need God as our ally and the support of a spiritual community and Jewish traditions.

In fact, our tradition provides us with a ritual, a prayer said every morning, privately, immediately after the Mode Ani, a prayer reaching out to God to help us find the courage, the determination to fight our Yetzer ha-ra, to help us be Jewish heroes

Baruch ata Adonai, sovereign of the universe, who removes sleep from my eyes and slumber from my eyelids. May it be Your will, Adonai my God and God of our ancestors to not lead us into the hands of sin, nor into the hands of pride or perversity, nor into the hands of temptation, nor into the hands of shame, and do not let the evil inclination rule over us.

May we dedicate this coming year, and all years to come - to conquering our evil inclination and to being Jewish heroes.

Shana tova.