

Shalom

One of my favorite things to do in my position as a rabbi in this congregation is meet with couples who are planning to get married. And in a community like this, I have plenty of opportunity - When I meet with couples planning their weddings, in some of our meetings, I ask them a series of questions, both to get to know them better and to encourage some degree of reflection about their relationship.

One of the simplest questions that I ask to each person in the couple is: "What do you most admire and appreciate about your partner?" I remember one couple to whom I asked this question and the groom-to-be said of his fiancée: "I most admire her extraordinary inner drive to succeed at everything she does." And the bride-to-be said of her fiancé: "I most admire his spontaneity and his care-free nature." And then later in the conversation, I asked: "What personal quality do you find -- challenging or frustrating -- about your partner?" And after a brief pause, the groom-to-be said: "Um, that would be -- her extraordinary inner drive to succeed at everything she does." And then with a chuckle, the bride-to-be answered the question: "That would be -- his spontaneity and his care-free nature."

And I thought: how interesting that the positive and negative qualities that they identified were one and the same! And when I started paying closer attention to the answers that other couples gave -- I found that this is a general pattern. It seems that we tend to fall in love with people who embody qualities which are simultaneously sources of admiration and frustration for us. And I think it's that way about ourselves as well. Certainly I know that for me, some the qualities that I like most about myself -- like my tendency to strive for excellence -- are also the qualities that I find most agonizing and most frustrating about myself. for example - 'Striving for excellence' too often crosses over the boundary into beating myself up over my imperfections. In moments of Teshuvah, in moments of focusing on repentance, the aspects of myself which I generally admire are often the things I would most like to change about myself. And I would not be surprised if this is true for you as well. I learned that this paradoxical nature of our virtues and our sins being one and the same is a well-established phenomenon in Judaism - and if we understand it, we can better understand our goals during this process of Teshuvah and introspection that characterizes this time of year.

It all starts in the book of Genesis. God creates the first human being - and we read

וַיִּפְּרֹשׂ אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאָדָם מִדָּפְנוֹת הָאָרֶץ

and God formed the human being from the dust of the earth. But the rabbis in the Talmud noticed something perplexing about this verse: The word *ymhhu* - meaning 'God formed' - is spelled with two yods. It should be spelled with only one. And in the Talmud, the commentary is registered that this double yod means: each human being is created with two 'inclinations' - a *cyv rmh* - the inclination to good, and a *grv rmh* - an inclination to evil. And these two inclinations try to pull us in different directions.

I guess you're probably thinking about how they've shown it in various movies with the little angel on one shoulder, impelling the person to do the right thing, and the little devil on the other shoulder, encouraging the person to submit to his or her most base desires and instincts. But the Jewish view is slightly different from that. Because in Jewish thought, the Yetzer HaRa, the inclination to evil, is absolutely indispensable to our lives. The Midrash even tells us that if it weren't for the Yetzer HaRa, no one would ever build a house; no one would ever get married and have children; no one would ever engage in business. All these things, without which our world could not truly function, are often done for ulterior motives - which are often less than fully pure: they reflect our pride, or our desire for material comforts that we don't really need. But our inclination to evil is simultaneously our inclination to productivity, to establishing permanence. If it were just up to our Yetzer haTov, - our inclination to good -- we would probably spend all day, every day living in perfect contentment with what we have, with perfect appreciation to God for granting it; never feeling the need to strive for anything more. And our world, and our lives, would be stagnant.

And this, our tradition says, is why each of us was created with a Yetzer Ha-Ra- to provide the energy to keep our world and our lives moving forward. I know this sounds familiar to you if you've ever studied Freud. While there are some differences, the Yetzer Ha-Ra is basically equivalent to the "id" - it reflects our most basic and often inappropriate desires, but without it, we could not survive. In the Talmud, a very imaginative story is told about how a group of rabbis were so fed up with the Yetzer HaRa - that they chased after it and they captured it and they got ready to kill it. But then Elijah the Prophet found them and said: Listen: If you kill the Yetzer HaRa, the entire world will collapse. Well, they didn't listen. They kept the Yetzer haRa in jail for three days as they prepared the gallows, or whatever other method they had planned to use to execute it. But on the third day, someone noticed: You couldn't find a single fresh egg anywhere in the entire land of Israel. The entire process of procreation had come to a grinding halt - even in the animal world! And the rabbis decided that they had to let the Yetzer HaRa go free. Maybe it was because now they fully understood its value in the world. Or maybe just because they just developed a craving for a good omelet. But before they set the Yetzer haRa free, they wanted to do SOMETHING to it to render it less powerful to tempt people to do wicked things. So they put out its eyes and they let it go. So now the Yetzer HaRa is blind. In a conniving kind of way, that gives us an advantage. It means we can lead the Yetzer HaRa in places it doesn't necessarily want to go. In our prayers on Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur, there are numerous references to how the Yetzer HaRa tempts us and how we must protect ourselves from it. But we NEVER pray for the Yetzer HaRa to disappear, or even to be weakened. Instead we pray to God, /l k scg, avk ubhrmh , t ;ufu God, compel our Yetzer Ha-Ra to be subservient to You. Don't WEAKEN our Yetzer HaRa, but rather help us figure out how to use our Yetzer HaRa to do God's work.

The Ba'al Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism, used to say that true repentance, true Teshuvah, means looking within our souls and seeing the sparks of goodness within everything that we do - even within our sins. Recognizing this fact is the first step to re-channeling these sparks of goodness to better purposes. Only then do our sins disappear.

These issues are on my mind on this holiday for two reasons. First of all, I find that this concept of the Yetzer HaRa can be especially helpful to all of US as we engage in the process of self-reflection and self-betterment that we call Teshuvah. But also - I think the concept of the Yetzer HaRa leads us to an answer to one of the central issues that many of us have had to face this year. Perhaps you saw the recent Gallup poll that states that Americans now have less confidence in religion than ever. Last year, 60% of Americans said that they have "very much" confidence, or "quite a lot" of confidence in religion. But this year, the number is 45%. Of course, I'm trying really hard not to take this personally. Actually, given the year we've had, it's not so surprising -- From September 11 to the various kinds of clergy scandals this year. There's one question that I've been asked this year more often than any other: when we look at all the pain and suffering and division that have been caused by religion, this year and through the ages, why **should** we have any confidence in it? if we did a really honest cost-benefit analysis of the role of religion in our world, which side would it turn up on? The side of merit, or the side of liability?

And I picture the debate taking place in my mind. On the one hand, it's so obvious that, throughout history, religion has been a source of divisiveness rather than unity. The various world religions have tended to be at each other's throats at every minute. a bloody list of atrocities, Crusades, Inquisitions, pogroms, holy wars, suicide bombings and September 11. You know, rabbis are continually troubled by how, whenever they ask survey questions about people's confidence in religion in this country, Jews are the group in the United States that has the LEAST confidence in religion. This really bothers a lot of people. It bothers me too - but at least I'm not the least bit surprised. Because throughout our history, other people's religions have tended to be very hazardous to our health. No wonder we're generally skeptical. But of course, there's another side to the story. As a powerful force in our world, it's no surprise that religion is the source of great and terrible evil - but it is simultaneously the source of great goodness and generosity. This is the analogy that I sometimes like to use: just think of all the pain and suffering that are caused in this world through the act of speech. Through speech, we slander people, we gossip, we use speech to incite hatred. So because of all these evils that speech has introduced into the world, from now on I'm boycotting speech. I will not speak. Of course, if someone said all that to us, we would respond: that's crazy! If you refrain from speech, of course you miss all the advantages of speech as well - all the ways speech can be used constructively in our world, spreading wisdom, and love, and inspiration, and concern.

Well, same thing with religion. Boycotting religion because of everything destructive that has taken place through religion also means throwing away all the ways that religion is a source of goodness and healing in our world. A good proportion of the acts of Hesed - of the acts of goodness and generosity in our world are prompted by religious ideas and doctrines. I've shared with you that two years ago a study conducted by the University of North Carolina found that the rates of charitable giving were SIGNIFICANTLY higher among those who were affiliated with a religious organization. Historians studying the Civil Rights Movement in the United States tend to agree that the religious energy behind it was absolutely critical to its success. It's a rare person indeed who is able to overcome

a battle with addiction without some kind of religious ideas and faith to help to pull them out of the pit. And especially stunningly, those who study the phenomenon of 'Righteous Gentiles,' those who risked their lives to save the lives of Jews during the Holocaust - note that a significant majority of them had some kind of religious motivation for doing so. And these couple of examples are not even BEGINNING to touch upon the ways that religion provides a sense of meaning and purpose and community and solace -- all the things we would expect from an institution that has existed in virtually every society in the history of the world.

The problem is, of course, that religion is like our Yetzer HaRa. The very same qualities that make it such a positive force in the world also make it a destructive force in the world. Especially, belief in religion provides CONFIDENCE and CERTAINTY in the justness of one's cause. Without this confidence and certainty, the Civil Rights movement would have fallen apart; and those who risked their lives to save the lives of others would have been paralyzed by fear instead. But it's that same CONFIDENCE AND CERTAINTY in the justness of one's cause that has sometimes motivated religious people to do acts of unthinkable evil. Judaism has always recognized this as the religious person's primary pitfall. And so, thank God, we are not told that our faith ought always to be firm and unwavering. We are told that whatever seeds of doubt we find within us are for a productive purpose. The Hasidic master Moshe Leib of Sasov used to say that it's good and healthy to sometimes doubt God's existence and beneficence. Because otherwise, if you had total and perfect faith in a God who provides to everyone exactly what they need, then if a poor person came up to you and asked you for some help, you would say, "I don't need to help him! Let God help him!" In the words of Rabbi Emanuel Rackman -- an Orthodox rabbi, believe it or not: "Judaism encourages doubt even as it enjoins faith and commitment. A Jew dare not live with absolute certainty, because certainty is the hallmark of the fanatic and Judaism abhors fanaticism, and because doubt is good for the human soul, its humility. . . .[whereas] man's certainty with regard to anything is poison to his soul."

Much as we might desire to kill off the Yetzer HaRa - the inclination to evil- such an action would destroy us and our world. Much as it sometimes might be tempting to blame the world's problems on religion, such an action destroys one of the world's greatest sources of goodness and healing. During this season of Teshuvah, of repentance, much as we might like to find the things we don't like about ourselves, and about our conduct, and just rip them out, our tradition counsels us: it will never work. The bad is always mixed in with the good. In our lives and in our world, may we train our eyes to find the Divine sparks that inhabit even our misdeeds, so that we can nurture those sparks and help them to grow.

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