

The Evil Inclination, for Good and Ill

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The evil inclination is on florid display at this presidential election season.

The *yetzer ha-ra*, that wicked impulse, unleashes our untamed natural appetites and passions. When we look at our candidates, some will focus on vulgar language that appears to indicate abusive behavior toward women. Others will emphasize obfuscations about improperly handled official email. We also see bald ambition in both candidates. Both are willing to go to unsavory lengths to achieve the goal of election as President of the United States. One resorts even to race-baiting, misogyny, and fat-shaming. The other sacrifices personal integrity for what she deems the greater good.

Despite its name, our rabbis do not view our *yetzer ha-ra* as exclusively evil. Without it, they say, a human being would never marry, procreate, build a house, or earn a living. In short, were Donald Trump's wicked impulses not "huge," he would never have built the structures or amassed the fortunes that propel him to the precipice of the presidency. And the impulses that show up in Hillary Clinton's ethical lapses are the very same that have inspired her to a lifetime of public service, devoting incalculable hours over the course of decades in pursuit of what she believes to be best for America and the world.

Though the rest of us aren't running for President, we are more like our candidates than we care to admit. We, too, evidence moral failings that are remarkably similar to our greatest achievements. On this Yom Kippur Day, we fight our *yetzer ha-ra* with ambivalence, seeking to conquer our bad behavior without sacrificing its benefits.

We know: The temptation to cheat on our taxes comes from the same impulse that drives our success at work.

We know: The allure of glancing over at the next student's test paper is the very same that pushes a person to do well in school.

We know: The urge to lie for our kids overcomes us precisely because we are so devoted to wanting the best for them.

We know: The stinginess that makes a person uncharitable seems inseparable from the thrift by which the same individual has provided for a secure retirement.

We know: The failure to express thanks for another's kindness, or to make room for another's success, may stem from the self-reliance of which we are justly proud.

We are shocked by clergy sex scandals; but should we be? The insatiable desire to connect with congregants may lead the unrestrained priest or rabbi to violate boundaries that should never be breached.

Our sages were right. God has implanted a most complicated instinct within us. We must express our evil inclination in order to accomplish anything in this world. And we must restrain that very same impulse if we are not to be evil.

So what is a sincere penitent to do? What is our work here on Yom Kippur, if not to rid ourselves of our *yetzer ha-ra*, to overcome our inclination to evil?

First, we must examine the problem. Rabbi Stephen Fuchs offers the example of Ebenezer Scrooge, the unlikely hero of the most unlikely book for any rabbi to bring up on Yom Kippur: *A Christmas Carol*, by Charles Dickens. Scrooge is as successful at business as he is miserly. The nightmares that lead to his repentance begin when he sees his late partner, Jacob Marley, as "he walks about [the afterlife] chained to his account books, wailing in misery." Scrooge objects: "But you were always a good man of business, Jacob!" And that he was. Indeed, Marley's obsession with amassing and preserving his fortune was intimately connected to his stinginess, the principal manifestation of his evil inclination.

Ultimately, Scrooge recognizes Marley's problem as his own. By the time the story reaches its conclusion, he has found a way to turn away from the wicked results of his natural impulses without sacrificing the benefits. Scrooge can perpetuate his success at work – indeed he must, to continue employing Bob Cratchitt – in order to provide for Tiny Tim, his worker's loveable but gravely ill son.

Our job this Yom Kippur is not to obliterate our *yetzer ha-ra*, for that would be both impossible and inadvisable. Our task instead is to redirect that inclination to do only good.

If you must stop cheating on your taxes, channel your financial wizardry into helping a charitable organization to balance its books.

If your sin this Day of Atonement is sneaking peeks at your classmates' tests, redirect your eagerness for good grades by helping a student who has a harder time. Tutoring somebody else will sharpen your own skills.

If you've been lying for your kids, channel that poorly-spent energy into a *mitzvah*. A less fortunate child could use your help to get ahead in life.

If you're as stingy as Scrooge, keep working and earning and saving, while also utilizing your fiscal acumen to create and stick to a generous charitable budget. That may be hard work at first, but you're no stranger to effort. The payoff will be immeasurable.

If you are confessing that you have taken self-reliance to an extreme, failing to acknowledge the gifts and contributions to others, make it your business to build up the esteem of others, spreading gratitude around your home, your workplace, and your community like rain on parched fields.

And if sexual immorality has led you astray, redirect that passion to the people in your life with the rightful claim upon your love and devotion.

An 18th Century Polish rabbi known as the Dubner Maggid told a wonderful story to illustrate the point:

A king owned a precious diamond, his prized possession. One morning, he awakened to find, to his horror, that the diamond had sustained a hideous scratch. How could such a thing even have happened? The king slept with the diamond that night as every night, hugging it close. The king called upon skilled artisans throughout the land. Each of them responded identically: "I can't imagine how that happened. Nothing is harder than a diamond. And I have no idea how to remove the scratch." The king called experts from across the sea, and even consulted magicians and seers, but none could help. Finally, a young girl stepped forward. "I think I can repair the diamond," she said. The eager king entrusted her with the jewel. The next day, the girl returned the diamond. Now, the gem was emblazoned with the etching of a rose. What had been a scratch was now the stem of a magnificent flower. The king was mightily pleased.

The story is allegory. The scratch stands for the wrongs we have done. They cannot be erased. Indeed, the evil impulse that gives rise to our sins cannot be obliterated. However, we can, with hard work and artistry, turn even our *yetzer ha-ra* into a thing of beauty. The king represents God. The Holy One is distressed by our sins today, desiring nothing more than for us to employ our wicked impulse to positive purpose.

The diamond? That jewel is the human soul. Ours hangs in the balance on this Yom Kippur. The scratches are there, and so is the question: Will we multiply the blemishes on our souls? Or will we carve a rose?

On this Yom Kippur, let us explore those scratches. Let us lament them. Let us apologize for them. Let us vow never to make them deeper. Then, let us get to work, carving that rose.

Amen.