

Yom Kippur Evening 2009

Chocolate & the Yetzer Hara

The following is a verbatim reenactment of the conversation between me and myself when I see a piece of chocolate.

“Don’t eat it. You know chocolate makes your heart race. The sugar makes you anxious. You’ll have hot flashes. You’ll gain weight. Then you won’t feel good about yourself. Then you’ll take it out on Aaron.”

“Stop being so hard on yourself. The side effects aren’t that bad. How much weight will I gain from one piece? So I’ll walk it off tomorrow. I’ll run up and down the stairs a few more times.”

“Here we go again. I always make these excuses to convince myself that its OK. I know I can’t eat just one piece. I promised myself the last time I gorged myself on chocolate and felt bad afterward that I wouldn’t do it again.”

“Big deal. Its not the end of the world. Its just a piece of chocolate. I’m feeling stressed and tense and chocolate always calms me down.”

“Don’t do it! I promised myself that this time I’d be strong enough to resist!”

“Too bad. I’ll try to do better next time.”

Temptation is all around us. And its not just food. The two little voices in our head are constantly doing battle over what we say to and about each other.

“Don’t tell that secret that you weren’t supposed to spread.”

“Don’t worry. It will never get back to them. And it’s a juicy story.”

-“Don’t lie about why you didn’t do your homework.”

-“I have to think of a good excuse or the teacher will kill me.”

“Don’t cheat on that test.”

“But I have to so I can get a good grade.”

-“Don’t hit your sister.”

-But she’s really bugging me.

“Don’t be nasty to your child because you had a bad day.”

“But I’m just so frustrated I just can’t help it.”

-“I’ve got to finish my work.”

-“Later. I want to play xbox.”

We all give in. No one is immune. From politicians cheating on their spouse to greed on Wall St., to those who can’t control the violent streak within them, to all the ways big and small that we inflict pain on each other and ourselves, we confess that we have let our impulses get the better of us.

As we begin our Yom Kippur observance, as we confess our sins against ourselves and others, we shine the spotlight on that pesky, troubling, nasty voice within us which makes us give in to our vices, our desire for self-gratification, our self-destructive behavior. It is with us every minute of the day. It knows our vulnerabilities and all of our secrets and how to get us to do exactly what it wants. It is responsible for all the ways we undermine ourselves – our health, our aspirations, our goals, our self-esteem, our spirit, our relationships, the way we present ourselves to others. It keeps us within its grasp by paralyzing us with fear and paranoia. It makes us doubt our abilities and stop reaching for our goals.

Whether we like it or not, I now present to all of us what the rabbis call our yetzer hara – our evil inclination. It is shaking its head inside us right now, not wanting to be seen. It is telling us that this isn’t a good sermon topic. It is whispering in our ear “Don’t worry, we won’t have to change. We don’t have to listen to this. Just close your eyes and go to sleep for the next 10 minutes. We don’t have to do anything we don’t want to. We don’t have to stop smoking, drinking, eating all that junk food the doctor told us we shouldn’t have, gossiping, yelling at each other or spending our time on mindless activities. Life is too stressful. We should just say and do what makes us feel good and not worry about the consequences.”

But the reason we came to services tonight is because of the strength of our other voice, our yetzer hatov, our inclination to do good. It knows we need all the help we can get to overpower our yetzer hara. It is responsible for dragging us out of the house and making us fast for the next day to force us to feel how much the world needs our help. Its going to make us think about our behavior during the past year, feel regret about all the times it wasn’t strong enough to make us eat right, do a mitzvah, be supportive of others, kind and generous and helpful to our family, our friends, the temple community, those we do not know.

In my role as the ally of our yetzer tov on this Day of Atonement, I am here to expose and examine our evil inclination so we can develop a plan to counteract it in the year ahead.

When did we get this yetzer hara?

Job 11.12 says “We are born a wild ass.” Jewish tradition tells us that children are born only with an evil inclination. As we grow, the yetzer tov develops very slowly. Our yetzer tov actually takes an equal role within us only in our 14th year, when we officially become an adult in Jewish law. It is only then that we are responsible for recognizing the difference between right and wrong. It is compared with the reason why we look for hametz with a candle on the 14th day of the month of Passover. It is the same point in our life when we search out the bad parts of ourselves and shine a candle on them. When we are children, it leads us to do mischief and have a bad temper. Even when we reach the age of 80, our tradition tells us, it never stops trying to get the upper hand and knock us off our course.

Why were we created with a yetzer hara in the first place? Why is there chocolate, jealousy and greed, wars and conflicts, paranoia and self-doubt? Why do we commit all the sins that we need a Day of Atonement to atone for?

The rabbis tell us that we need the struggle with our yetzer hara to enable us to reach for our highest goals. We need a certain amount of desire, ambition and insecurity to push us to live up to our potential. Rabbi Moshe Luzzatto wrote that human beings are placed between perfection and deficiency. The only reason we strive for perfection is because we knowingly and willingly choose good over evil.

We need some level of impulses in order to survive. If we had no desire to eat, we could not live. If we did not allow ourselves any free time or diversions from our work, we would burn ourselves out and be no good to anyone. If we thought we were good enough the way we are, we wouldn't achieve or accomplish anything during our lifetimes. The midrash teaches us that if it weren't for the yetzer hara, no one would build a house, marry, have children or engage in business.

Scientists teach us that if you open a chrysalis, the cocoon where a butterfly develops, so that it doesn't have to struggle to get out, it never develops the strength to fly. It is the struggle with our yetzer hara which makes us strong and allows us to reach our potential.

What triggers our yetzer hara and allows it to gain the upper hand over our yetzer tov?

The Talmud teaches “do not become angry and you will not sin.” When do I have no defenses against chocolate or anything filled with sugar, salt and carbohydrates? When I’m stressed. All it takes is one troubling phone call or email, one angry or frustrating interaction, and before I know it my head is in the snack cabinet, gorging myself on anything I can find. I don’t even bother reasoning with myself. The yetzer hara has me by the throat. When someone has pushed my buttons – triggered my sensitivities and vulnerabilities, my yetzer hara charges in and takes control. It overpowers my sense of reason and I lose control over what I say to anyone in my path. Whenever it sees a weak moment, it pounces and forces us to do its bidding.

Judaism is structured with rules, called halachah, because of our recognition that we are weak and need guidance to overcome our yetzer hara. 613 commandments in the Torah. An entire Mishnah, Talmud. Shulhan Aruch. In each generation, our ancestors created laws because we need all the help we can get to follow the right path. Our country needs laws because, if left to our own devices, our yetzer hara would destroy our society.

Last year our entire economy nearly collapsed because of corporate greed. President Obama recently addressed Wall St. and warned them to change their ways. He said that in less than a year, it was clear that corporations were already returning to the same risky, unethical practices which caused this disaster. Until the government continues to put regulations in place to make these behaviors illegal, all he could do was implore corporate leaders to restrain their inclination to make as much money as possible at all costs.

How do we keep our yetzer hara in check? There’s actually a book called Battle Plans – How To Fight the Yetzer HaRa, with guidelines specifically designed to help us minimize its power.

*Identify the voice of your yetzer hara. For example, whenever you begin to elevate yourself above another, whenever you attach more importance to your ego than to God’s moral standards, whenever you make yourself the center of attention because you are “in the know”, go on high alert and assume the battle position. You are under attack of the yetzer. Switch from intelligence about another person to intelligence about how to treat another person. Remember the words of our tradition: Everyone is made in the image of God. Do not judge another until you stand in his or her place. Use your ammunition: think of a kind word to say, something good about the person.

When you feel mired in negative thinking or feeling, take a deep breath and try to let go of your critical thoughts. Be reassured of your power to overcome. Move from your inner critic to your inner caretaker.

Don't allow it even a small concession. Its like giving one drink to an alcoholic, or one piece of cake to a chocoholic. Remember that once you give in to it just a little, it will ambush you and take over your words and actions. You won't be able to stop it.

Rabbi Joseph Telushkin teaches that when we learn what direction the yetzer inclines you, marshal that tendency and use it for good. Desire to be famous, have a lot of money? Give tzedakah and put your name on a wall.

It is useless to think that our yetzer hara will ever be neutralized. I know that no matter how hard I try, I will never stop wanting chocolate. We'll never stop being selfish or insecure or needy. We'll be right back here next year, asking God to excuse us for Kol Nidre, all the vows, the good intentions we had which went unfulfilled. We are engaged in a lifelong struggle. But the more we exercise our yetzer tov, the stronger it will be. As Ben Azzai taught, in Pirkei Avot Chapter 4, Mishnah 2: run to perform [even] a minor mitzvah and flee from sin, for one mitzvah leads to another mitzvah, and one sin leads to another sin; for the reward of a mitzvah is a mitzvah and the 'reward' of a sin is a sin."

Our day of introspection has begun. Our two inclinations are standing toe to toe, facing off in the arena of our mind. May the best one win.